

Workplace Bullying

This is the first in my series regarding Workplace Bullying. It is a simple overview, which I hope will assist those in the workplace to start identifying Workplace Bullies.

The purpose of this piece is to create an awareness and collective understanding of Workplace Bullying. It is an affront to our human dignity, and violates our Human Rights and Constitutional Rights as global citizens.

Workplace Bullying is unlegislated in South Africa, and is a prolific and insidious phenomenon. It knows no race, gender, language, sexual orientation or religion, and affects millions of South Africans and individuals globally every single day.

It occurs in big businesses, small businesses and amongst the self-employed. It also knows no "level" - subordinate, colleague, supra-ordinate or peer. Bullying can be an individual act or a collaborative and collective act amongst multiple like-minded individuals within an organisation.

The victims remain silent - often unaware what classifies as bully behaviours, or simply move on and find other jobs. The typical "fight or flight syndrome".

Often co-workers observe and participate in the behaviour - too afraid themselves to face the bully or be targeted themselves by the bully.

I have met numerous bullies in my twenty-five year career, and the modus operandi appears to remain constant across numerous organisations and industries.

I have coached a number of victims of Workplace Bullying, and this is what I have learned:

1. Male on female bullying is the most common. However, we must remember to make the distinction between "sexual harassment" and bullying. Bullying behaviours listed below will clarify this distinction.
2. Male on male bullying most common, particularly in small businesses. Employees are most vulnerable here because they are unaware of their legal rights as employees, or illiterate. In most cases, both. Small organisations also often do not have a Human Resources Managers, or any kind of recourse against the bullies. Often, basic policies and procedures are not in place - for example a Grievance Procedure.
3. Employees will not employ internal procedures if they are in place, for fear of losing their employment or suffering further humiliation from the bullies.
4. Female on Female bullying is the most prevalent. There are a number of theories about this, which I will discuss later in my series.
5. Once the "target" of a bully is removed (forced to resign or simply moves to alternative employment), we have the emergence of "serial" bullies - they simply move on to the next target.
6. The longer one remains in this toxic state (the victims of workplace bullies), the more severe the psychological trauma becomes. Often age and physical location, and personal health act as barriers to finding alternative employment. The victim is literally "trapped".

I will expand on this later in my series.

The Signs that You are the Victim of a Workplace Bully or Multiple Bullies:

1. You are verbally (swearing at you, shouting at you), electronically or physically undermined amongst your colleagues. Depending on your level of seniority, this can happen across multiple levels within the organisation. You are made to feel incompetent and humiliated on a daily basis. Please note that this can also constitute physical abuse - often resulting in violence, particularly in (but not limited to) male-on-male bullying.
2. Your workload increases dramatically. Your "job" changes. What you were employed to do and what you are expected to do becomes magnified - often outside of your current skills or knowledge levels. This tactic is employed by bullies to overwhelm you and make you look incompetent, and to ensure that your performance at work suffers.
3. Depending on your level in the organisation, responsibilities are removed, reporting lines are changed, and the authority you had disappears. This is a bully tactic to further discredit you in front of your colleagues.
4. Blatant lies become the order of the day. Bullies are most often incompetent themselves, and will override authority and knowledge due to ignorance. Or will begin to make untrue statements about you, to your colleagues, and, because of their seniority or position within the organisation, these falsities are taken as "fact". You are misquoted by the bullies, and most often, this will most often not be questioned.

