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Employee Abuse in the Workplace

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Employee abuse in the workplace is emotional and psychological abuse not covered by law and occurs among employees, managers, and customers.

Examples of Employee Abuse

This type of verbal and emotional abuse includes put-downs, bullying, intimidation, harassment, shame, coercion, exerting values of power, being overworked to extreme, lying, condescension, creating feelings of powerlessness, being made to feel insignificant or inferior, excessive demands of perfection, inconsistent application of practices, not providing employees sufficient information to perform, depriving of rights/benefits, inappropriate nonverbal behaviors, ignoring, belittling, talking down to another, making judgments, setting up situations for failure, and double binds.

Employee abuse occurs among employees, managers, and customers.

Why People Act Abusively

Reasons people act abusively include to protect themselves, to get their portion, to manipulate, to intimidate, to defend themselves, to maintain their territory, for revenge, having a mental health disorder, acting out, control, fear, modeling from the organization, feeling threatened, insecurity, acting the only way they know how to act, habit, feeling devalued, feeling trapped, being in a culture that condones abuse, anger, impatience, using abuse to achieve results, lack of social skills, having been treated like an object themselves, not having developed the ability to empathize, and viewing others as a means to an end.

How Recipients of Abuse Feel and Act

Recipients of employee abuse may feel harassed, insecure, intimidated, protective, rebellious, devalued, suspicious, uncomfortable, withdrawn, embarrassed, trapped, hurt, worthless, unappreciated, exploited, powerless, angry/furious, revengeful, unacknowledged, hopeless, oppressed, lack of motivation, fearful, and inadequate.

Recipients of abuse may have a variety of behaviors or reactions such as the following:

- If an employee, manager, or customer abuses an employee, that employee's reactions may include desire to retaliate, absenteeism, withdrawing, and low productivity.
- If an employee abuses a manager, the manager's reactions may include labeling the employee as a troublemaker, taking disciplinary action, or believing the employee is trying to make the manager look bad.
- If an employee or manager abuses a customer, the customer's reactions may include desire to retaliate, leaving, asking to see an upper level manager, and filing a complaint with the Better Business Bureau.

Costs and Consequences of Employee Abuse

Costs or consequences of abuse can affect everyone involved. Consequences to the organization may include absenteeism, turnover, retraining, replacement, inefficiency, low morale, disruption, lawsuits, and lower productivity. Consequences to the recipient of abuse may include low self-esteem, loss of sense of belonging, and lower productivity. Consequences to the abuser may include lawsuits, time for meetings to resolve conflicts, and potential loss of friends. If an organization ignores abuse, expects that the abuse may escalate or spread, and/or employees may take sides.

Recourses Available to Recipients of Abuse

Different scenarios have different recourses depending on who is receiving abuse.

Scenario 1: If a manager or employee abuses a customer, typical recourses available to the abused customer include leaving, removing all accounts from the organization, contacting the upper management of the organization, or filing a complaint with an entity

such as the Better Business Bureau. Typically, in this scenario, the customer may take any or all of the recourses available to him or her.

Scenario 2: If a customer abuses an employee or manager such as in cursing or giving physical threats, typical recourses available to the abused employee or manager include talking to the customer to resolve the abuse, telling an upper level manager, enforcing any organizational policies such as hanging up the telephone if the customer curses, telling the customer to call back or come back when they are calm, asking the customer to take his or her business elsewhere, or calling security. Typically, in this scenario, the employee may contact a manager. A manager may contact security. Employees and/or managers try to protect their own physical safety and would try to adhere to any organizational guidelines that exist.

NOTE: Not all organizations have guidelines for dealing with customer abuse by telephone or in person. Organizations need guidelines, policies, and procedures for dealing with issues such as cursing and threats of physical harm to ensure employees are safe, particularly if employees are in danger of any physical harm.

Scenario 3: If an employee abuses a manager, typical recourses available to the abused manager include talking to the employee to resolve the abuse, disciplinary action, terminating the employee, or transferring the employee. Typically, in this scenario, the manager often terminates the employee. Exceptions include settings such as government and some educational areas where terminating an employee is difficult.

Scenario 4: If an employee abuses another employee, typical recourses available to the abused employee include talking to the abuser to resolve the abuse, talking to the manager, asking witnesses to document their observations, the employee assistance program, human resources, labor relations, equal employment opportunity, ombudsmen, unions, training, counseling/therapy, employee relations, legal department, chief executive officer, organization's president, attorneys, minister, mediation, quitting, transferring, adapting, doing nothing. Typically, in this scenario, confronting the abusing employee sometimes helps end the abuse. When confrontation doesn't help, often the employee transfers to another area.

Scenario 5: If a manager abuses an employee, typical recourses available to the abused employee include talking to the abusive manager to resolve the abuse, telling the manager's manager, the employee

assistance program, human resources, labor relations, equal employment opportunity, ombudsmen, unions, training, counseling/therapy, employee relations, legal department, chief executive officer, organization's president, attorneys, minister, mediation, quitting, transferring, adapting, doing nothing, accepting any disciplinary action, and risking being terminated. Typically, in this scenario, the employee is often terminated.

NOTE: Technically, the abused employee can seek recourse, but the abusing manager typically has ultimate authority over the employee he or she abuses. Thus, in reality, the abused employee often has little or no effective recourse.

Reasons for Employees Not to Talk to Their Manager's Manager About Abuse From Their Immediate Manager

If a manager abuses an employee, and the employee tells the abusing manager's manager, the upper level manager may have the mindset that managers always support their managers. The upper level manager may tell the abusing manager to handle the situation. Then, the abusing manager, with the support of the upper level manager, often terminates the employee the manager has abused. Consequently, speaking up can be unsafe for the employee who is the recipient of abuse.

If an upper level manager does have the mindset that managers always support their managers, the upper level manager may be supporting a manager with a mental health disorder. While not all managers who are abusive have a mental health disorder, some may have one. Statistics show more than one in five Americans have a mental health disorder, yet only 16% seek treatment. Also, approximately 5% of the U.S. population has a serious mental illness.

Many states allow employers to terminate an employee without cause. When an abused employee tells the abusing manager's manager about the abuse, if the abusing manager perceives the abused employee as a troublemaker, he or she may terminate the employee.

Why Employees Stay in Abusive Situations

Some employees who are the recipients of abuse may lack the skills or incentive to leave an abusive work situation because the abuse reminds them of family-of-origin issues where they experienced repeated abuse. As a result, the employee believes that abusive experiences are everywhere, so he or she has no incentive to leave. Helping professionals need to be

particularly supportive of employees who are the recipients of abuse since those employees may lack the skills to help themselves.

Considerations for Determining if a Manager Is Abusive and Factors to Consider in Identifying Abuse

Considerations for determining if a manager is abusive include numerous complaints and high turnover for that manager's area. What are factors to consider in identifying abuse?

Extenuating circumstances and frequency of abuse are significant factors to consider as to whether or not a situation qualifies as abuse. For example, if a sleep-deprived manager with a newborn baby snaps at an employee, does the occurrence qualify as abuse? Another factor to consider is how many occurrences qualify as abuse. When a customer, manager, or employee states they are experiencing abuse, whether or not abuse exists depends on the definition of abuse and the source of the definition.

Factors That Contribute to Employee Abuse

Factors that contribute to employee abuse include

- not controlling hot buttons;
- inappropriate mindsets;
- no organizational values regarding respect for employees or values not clearly defined;
- organizational values regarding respect for employees that exist without consequences for failure to implement them (theory differs from reality.);
- no established or publicized policy regarding abuse in relationship to the organization's values;
- no established or publicized procedures for reporting abuse;
- no policy statement protecting those who report abuse from retaliation or negative consequences;
- no policy statement of actions the organization will take if retaliation or negative consequences do occur to those who report abuse;
- no policy statement of the actions the organization will take regarding the abused and the abuser;
- not offering skills, training, and education to prevent and stop abuse; and
- not providing resources/recourses for help/intervention when abuse occurs.

Factors That Prevent and Stop Employee Abuse

Factors that prevent and stop employee abuse include

- *controlling hot buttons.* Individual employees and managers are responsible for identifying and controlling their own hot buttons;
- *updating mindsets and educating employees and managers regarding these updated mindsets.* Old mindsets that need updating include: victim entitlement (If you don't act the way I think you should, I'm entitled to treat you any way I want.); managers always support their managers; the customer is always right; I'm right, you're wrong; a manager delegates responsibility without authority to an employee, then blames the employee for any outcomes resulting from lack of authority; if you don't like it, leave; an eye for an eye; negative consequences for clerical employees that don't apply to other employees (Example: Reprimanding secretaries for being late from lunch and not reprimanding other employees who are late.); a manager makes an exception to a policy in front of the same employee whom the manager would not allow to make an exception to a policy (Example: The manager gives a customer a refund, but wouldn't allow the employee to do so.);
- *defining and publicizing organizational values relating to respect of employees as well as the consequences for not implementing them.* Appropriate organizational values include dignity, respect, honesty, equal and fair treatment, integrity, ethics, and listening. Ways to publicize organizational values include wallet cards, mission statements, orientation handouts, newsletters, staff meetings, bulletin boards, the organization's Web site, and "stay" interviews (as opposed to exit interviews). Consequences for not implementing organizational values include training, retraining, disciplinary action, demotion, and reassignments;
- *establishing and publicizing a policy regarding abuse from employees, managers, and customers in relationship to the organization's values.* Establishing and publicizing procedures for reporting abuse. Including the following in the policy and

procedure: The organization will not tolerate abuse; the organization's definition of employee abuse and the criteria and frequency that qualify as occurrences of abuse; the organization will protect those who report abuse from retaliation or negative consequences; the actions the organization will take if those who report abuse do receive retaliation or negative consequences; the actions the organization will take regarding the abused and the abuser if abuse does or does not exist; the guidelines and procedures for dealing with abusive customers on the telephone and in person; the skills, training, and education the organization will offer to prevent and stop abuse and whether the skills, training, and education are mandatory or optional for all employees; the resources/recourses for help and intervention when abuse occurs. Ways to publicize policies and procedures for reporting abuse include wallet cards, mission statements, orientation handouts, newsletters, staff meetings, bulletin boards, and "stay" interviews (as opposed to exit interviews);

- *skills/training/education to prevent employee abuse* including stress management, educating employees and managers regarding updated mindsets, assertiveness, active listening, negotiating, sensitivity training, learning empathy, reframing skills, customer service skills, communication skills, diffusing hostility skills, learning to make "I" statements, paraphrasing, reflections, conflict resolution, supervisory training in intervention responses, and team building;
- *resources and recourses to help prevent and stop employee abuse* including an open door policy for managers, employee assistance programs, human resources, labor relations, equal employment opportunity, ombudsmen, unions, training, counseling/therapy, employee relations, legal department, chief executive officer, organization's president, attorneys, minister, and mediation. NOTE: Mediation can be particularly helpful in addressing abuse.

Who Is Responsible for Preventing and Stopping Employee Abuse?

For the factors that prevent and stop employee abuse to be effective, organizations need to identify specific people or areas responsible for implementing each factor, an overall coordinator to ensure implementation occurs, time lines, and accountability on an ongoing basis. While organizations, employees, and managers are responsible for preventing and stopping employee abuse within their organization, outside sources such as helping professionals, consultants, lawyers, politicians, mediators, and ministers can influence organizations, standards of practice, societal views, and laws relating to employee abuse.

What Helping Professionals Need to Consider in Dealing With Employee Abuse

Helping professionals need to consider various issues in working with the abused, the abuser, and the organization. An abused employee may need help with

- learning to control their hot buttons;
- choosing whether to try to resolve the abusive situation and approaches to use to do so;
- choosing whether to try to leave or stay in their position;
- learning coping skills for staying in his or her current job while looking for another job;
- recognizing and believing in his or her worth;
- identifying legal rights and lack of rights;
- identifying options in case the employee can't find another job, but also cannot tolerate the current position. Examples: a leave of absence, moving to a new location, returning to school, or training for a new career;
- identifying available resources and recourses including talking to the abusing manager, talking to the abusing manager's manager, employee assistance programs, human resources, labor relations, equal employment opportunity, ombudsmen, unions, training, counseling/therapy, employee relations, legal department, chief executive officer, the organization's president, attorneys, minister, and mediation;

- identifying the pros and cons of utilizing any available resources; and
- understanding the importance of documenting specific dates, times, verbal statements, behaviors, actions, and reactions of the abuse, the abuser, and the organization as a record for him-or herself, for the organization, and for legal purposes if necessary.

Accepting responsibility can range from an action as simple as educating a colleague about workplace abuse to actions like advocating for new legislation. Workplace abuse deserves as much concern as spouse, child, and elder abuse. Change can occur.

An abuser may need help with

- learning how to control his or her hot buttons;
- choosing whether or not he or she wants to change his or her behavior;
- learning how to change behavior and what behaviors are acceptable to use instead of abuse;
- identifying the costs and consequences for not changing behaviors; and
- identifying the benefits of changing behavior.

An organization may need help with

- the organization's upper management learning how to control their hot buttons;
- identifying the costs and consequences, of continuing to employ the abused and the abuser;
- identifying the options for ending the abuse including the pros and cons of each option;
- identifying which options may avoid legal consequences; and
- understanding the importance of documenting all relevant behaviors and actions of the abused, the abuser, and of the organization for records and legal purposes if necessary.

Summary

Most executives are reluctant to admit that workplace abuse occurs within their organization. Affected employees who try to implement change risk termination due to employment-at-will laws. New laws may be necessary for companies to enforce significant policies to prevent and stop employee abuse. These laws could provide strict consequences for allowing abuse as well as provide employees with more immunity, rights, and recourses. The implementation of new laws and company policies requires individuals and groups to accept responsibility for helping to implement them.