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When Bullies Go To Work

Employers that tolerate abuse risk lower productivity, high staff turnover, costly legal fees -- and worse, MARJO JOHNE finds

Thirteen months after he started working as a district manager for Imperial Parking, Timothy Lloyd decided he had had enough of "going in to war every day."

So he took his lawyer's advice and sent his employer a letter explaining why he wasn't coming back and demanding six months' pay plus full benefits.

"I was very unhappy in my work -- burned out, stressed out . . . There were constant threats of dismissal, constant invading of my personal space, and use of profanity that was personally directed at me," says Mr. Lloyd, who left Imperial Parking's Calgary operation almost nine years ago.

In short, Mr. Lloyd had landed into a pit with an office bully -- who also happened to be his manager. Bullying, a much-discussed topic in recent months following the suicide of a student in Halifax and another in the Vancouver area, is not restricted to playgrounds and schoolyards. It is also an unfortunate reality in the workplace.

Ask anyone you know if they've encountered an office bully, and chances are you'll hear an anecdote or two: the boss who yells at staff, the co-worker who constantly makes fun of your accent, the supervisor who piles on more work and then shortens your deadline.

These are just a few examples of what experts refer to as psychological violence in the workplace -- abuse that takes the form of bullying, intimidation and harassment. The Canadian Initiative on Workplace Violence, a non-profit research group in Toronto, describes bullying as "offensive behaviour through vindictive, cruel, malicious or humiliating attempts to undermine an individual or groups of employees. These persistently negative attacks are typically unpredictable, irrational and unfair."

While physical violence in the workplace tends to come from external parties -- customers or maintenance workers, for example -- psychological violence comes from within. Glenn French, national director of the Canadian Initiative on Workplace Violence, says Canadians are more likely to experience the latter.

"You have a better chance of being a workplace fatality in the United States," he says. "Whereas in Canada, you have a better chance of being bullied, harassed and abused."

Studies suggest psychological violence in the workplace is widespread. In a 2000 survey of Canadian labour unions, more than 75 per cent reported incidences of harassment and bullying.

This problem is not a strictly Canadian phenomenon. A study in 1997 by the International Labour Organization showed that 43 per cent of international civil servants believed bullying and verbal aggression was a problem at work. But just how widespread psychological violence is has proven difficult to gauge. Depending on the country surveyed and how psychological violence is defined, results have ranged from 2 to 45 per cent.

"This is an important problem because organizations are going to lose good people," says Natalie Allen, an industrial and organizational psychologist and professor at the University of Western Ontario. "The consequences are lower productivity and dissatisfaction that leads to turnover."

It may be impossible to measure with any accuracy the financial consequences of psychological violence, but there is little doubt it has a direct impact on the bottom line. In addition to decreased productivity and higher turnover, bullying also results in increased absenteeism, disability leave and legal costs stemming from "constructive dismissal" lawsuits.

One such lawsuit, against Chukal Enterprises in Coquitlam, B.C., ended with a court order for the company to pay its former employee about \$38,000 plus legal costs. The employee, Susan Morgan, quit her job as restaurant manager after being subjected to more than two years of yelling and swearing. The abuser was a new kitchen manager who grew hostile whenever customers sent back food. Ms. Morgan, who was responsible for bringing the rejected dishes to the kitchen, bore the brunt of the abuse.

The British Columbia Supreme Court ruled that Chukal Enterprises, which owned the restaurant, knew about the abusive behaviour but did nothing to stop it. And in failing to act, Chukal had breached an implied term of any employment relationship -- to treat staff, as the court put it, "with civility, decency, respect and dignity."

A similar decision was reached in Mr. Lloyd's subsequent lawsuit against Imperial Parking. Five years after he launched the suit, Mr. Lloyd won a judgment of about \$31,000 plus part of his legal fees.

"Was it worth it? Financially, definitely not," says Mr. Lloyd, who now works in Standard Life Assurance Co.'s real estate leasing division. "But from the point of view of feeling like you did the right thing and maybe did some good for somebody else in some way -- yes, absolutely."

Joe Conforti, a partner at Goodmans LLP, a Toronto-based law firm, says these rulings deliver a clear and unmistakable message to companies. "Employers are responsible for maintaining the workplace," he says. "They're not able to monitor workers 100 per cent of the time and cannot ensure that everyone is polite and civil all the time, but they have to take all reasonable steps to ensure that civility and decency is maintained. They cannot tolerate [bullying]."

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While some bullied employees turn to the courts, others take matters into their own hands.

A few years ago, Pierre Lebrun, an Ottawa Transit employee, killed four co-workers before shooting himself. An inquest later revealed that Mr. Lebrun, who had a speech impediment, had been teased and bullied relentlessly. He left behind a letter, saying in part: "I'm tired, exhausted and completely backed against the wall. They will never leave me alone. I can't go on living like this! They have destroyed my life, I will destroy their life."

For those businesses that tolerate workplace bullying, the risks go beyond decreased productivity, high employee turnover and costly legal expenses. They could also be taking a dangerous chance.

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