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Workplace Bullying: Implications for Adult Educators

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Abstract: Workplace bullying is when one person or a group in a workplace single out another person for unreasonable, embarrassing, and/or intimidating treatment. According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, up to a third of workers may be targets of bullying. Education and awareness are vital to protect all employees.

"All cruelty springs from weakness." Seneca, 4BC-AD65

Bullying in the workplace has unfortunately been a part of the working environment for a long time. It has been called harassment, abuse, incivility, intimidation, and in some instances the result of office politics. Much is written about bullying in schools and action has been taken in an attempt to alleviate this problem, but bullying in the workforce is another matter. The schoolyard bully chooses targets because he/she believes the target is different or weaker and easily intimidated. The workplace bully chooses targets because they act with integrity and demonstrate high levels of competence which threaten the bully. All too often the competence of the targeted person only serves to remind the bully of his/her insecurities and many times this is enough to put the bully on the offensive. In some situations, workplace bullying has occurred because the targeted person refused to be subservient and resisted control; bully envied targeted person's competence; bully envied targeted person's social skills, being liked, positive attitude and ethical target behavior. Other circumstances could include the cruel personality of the bully or problems with substance abuse; and a hostile workplace culture where bullying leads to promotion.

Although it is evident that bullies exist in the workplace, they are not the source of research for most qualitative studies. In most cases, bullies are not willing to admit they are bullying and are not anxious to share their process or reasoning behind their actions. Targets of bullying are another issue. They are looking for assistance and interventions. This qualitative research study was conducted using a content analysis of 11 counselor interviews. The research sought to answer these two questions: (1) What interventions do counselors use with clients who are targets of workplace bullying? (2) Which interventions do counselors state are the most effective or necessary in working with clients who are targets of workplace bullying? The interview responses from counselors generated categories of interventions. This examination revealed that interventions used with targets and interventions considered most effective or necessary were similar. The interventions utilized included (a) active listening and assessment of functioning, (b) building self-esteem, (c) providing support and validation of the target's experience, (d) educating the target, (e) coaching, (f) creating an action plan, and (g) awareness of work resources. Participants utilized multiple interventions based on targets' presenting symptoms.

More than half of the participants reported that they had experience as targets of workplace bullying in their own work histories. Participants who had been former targets were more likely to recognize workplace bullying in their clients. Data from this study revealed that a lack of formal training and education required participants to use creativity in their selection and utilization of interventions for targets. This creativity was particularly noticeable in the descriptions of informal education methods used to assist targets. The participants utilized what worked in the past in similar situations and created individual combinations of interventions for each target based on what the target presented. Information about how to help targets was extremely limited for participants. Some participants used books and handouts to assist targets. Also, most of the participants did not refer targets to workplace resources because there are no laws to protect targets in Illinois. There is definitely a need for the creation of laws to prohibit workplace bullying. The main goal of the majority of the participants was to help the target become less of a target.

Implications for counselor educators parallel those of the counselor participants. They include the need for topics of workplace bullying, its effects on targets, and how to help targets be incorporated into the research, presentations, textbooks, and curricula. As workplace bullying research is developed, the results must appear in textbooks utilized in counselor education programs as well as frequently read journals. Also, workshops, conference presentations, in-service and pre-service trainings, and research and strategy articles need to be developed and made available. Counselor educators must work with counselors as advocates for policy development and for laws regarding workplace bullying.

The study also found that other professionals need to know about workplace bullying and need formal training about workplace bullying. These professions include but are not limited to Human Resource (HR) personnel, administrators, managers/supervisors, and career coaches. Data from this study indicated there is not a good system in most organizations in the United States to deal with workplace bullying. HR personnel do not have specific policies or procedures when dealing with workplace bullying. Information about workplace bullying, its effects on targets, and organizational management of workplace bullying is important for HR departments. The HR department needs workplace bullying policies that include (a) zero tolerance of workplace bullying, (b) workplace bullying as a disciplinary offense, (c) a commitment of confidentiality regarding complaints of workplace bullying (d) a timetable for all stages of the complaint procedure, (e) training for all appropriate personnel, and (f) regular monitoring that may include counseling for the bully and the target.

In conclusion, this research supports the education and training of counselors, counselor educators, and the working world on the subject of bullying in the workplace. They may all have different roles in the process of eliminating bullying in the workplace, but each role is an important piece of the process. Adult educators in their roles as instructors, trainers, presenters, and researchers are the link in providing the education.