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Workplace Bullying: What Supervisors Should Know

When you hear the word bullying, playgrounds, children, or teenagers are usually the first things to come to mind. Unfortunately, it carries on into adulthood, and even into the workplace. Bullying not only has negative effects on the individual but also has serious effects on the organization. As supervisors it is important to be aware of bullying, and what you can do to intervene.

What is Workplace Bullying?

According to the Department of Labor, workplace bullying refers to repeated unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed at an employee (or group of employees), which are intended to intimidate and create a risk to the health and safety of employees. Bullying involves repeated attacks against a target that often degrades, threatens or humiliates a worker. Some examples of bullying include:

- Invalid criticism
- Exclusion
- Being treated differently than other employees
- Excessive monitoring
- Target of jokes
- Spreading rumors or gossip

The Effect of Bullying on the Employee and the Organization

Workplace bullying not only has an effect on the victim's dignity and self esteem, it can leave him or her feeling defenseless. Recurrent bullying can lead to mental health and physical problems such as high stress, absenteeism, sleep disturbances, or depression. From an organizational perspective, bullying can be very costly. It can lead to increased turnover, a decrease in morale and productivity and in some cases, legal action.

What Supervisors can do to Promote Anti-Bullying

Victims of bullying may not report it because they fear retribution or lack the confidence in management or the organization to take action. Ensure that reports of bullying are supported.

- Talk to Human Resources about creating a zero tolerance anti-bullying policy. If one already exists, review the company policy with your staff and ensure that other levels of management are fully aware of warning signs of bullying.
- Bullying is less likely to occur in organizations that have open communication and sound personnel policies. Encourage an open door policy so that employees feel comfortable reporting issues or ongoing conflicts with co-workers to you.
- Foster a work environment where employees are engaged and feel involved in decision-making. Reward teamwork and other cooperative behavior.
- Lead by example. Do not get involved in workplace gossip and discourage gossip among co-workers.
- If bullying has been witnessed or reported, the behavior should be taken seriously and addressed. Bring the concern to Human Resources and make sure that the situation is properly investigated.

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