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Bullying Is NOT a Conflict

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Workplace Bullying is NOT Conflict

One of the biggest misconceptions that people have about workplace bullying is that it is similar to conflict and therefore, persistent workplace aggression is handled like conflict. This is understandable because most people are not aware that bullying even happens in the workplace. Those who are aware frequently do not have a clear definition of persistent workplace aggression nor do they understand the differences in how to handle workplace bullying. It is, therefore, imperative for organizations to differentiate between workplace bullying and normal conflict to effectively manage, stop, and prevent it.

Normal workplace conflict is based on differences that people have or about disagreements over a particular issue or issues in the workplace. For example, I might have conflict with another social worker because they scheduled a weekly meeting at a time in which I could not attend but needed to attend. Eventually, we would work it out, let it go, and move on. Conflict is normal and inevitable. In many cases, it makes the organization stronger when it is managed appropriately.

Workplace bullying, on the other hand, is about sabotaging another person's reputation and professional standing using covert and overt abusive behavior. It is a series of incidents over time and does not necessarily have a triggering event. These incidents when looked at independently from one another may seem minor, but when viewed collectively paint a picture of workplace abusive behavior in the workplace. For example, if I am being cyber bullied, looking at one email does not seem harmful, but when you look at the 500 emails I have received from a bully, it shows the pattern of workplace abuse.

Workplace bullying also goes on and on. It intensifies over time, rather than improving. So, for the target, there is no reason for the aggression and usually there is no end. Workplace aggression does not make the environment better, but it deteriorates the culture, making it unbearable for everyone involved, even those who are perpetrating the violence.

Bullies begin using aggression for lots of different reasons. Some start because the bully is jealous of the target or the target has qualities that the aggressor resents. Often bullies use aggression to mask their own insecurities, lack of self-esteem, or to empower themselves. Persistent workplace aggressors use bad behavior to get ahead, for self-promotion, and to secure their work relationships. Many times, because they do not have the professional skills to do so in any way other than bullying.

Persistent workplace aggression manifests out of the personal issues of the bully rather than differences between two workers or as a result of conflict. As such, it must be handled differently. It is these key differences in workplace bullying and conflict that are important to recognize. These variances in the two make a huge impact on how, when, and who intervenes. Understanding the variances allows organizations and leadership to cope with aggression effectively rather than treating it like normal conflict which ends up perpetuating bullying and re-

victimizing the target. For more information, go to www.jankircher.com or contact jankircher@jankircher.com