

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

STATE

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KOLKATA

City of Joy

Bullying: The “B” Word That Won’t Go Away

Remember the bully on the playground who hustled you for lunch money or made fun of your pigtails—the one who made others cry, feel scared or intimidated, and made school a miserable place to be? Unfortunately, bullies and bullying behavior find their way into the federal workplace, and we must cope with it as adults. The discomfort and intimidation can be irritating or devastating. Although bullying may be evidence of other unlawful behavior, there is currently no specific federal law prohibiting bullying. Nevertheless, this type of behavior should not and will not be tolerated at the Department of State.

The phenomenon of workplace bullying is a rising concern in the public and private sectors. According to the 2007 Zogby International Survey, 37 percent of American workers, an estimated 54 million people, have been bullied at work. Workplace bullying is defined as using persistent aggressive or unreasonable behavior against a co-worker, most often a subordinate. The behavior can take on many characteristics—angry outbursts, persistent antagonistic criticism of co-workers, biting sarcasm and humor designed to humiliate, screaming, yelling and belittling others’ opinions. The effects can be psychological and physical. Some bullied employees call in sick to avoid the bullying, which over time affects the productivity of an entire office. Many workers become unmotivated and stressed, lose sleep, fear going into the office and exhibit symptoms of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder or hypertension. A bullied office may lose engagement because its workers have lost the motivation to produce work for the bullying boss.

The topic was raised when Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke at the Depart-

ment’s Women’s History Month program in March. She explicitly stated that bullying will not be tolerated. Whether or not bullies are bad people is not the question. Bullying is about behavior, and that is what must change. And such habits can be changed with feedback, continuing education, counseling and training. Often, bullying is the result of poor communication skills and a lack of acknowledgment by management. It may be leftover aggressive styles no longer proper in a civilian setting or an inability to manage anger.

The Foreign Service Institute offers a variety of courses to improve communication and interpersonal skills with a focus on team building. The courses below would best benefit employees who might be labeled as bullies. If you have characteristics of a bully or feel that you might be perceived as one, please sign up for a class as soon as possible. It’s never too late to become a better employee and create a positive workplace for your co-workers.

- Customer Service Training (PA143)
- Effective Speaking and Listening Skills (PK240)
- Leading in a Diverse Workforce (PT 218) for managers
- Valuing Diversity in the Workplace (PT 225) for employees who are not managers; and
- 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (PT 216)

While bullying itself does not automatically violate Equal Employment Opportunity laws, bullying behavior can lead employees to bring EEO claims. Our analysis of multiple complaints of discrimination in the Office of Civil Rights has found that many



bullied employees allege that they’ve been subjected to a hostile work environment in violation of EEO laws. Managers, be aware: If someone in your office has the characteristics of a bully, it is your duty to counsel that person before his or her behavior creates an uncomfortable situation for your other employees, harms others, leads to workplace violence or subjects the Department to legal vulnerability because timely action was not taken. Finally, ask yourself (or, better, ask others who will be honest with you) if you yourself rely on intimidation or scare tactics in your leadership style as a form of workforce control.

Everyone deserves to work in an environment that is safe and bully-free. After raising more awareness on the issue of workplace bullying and increasing the avenues for improving communication and team-building skills in the Department, bullies will hopefully only remain on the playground of our childhoods and stay out of the office forever.

For more information about workplace bullying, visit our Web site: <http://socr.state.gov> or <http://bullyinginstitute.org>. ■



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