
Warning: Mobbing is Legal, Work with Caution

Jody E. Housker, Ph.D., NCC, LPC

Managing Director/Counselor

31 Stories, LLC

3390 Peachtree Road NE, Ste 1102

Atlanta, GA 30326

jhouster@bellsouth.net

Stephen G. Saiz, Ed.D., NCC, LPC, ACS

Plattsburgh State University

Counselor Education

107F Ward Hall

Plattsburgh, New York, NY 12901

stephen.saiz@plattsburgh.edu

Dr. Housker is the Managing Director of 31 Stories, LLC a private practice counseling center in Atlanta, GA. She works with those who have been impacted by illness, disease or death. Her research interests include the use of creative interventions to alleviate distress and create meaning when

faced with illness, disease or death.

Dr. Saiz is an Associate Professor of Counselor Education at State University of New York at Plattsburgh and coordinator of the Community Counseling Program. His research interests include adoption, the use of metaphor in supervision, and the use of early recollections in counseling.
Contact Information

Mobbing Example

Hayden Scott is seemingly successful. He is close with his family and works as a University Professor. He loves his work. Student feedback of his teaching is positive - he often receives appreciative thank you notes at the finish of classes. He goes beyond his job requirements to help his department and students succeed in their chosen profession.

After four years of dedicated service, Hayden prepared his tenure packet and presented it without trepidation. His first and third year reviews were positive and cited no deficiencies or areas of concern. He had authored a number of publications, presented at conferences, and provided service to his community and school. He was given no reason to believe his employment at the university was threatened.

It is at this point that Hayden's life takes a turn. Hayden learns that what he had ignored for months is now going to haunt him.

Several months earlier Hayden felt certain students and colleagues were responding to him coolly and talking secretly about him. Doors were closed as he approached, conversations were interrupted when he entered a room, and he was not invited to "unofficial" faculty gatherings. He ignored this as he did not want to get involved in counterproductive workplace politics. His hope was the situation would dissolve itself when no attention was provided to fuel its continuation.

He soon learned his tenure was in question. Little explanation was given but the dean of the department stated that one professor seemed to sabotage his promotion. The dean and a union representative suggested he apply again the next year.

This defeat led Hayden to question what he had dismissed earlier. Through keeping alert to the politics of the office and researching his situation, Hayden learned he had been "mobbed".

Mobbing Defined

According to Westhues (2002) mobbing "is an impassioned, collective

campaign by co-workers to exclude, punish, and humiliate a targeted worker.” Namie and Namie (2000) name it bullying and define it as “the repeated, malicious, health endangering mistreatment of one employee by one or more employees” (p. 3). Whether termed mobbing, bullying, or verbal abuse the behaviors and results are to the same ends “to crush and eliminate the target” (Westhues, 2002).

Mobbing frequently involves the use of “harassing, abusive, and often terrorizing behaviors” (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999, p. 34). Mobbing is seldom overt instead it thrives on the use of rumor, innuendo, making inappropriate jokes, and public discrediting (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999; Namie and Namie 2000). What seems to traumatize the target the most are covert tactics used continuously and methodically. These methods often leave the target feeling as though mobbing is occurring, but without concrete evidence.

Mobbing Frequency?

Due to the lack of reporting, the number of mobbing victims is uncertain. Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot (1999) estimate that in the United States “well over 4 million people yearly, are, or may become, victimized by mobbing” (pg 25). According to Leymann (n.d.) one out of every four

employees entering the labor market will risk being subjected to at least one period of mobbing of at least six months' duration during his or her working career.”

Who Mobs

The literature is particularly critical of the perpetrators of mobbing. According to Namie and Namie (2000) those who instigate mobbing tend to be bullies, who try to dominate people in nearly every encounter. They are described as “inadequate, defective, and poorly developed people” (Namie and Namie, 2000, p. 14). They tend to be unpredictable, angry, critical, jealous, and manipulative (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999; Namie and Namie 2000). Finally, Glass (1999) describes them as representing “everything bad” (p. 239).

Targets of Mobbing

An individual can be mobbed regardless of age, race, religion, gender, or rank within an organization (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999; Namie and Namie 2000; Leymann, n.d.). Though any person is susceptible to being mobbed, those individuals who are devoted, loyal, creative, organized, cooperative and experienced professionals, seem to be at a higher likelihood to experience mobbing (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot,

1999).

It is suggested that particularly creative individuals may often be subjected to mobbing because they promote new ideas which may challenge others (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999). Mobbing may begin out of jealousy over the superior competence of the target, envy over the targets social skills or envy regarding the positive attitude of the target that attracts colleagues to them (Namie and Namie, 2000). At times mobbing is done as a bully revels in animosity, gaining pleasure from the excitement that it creates, giving the bully what Westhues (2002) calls “the euphoria of collective attack”.

Why do Targets Endure

It may be questioned why a person would stay in a job in which she/he is being mobbed. Mobbing victims often stay because they love their work (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999). They feel a sense of identity, competence, and commitment to what they do.

It is perhaps the targets commitment to the job that leaves him/her ill prepared for the mobbing experience. Targets dedicated to their work may rely on their superior efforts to move ahead and gain recognition, in lieu of

tracking the politics of the job. Targets tend to be empathic, just, and fair people (Namie & Namie 2000; Auerbach, 2001), who naively believe if they don't fight back against mobbing and continue to excel in their work, the perpetrator will lose interest and stop or that others will recognize the work they do and disbelieve the rumors and lies being told. This lack of knowledge about mobbing leaves the target little time to build the necessary survival networks to combat the problem (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999).

The Price the Target Pays

At the beginning of the mobbing experience the target may choose, as Hayden did, to ignore the problem. However; as the alienation of being mobbed continues, the target may find that he/she is less productive, creative, and self questioning. Mobbing can leave the target's life in turmoil (Glass, 1999), feeling embarrassed, frustrated and untrusting. Symptoms may include crying, sleep difficulties, lack of concentration, high blood pressure, gastrointestinal problems, excessive weight loss or gain, depression, alcohol or drug abuse, avoidance of the workplace, and/or uncharacteristic fearfulness (Namie & Namie, 2000; Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999). For some the degree of symptoms may become severe and include severe depression, panic attacks, heart attack, other severe

illnesses, accidents, suicide attempts, violence directed at third parties and symptoms of PTSD (Namie & Namie, 2000; Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999). These symptoms may lead the target to feel who they are as a person is being stripped away.

As emotional and psychological changes take place often physical difficulties follow. Those mobbed have been found to experience reduced immunity to infection, heart attacks as well as numerous other health problems (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999). According to Leymann (n.d.) roughly ten to twenty percent of those mobbed in his study seemed to contract a serious illnesses or committed suicide.

Changes take place in relationships inside and outside of work. When the target fails to “bounce back” from the impact of being mobbed, family and friends may begin to abandon the target (Namie & Namie, 2000).

According to Westhues (2002) “Not infrequently, mobbing spelled the end of the target’s career, marriage, health, and livelihood.”

All of the psychological, physical and relationships changes will likely lead to financial difficulties. Paid time off from work, doctor appointments, therapy, as well as medications may be required.

Mobbing: Legal Solutions

Certainly, each case of mobbing will have different legal merit depending on the client, the employer, the abuse and a variety of other factors. First, consider recourse through internal complaint channels and through formal systems. Some employers may empathize with the target and work to help the situation. Human resource representatives may intervene and attempt mediation. While this may seem a useful path, keep in mind that the human resource department works for the employer. Their primary interest is the employer. Do not allow the client to become overly optimistic or see this as the end to the battle, this may be one more step in a long and painful process. Therefore, Davenport, et al (1999) observe that as a counselor it will be critical to have attorney referrals available that specialize in workplace issues (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999). However, enlisting a lawyer may be the start of a protracted, uphill battle often with little chance of success.

An attorney should be able to determine if the actions of the perpetrator are illegal, which mobbing seldom is, or if the actions fall under discrimination, harassment, or hostile work environment (Davenport, Schwartz and Elliot, 1999; Namie & Namie, 2000). Should the actions of

the perpetrator be deemed mobbing and legal, work with the client to plan a useful course of action.

Harassment or discriminatory treatment-if unrelated to gender, race, age or any other title seven protected categories are not dealt with under current US law (Namie & Namie, 2000). Clients advised by an attorney that they have a case of illegal conduct must still be helped in understanding what this means, and in gaining support for the prolonged battle that may lay ahead.

An attorney can help prepare a client for conversations by providing language that may keep them out of trouble. Such language may allow the target to express him/herself in an assertive way in language that is free of rancor and vitriol.

Mobbing: Possible Counseling Interventions

The authors have developed a number of suggestions to help the targets of mobbing. First, assist the target in enlisting support. It will be important to develop relationships and ways to talk about mobbing events without exhausting people with the details or emotions of the situations. Mobbing occurs over time and it is helpful for the target to explain to those around him/ her that this will not be over in a month's time but may continue for

years. Knowing this may help supporters understand that this is not a one-time event and that long term support is required with this type of abuse.

Second, it will be helpful to assist the client in grieving the losses amassed. The client may need to grieve the loss of a promotion, a job, or a career due to mobbing. The loss of relationships, self-confidence and self also may need to be grieved.

Third, consider helping the target assess the possible financial impact of mobbing - attorney fees, health costs, mental health costs, lost days of work, and possible loss of a job. Reviewing finances and planning for various eventualities is one facet of help that cannot be overlooked.

Fourth, help the client evaluate what is going on from an outsider's perspective and to consider an escape plan. It may be viewed as a defeat by the client to look for another job, but this could be the healthiest choice. If the client seeks other opportunities, it will be necessary to build a resume and prepare for interviews. A counselor can assist in framing the language of the resume and the way the client talks about the workplace in a professional manner.

Fifth, the counselor may help the target focus on skills useful outside the

job. Minimizing time at the workplace can help alleviate stress.

Volunteering for organizations that bring out other talents, and build relationships outside the work environment may help one to find new areas of interest that might provide a more developed identity which incorporates the values and interests as well as skills of the client.

Finally, helping the client gain perspective about pursuing a negotiated settlement or a legal resolution may be the most important work of a counselor. Are the target's needs for fairness and justice outweighed by the price paid for challenging an often smug, hurtful culture that will likely outlast any lone individual's campaign for justice?

References

Auerbach, J. E. (2001). *Personal and executive coaching: The complete guide for mental health professionals*. Ventura, CA: Executive College Press.

Davenport, N., Schwartz, R. D., and Elliot, G. P. (1999). *Mobbing: Emotional abuse in the American workplace*. Ames, IA: Civil Society Publishing.

GLASS, L. (1999). *The complete idiot's guide to verbal self-defense*. New York, NY: Alpha Books.

Leymann, H. (n. d.) The mobbing encyclopedia: Bullying; whistleblowing. Retrieved July 28, 2005, from <http://www.leymann.se/English/frame.html>.

Namie, G, and Namie, R. (2000). *The bully at work*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Inc.

Westhues, K. (2002). At the mercy of the mob: A summary of research on workplace mobbing [Electronic version]. *Canada's Occupational Health and Safety Magazine*, 18, 30-36.

[VISTAS 2006 Online](#)