Top Ten Tips for Dealing With Workplace Bullying

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Top Ten tips for creating and implementing an Anti-Bullying Policy within an organization.

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1. Create a Zero Tolerance Anti-Bullying Policy
Several forms of bullying are illegal in the U.S. and elsewhere; this includes assault and battery, retaliation, discrimination and harassment based on legally protected characteristics, and defamation. Other forms, such as harassment not based on a protected characteristic and other abusive conduct are not yet illegal in the U.S. It is therefore essential to address the issue in the company policy. Create a zero tolerance anti-bullying policy that is part of a wider commitment to a safe and friendly work environment. Like all workplace policies it should be available and applicable to all employees, posted in central locations and highlighted as part of the employee orientation process.

2. Define Bullying and Include Examples
Define bullying and spell out the consequences it has on the organization. Provide a brief list of examples of unacceptable behavior in the workplace. Examples of bullying can include: shouting, yelling, or using spiteful remarks; ridiculing, belittling, or otherwise demeaning anyone; spreading rumors or innuendo of a malicious intent; and taking credit for a subordinate or co-worker’s work.

3. Promote Awareness and Training
Hold awareness campaigns for everyone on workplace bullying and the consequences of engaging in it. Create training sessions and workshops, to be undertaken by all employees, focusing on the development of healthy and productive communication skills. Keep in mind, the strategies and plans used to minimize or control bullying should be designed to create a long-term change within the workplace and not used as a quick fix for the problem. Employers should also consider conducting periodic surveys of current employees to assess whether any destructive behavior is impacting morale or creating other problems in the workplace.

4. Provide Reporting Procedures
Establish an independent contact for employees. Provide details of people within the organization who are available to offer advice, information and support or receive complaints relating to workplace bullying. The contact officer should be objective, unbiased, and able to provide assistance to the employee directly and should not be directly responsible for conducting the investigation. Reporting procedures should be similar to those already established in harassment policies. A procedure for anonymous reporting must also be in place so as not to discourage victims from coming forward.

5. Call for “Active” Managing
Workplace bullying prevention efforts can be better served by giving management an active role in the staff they supervise, rather than being far removed from them. In doing so, managers are in a better position to spot potential bullies and potentially eliminate inappropriate behavior with their presence. Managers must also be aware of the responsibilities they have to assist the employees.

6. Ensure the Complainant is Supported
Improve management’s ability and sensitivity towards dealing with and responding to conflicts. Remember, a serial bully can be an expert at deception, so the fact that the allegation is unsubstantiated by an investigation does not mean that the bullying did not occur.

7. Have the Mindset that No Complaint is too Small
Take all complaints seriously and investigate properly. Immediate action should be taken to address the bullying behavior and reassignment of those involved may be necessary, with an “innocent until proven guilty” approach. Providing for alternative dispute resolution in these instances creates the best opportunity to come to a resolution within the workplace.

8. Realize that Bullying and Harassment Are Not Equals
Keep in mind when conducting an investigation that bullying differs from both harassment and retaliation. Harassment occurs when an employee, as part of a protected class, experiences offensive and unwelcome conduct serious enough to adversely affect the conditions of their employment. Retaliation occurs when an employee is subject to an adverse employment decision or further harassment after a complaint of illegal discrimination has been made. Bullying, on the other hand, is often done covertly, through trivial criticisms and isolation that occurs behind closed doors. While harassment and retaliation are per se illegal, bullying is not.

9. Be Attentive to Warning Signs
If there is a workplace bully in the organization it is imperative that management and HR recognize potential red flags. A pattern of resignations, discharges, or requests for transfers might be an indication of workplace bullying. An increase in sick leave or the number of grievances filed could also require further investigation. Larger organizations should keep statistical records and information relating to these events to allow for a more thorough analysis. Furthermore, conducting meaningful exit interviews with each individual who leaves the organization will help identify any problems and patterns.

10. Be Mindful that Bullying Affects Organizations
Workplace bullying can impact an organization both legally and financially. Replacing employees that leave as a result of being bullied, displaced work effort, and the potential legal ramifications are costs commonly associated with workplace bullying. A bullying environment may lead to employees failing to contribute their best work and refraining from sharing ideas for improvement, both of which can prove costly to organizations.

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