BULLYING & CO-WORKER CONFLICT FACTSHEET

Respect and Civility among co-workers, supervisors, administrators, customers, and clients should be the accepted norms in every workplace. While a certain amount of disagreement or conflict among co-workers is normal and healthy, bullying and disrespectful conflicts can lead to hostile work environments that create significant health impacts on effected workers and major disruptions to work quality and productivity. The U.S. is just in the beginning stages of recognizing these forms of workplace violence, and effective strategies for preventing and responding to them are just beginning to emerge.

1. What is Workplace Bullying and Co-worker Conflict?

CO-WORKER CONFLICT: This includes a wide range of inappropriate workplace behaviors, from disrespectful or aggressive interactions to acts of physical violence.

BULLYING: While there is no single definition of bullying, a subset of co-worker conflict, here are two useful definitions:

a. Repeated, health-harming mistreatment that takes one or more of the following forms:
   - verbal abuse
   - threatening, humiliating, or offensive behavior/actions
   - work interference -- *sabotage* – which prevents work from getting done.

   Source: Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute

b. Abusive behavior repeated over a period of time, with the victim experiencing difficulties in defending him or herself in this situation.

   Source: University of Maryland Work and Health Research Center (UMB WHRC)

Common bullying behaviors may include:
- false accusations of mistakes and errors
- hostile glares and other intimidating non-verbal behaviors
- yelling, shouting, and screaming
- exclusion and the "silent treatment"
- withholding resources and information necessary to the job
- behind-the-back sabotage and defamation
- use of put-downs, insults, and excessively harsh criticism
- unreasonably heavy work demands

NOTE: Different behaviors and situations will warrant that different actions be taken by the target and

work organization. Among other factors, consideration should be given to the power relationship between the perpetrator and target. At all times, the priority should be to protect oneself, both physically and emotionally.

2. How serious is the problem?

There is no national database that captures the full scope of bullying and co-worker violence in the U.S. However, PEF has been a partner in a federally-funded research project conducted by the University of Maryland in which PEF, CSEA, NYSCOPBA, and M/C employees from 5 different state agencies were surveyed. As evidence of the widespread interest in this problem, the overall response rate was very high: 72%. A total of 13,000 people completed the survey. Overall, 44% of the respondents indicated that during the prior six months they had experienced at least one of six negative acts listed in the survey**.** The rates of respondents experiencing these acts did not differ significantly by gender, race, or age. The most common acts reported were:

- "been ignored or shunned" 29.1%
- "had insulting/offensive remarks made about you" 26.4%
- "been humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work" 24.2%

Ten percent of those surveyed reported that they had been "bullied" in the prior six months, using the UMB WHRC definition.

Roughly one-fifth of the respondents who reported having experienced the negative acts indicated that it negatively impacted their work (20.2%), their intention to remain in their current job (20.9%), or their personal life (22.0%). The impact was greater on those who were bullied (47.9%, 45.1%, and 51.7% respectively).

The prevalence of bullying and co-worker conflict among New York State employees, while unacceptably high, is similar to the rates found by other researchers, principally in Europe and Australia.

Health effects that have been reported include:

- stress disorders of all types
- clinical depression
- high blood pressure
- cardiovascular disease
- impaired immune systems
- symptoms consistent with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

3. What can be done by the organization?

Every worksite should have a comprehensive and effective workplace violence prevention program, as required by the New York State Public Employer Workplace Violence Prevention Law and regulations. While the Law does not explicitly include "bullying" in its definition of reportable workplace violence, most experts in the field understand that bullying and co-worker conflict are

types of workplace violence, and may often lead to the actual physical assaults that are the Law's focus.

Thus, PEF believes that employers should explicitly address co-worker conflict and bullying, either as part of their overall workplace violence prevention program or separately. Regardless, the critical elements of an effective co-worker conflict/ bullying prevention program include:

- **Management Commitment and Employee Involvement –** reducing or eliminating bullying and other co-worker conflict MUST be a priority of the entire agency/organization, from the Commissioner or Director, on down. This commitment must be evidenced by both policy and deed. The manner in which top managers interact with those they supervise usually sets the tone for the entire organization. Employee/union involvement, on an ongoing basis, is key in the development and implementation of the program.

- **Worksite Risk Evaluation & Determination** – the causes of bullying and co-worker conflict may vary across and within organizations. A number of methods can be used to determine the causes for YOUR organization. These include: an anonymous questionnaire survey; focus groups; meetings or informal conversations; and a review of relevant incident reports. Some common factors that may contribute to an increase in bullying behaviors and other co-worker conflict include lack of resources, poor communication, inadequate staffing, and stress.

- **Hazard Prevention and Control** – a number of potential control measures should be adopted.

    - **Policy**

        - clear norms of behavior and procedures for dealing with breaches of those norms should be delineated
        - early intervention before conflicts escalate

        Note: Zero Tolerance policies, which often require a "one size fits all" response, regardless of the circumstances, should be avoided. These policies can lead to their own abuses, as when first graders are expelled for having an aspirin or squirt gun in their backpack.

    - **Complaint system** – it should be clear how to report threatening or abusive behavior and who to report to if the perpetrator is the direct supervisor. To encourage early intervention, it must be established that every effort will be made to resolve conflicts in a non-punitive manner.

    - **Prompt, thorough, impartial investigation must include:**

        - a clear policy of non-retaliation for complainant
        - a system for assessing reported threats
            - assessment should determine if there is an immediate or ongoing threat and if immediate action is necessary to protect the target
            - personnel conducting the assessment should be specifically trained to carry out this function
            - one approach is the development of a multi-disciplinary threat assessment team
        - the role of union representatives should be clearly delineated

        - communication with the complainant about the status of the investigation, while maintaining the confidentiality rights of the accused

    - **Potential non-disciplinary measures may include:**
        - prompt, informal resolution of minor incidents or misunderstandings
        - mediation or dispute resolution programs
            - these programs must be negotiated with the union(s)
            - use of these programs must be agreed to by both individuals/parties involved in the dispute.
            - use of these programs does not preclude either party pursuing the issue through more formal channels.
            - use of these programs is virtually never appropriate for bullying scenarios or situations where there is a power relationship between the target and perpetrator
        - policies and procedures for separating the parties.
            - Separation policies must comply with the PEF contract
            - Management should consult with the union representative, as well as the involved parties, before implementing a change in job assignment

    - **Provide support/assistance to those employees who have been targeted** – this may include referrals to EAP, separation from the other party, and other safety measures.

    - **Selection/evaluation/training of supervisors should include skills in people management**
        - incorporate relevant criteria in the hiring/promotion process for supervisors
        - incorporate relevant criteria in supervisors' training
        - incorporate relevant criteria in annual Performance Evaluations

    - **Development of an action plan to change the culture**
        - assign a responsible person and completion date to each task
        - may include campaigns to promote respect and civility

- **Safety and Health Training**
    - provide training to all employees on relevant policies, the code of behavior, and how to register a complaint
    - provide training to supervisors and managers and union officials on skills for managing people and conflicts and to encourage early intervention in conflicts

- **Recordkeeping and Program Evaluation**
    - develop systems to report and log incidents and threats
    - track the results of investigations
    - retain the relevant data in a database so that periodic review of the data can be performed to identify trends, causes, and to evaluate the effectiveness of prevention measures

- **Important Issues and Questions**
    - The manner in which individuals treat each other is impacted by the overall environment within the agency, particularly the level of respect that the agency exhibits toward its staff.

- Enforcement of behavioral norms must be fair and consistent throughout the organization.
- How do you change organizational culture? Experience and research shows it takes a sustained and dedicated effort, with commitment from top managers and involvement of union representatives and frontline workers.
- When developing mediation and/or dispute resolution programs, it is important to preserve people's negotiated rights to grievance/ arbitration and representation when discipline may be involved. These programs **should not** be piloted or implemented without a written agreement between PEF and Management that addresses non-interference with negotiated rights. Consult with your PEF Field Representative.
- Can civil service system procedures for selection of supervisors be improved to take into account "people skills"?
- How can we create civil and respectful work environments, given the systemic stressors such as political attacks on government workers, threats of layoffs, and short staffing?

4. What can be done by individuals?

1. Address the problem, do not suffer in silence.
2. If you feel that it is safe to do so, tell the perpetrator to stop.
3. Approach your union representative, supervisor, a top manager, or trusted colleague for help.
4. Document all incidents.
5. Document all efforts to remedy the problem.
6. Identify witnesses – get written statements, if possible.
7. Bring in a 3rd party to do mediation or conflict resolution. Make sure this doesn't degrade union contractual rights to grievance/arbitration. NOTE: This is likely to only be appropriate and effective in non-bullying situations, where both parties have a sincere desire to resolve the situation fairly.
8. Pursue separation from the other party.
9. File a workplace violence complaint.

NOTE: If you suspect that you may be a target for discipline by management, it is ***very important*** that you request union representation prior to submitting to an interrogation by any supervisor or manager.

5. What can union representatives do?

1. Listen, support, and build rapport.
2. Obtain permission from the target before taking action.
3. Investigate.
    a. offer confidentiality, if appropriate

b. if both parties are PEF members, get a 2nd steward/field representative to represent the other party

4. Get involved early in trying to help the parties resolve the conflict: Offer to talk to the alleged perpetrator and / or supervisor, either with or separately from the target.

5. Look for underlying causes and address with management.

6. Address hostile work environments.

7. Place bullying and related issues on the local labor/management, health and safety, or workplace violence committee agendas.

8. Initiate projects to develop organizational systems and procedures to prevent and respond to co-worker violence and bullying.

9. Schedule training of members or committees.

10. Ensure that the union is fully involved on those committees.

6. How do I get more information?

PEF has compiled a comprehensive list of resources on workplace violence prevention. Visit our webpage at www.pef.org, click on "Health and Safety" in the left column, then select "Bullying Workshop Materials" from the list of topics on the right hand side.

Remember! Co-worker violence and bullying in the workplace are serious problems, and should be identified, assessed, and controlled, just like any other workplace hazard. If you are concerned about violence at work, talk to your co-workers, health and safety committee, union representatives, and employer.

Upon request, the PEF Health & Safety Department will provide other factsheets, standards, regulations, and other resources. Visit our webpage to order these resources at www.pef.org/health-and-safety, or contact us at 518-785-1900, ext. 254 or 1-800-342-4306, ext. 254.

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Kenneth Brynien
President

Arlea Igoe
Secretary-Treasurer

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