



# Setting the Tone for Anti-Bullying:

Understanding and Dismantling a Toxic Workplace

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**The workplace that we've all been accustomed to has forever changed in the wake of the pandemic.** It has become more than just the four walls in which we conducted business from 9am-5pm. The pandemic has expanded what we call the workplace to include virtual conferencing platforms, instant messaging systems, email and any virtual social and professional gatherings. While some organizations have continued to work fully in-person due to the nature of their work, many organizations have elected to move to fully remote or create hybrid workforces.

With the concept of the workplace and working hours being vastly different now, we need to give extra consideration to the environment in which our employees are working. When employees worked in the office, it was much easier for leaders and employers to set expectations and parameters for respectfully working together. However, with our people predominantly working remotely and relying on virtual platforms to conduct their business, it is much more difficult for an employer or leader to shape and keep a pulse on the employees' work environment, from both a physical and psychological health and safety standpoint.

## ***“Bullying comes in many forms and no one person in an organization is exempt from becoming the target of bullying behaviours.”***

Creating and maintaining a safe workplace environment that is conducive to a positive workplace culture is no easy task, and this becomes even more daunting as virtual work becomes the new normal. As leaders, we have become removed from the daily contact we had with our people, resulting in a loss of communication and connectedness. On top of this, many employees have withdrawn and are less forthcoming about their unique experiences and challenges both professionally and personally.

When we lose connection with our people, we also lose sight of the nuances of our workplace culture, both positive and negative. In addition, in a virtual environment, co-workers often forget the established professionalism that is expected; perhaps this occurs due to a lack of face-to-face exposure, blurred lines between home and work, as well as building frustrations surrounding constantly working in the unknown.

This gives way to a rise in the potential for behaviours and interactions that can create a negative work environment. A negative work environment is also known as a “toxic workplace”, one that is characterized by, inappropriate jokes, rude remarks, disrespectful/forceful communication, gossip, unrealistic expectations, unfair treatment and bullying.

The line between what is considered bullying and outright harassment can at times be confusing. What we do know, as referenced by the Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety, is that most jurisdictions in Canada include bullying in the definition of workplace harassment, and in the absence of such legislation, a workplace free from bullying falls under the employer's general duty to take all reasonable precautions to provide a safe and healthy work environment for all workers. This includes both physical and psychological safety.

Knowing this, employers have a duty to inquire if they think an employee may be experiencing bullying. In addition, employers have a duty to intervene when/if they think the behaviours of an employee constitute bullying. Bullying comes in many forms and no one person in an organization is exempt from becoming the target of bullying behaviours. Some of the most common types of bullying we see are verbal, social and physical, and we are increasingly seeing cyber bullying. Any of these forms of bullying can take place between peers, from a manager to an employee and vice versa, from an external party to an internal staff member or from a staff member to an external party.

An employee who is experiencing bullying may exhibit signs such as:

- ▶ They dread going to work and may often call in sick to avoid work.
- ▶ They have spoken to co-workers or other trusted confidants at work and mentioned they feel they are repetitively treated unfairly.
- ▶ There are noticeable changes in their mood or behaviour.
- ▶ They have become socially isolated and withdrawn.



It is important to approach a conversation with an employee who may be experiencing bullying with an open mind. Start simple with an open-ended question, such as, "You haven't seemed yourself lately, is there anything you want to share with me?" Also, be sure to consider the following:

- Enter the conversation bias and prejudice free.
- Do not assume you know what is happening or how the employee feels.
- Do not call the employee a "victim"; rather, they are the "target of bullying."

You also need to address an employee who may be partaking in bullying behaviours. Consider the following best practices:

- Treat the conversation as a fact-finding mission, not a formal investigation (unless the situation is severe enough to warrant).
- Give the individual the opportunity to describe their behaviour and explore why it was inappropriate.
- Do not refer to the individual as a perpetrator or "a bully"; when these terms are used, we create a label that they may feel will forever be set in your mind.
- Use most situations as an opportunity to learn to do better next time. In some instances, the individual may honestly not have known the behaviour was wrong.
- Remember the purpose of the conversation is to acknowledge appropriate versus inappropriate behaviours, not to punish (unless the situation is severe enough to warrant).

The best advice is to take a proactive approach to minimize the chances of bullying occurring in the first place while making it clear that your organization has a clear zero-tolerance policy. This kind of proactive approach rests on the following pillars:

- Respect for all is integrated into your company values and culture.
- Policies reflect the company's commitment to a bully-free workplace.
- Policies are brought to life through communication, training and consistent application.
- Take all instances seriously and take immediate action.
- Drive accountability. It takes a village to call out behaviours that are counter to a positive workplace culture and encourage your people to come forward when the line has been crossed.
- Be the role model. All of this starts from the top with leadership setting the tone.

Overall, condoned bullying and toxic behaviours coupled with a lack of accountability and positive reinforcement promotes a workplace culture which will certainly become toxic and will have a lasting negative affect on the employees and others who engage with your organization.

By taking a proactive approach leaders can set the tone, lay out the expectations and show staff that they are fully committed to providing a safe workplace. By championing this, employers will be able to maintain a positive workplace culture whether their people are working together in-person, virtually or a mix of both. ■

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*For more information, join MaxPeople and the Canadian Payroll Association for the upcoming webinar, "Anti-Bullying in the Workplace," on February 9. Register at: [payroll.ca/Webinars](http://payroll.ca/Webinars)*

