Stop Workplace Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying among school-age children is a frequently highlighted topic in news stories and articles because of its negative impact on their psychological development and wellbeing. However, cyberbullying isn’t bound by age or schoolyards. When it happens between coworkers, it becomes a workplace issue in which people of any age may play a role.
Cyberbullying is just like traditional workplace bullying and harassment, but it is delivered by someone using digital technology, often anonymously. The messages are delivered via electronic devices on various online platforms. It isn’t about occasional offhand comments or actions; it is about repeated offenses. While inappropriate offhand cyber comments are certainly an HR concern, they are not considered cyberbullying.

A 2014 survey conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute found that 6.5 million workers reported being affected by bullying in the workplace.¹ Cyberbullying actions include communicating repeated negative, harmful, false, or demeaning content that is embarrassing, humiliating, or damaging to a victim (BOX 1). It sometimes begins with insults or put-downs to wear someone down or intimidate them, but can progress to include professional and personal attacks. Cyberbullying is most commonly transmitted through social media, texts, chat rooms, and email.

Cyberbullying may seem like an interpersonal issue that requires only passive encouragement for the people involved to “work out their issues.” After all, the cyberbullying may occur outside the physical workplace and normal working hours. Is it an employer’s responsibility to take action if the bullying between coworkers takes place on personal computers and devices?

Cyberbullying should be treated as a disciplinary offense, even when it occurs outside the office. For one reason, the effects of cyberbullying often impact more than just the bully and victim. What may begin as whispering negative interpersonal undertones felt amidst other workplace dynamics, if left unaddressed can grow to undermine business interests when a bully’s agenda takes precedence over the practice and the important work done within it. The results can be devastating, including hard hits to teamwork, practice culture, business reputation, and even severed practice goals.

There is another reason for an employer to consider cyberbullying as harmful. Studies have shown that workplace bullying can cost anywhere from $30,000 to $100,000 per year for each individual who is bullied.²

Cyberbullying is a form of workplace harassment and, when left uncontrolled, may lead to professional sabotage. With the potential for far-reaching impact to individuals, teams, and workplace conditions, veterinary practice leaders must understand the effects of cyberbullying and implement a plan of action to minimize its occurrence.

THE EFFECTS OF CYBERBULLYING

Digital devices and social media have changed the way and frequency by which people communicate. Laptops, mobile phones, and tablets provide immediate and continuous means of both private and public communication. Private cyberbullying (text and direct messaging) victims may experience persistent solitary anguish, while public cyberbullying (social media posts and commenting) victims may experience more permanent reputation damage impacting them personally and professionally for years to come.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory states that social inclusion and belonging is a fundamental psychological human need that must be present for people to realize their full development potential.³ Not only does exposure to systematic mistreatment over prolonged time periods diminish one’s motivation to grow, but it also enhances and exposes emotional and psychological vulnerabilities including anxiety, depression, burnout, and even suicide.⁴ This issue is a serious one with the potential for devastating consequences.

WORKPLACE CONTROL OF CYBERBULLYING

With a heightened awareness of the negative effects of cyberbullying, it’s time to look into the responsibilities of employers and supervisors. While there isn’t solid legislation available to help workplaces deal with bullying behaviors, there are resources.

According to a recent article, there are at least 3 actionable solutions leaders can use to correct and prevent bullying: adjusting workplace dynamics that incite it, confronting the bully, and protecting the
CAREER CHALLENGES

Victim. Your approach may include 1, 2, or all 3 of these solutions as you assume responsibility for correcting undesirable bullying behaviors in your practice.

Adjust Workplace Dynamics
Culture and work environments undoubtedly play strong roles in shaping employees’ behavior. Changing workplace dynamics that may contribute to an environment where bullying behaviors are manifested starts with leadership. Best practices include:

● Provide HR and empathy training for anyone in a supervisory role
● Remove rigid “pecking orders” that contribute to unhealthy competition and division within teams
● Change supervisory promotion eligibility to include leadership skills or desires
● Stay alert and act on patterns of grievances surrounding particular employees
● Adjust a perfectionism mindset and performance expectations
● Create a written policy that prohibits bullying behaviors
● Avoid policies that attempt to impede freedom of speech; instead, implement policies that communicate unacceptable behaviors.
● Incorporate the policy in an employee manual that is signed by every employee, including contracted employees.
● Carry out the policy with a no-tolerance approach regardless of the person/position
● Set the example for respectful communication

Confront the Bully
Many bullies aren’t aware they are bullies (read “Are You the Bully”? In TVN’s Fall 2019 issue). They may have been raised with a “tough love” approach or come from the school of hard knocks, both of which normalize bullying behaviors. Depending on the severity of the bullying behaviors, confronting a bully should happen as soon as possible. You must clearly communicate the no-tolerance policy.

The Workplace Bullying Institute survey found that 67% of the time, higher-level managers supported bullies and only 2% of the time were the bullies actually punished. There must be consequences to all bad workplace behavior, including bullying and cyberbullying. Best practices include:

● Immediate termination for proven severe infractions or repetitive bullying patterns
● Possible suspension for less severe infractions
● Professional development coaching for offhand comments or less severe infractions that includes:
  ● Self-awareness
  ● A focus on collective team outcomes over individual gain
  ● Opportunities to influence others positively rather than negatively
● If the bully is in a supervisory role to the victim:
  ● Schedule frequent professional coaching sessions and require leadership training to minimize HR risk
  ● Remove the victim from a subordinate role temporarily or permanently
  ● Document all bullying incidents and coaching sessions
  ● Make retaliation grounds for immediate dismissal
  ● Encourage all to report bullying behaviors they’ve witnessed to their supervisor; if the bullying is being done by a supervisor, encourage reporting to their supervisor.

Protect the Victim
Protecting victims of workplace cyberbullying is challenging because it may not be evident to others, such as in the case of texting and private messaging. In addition, victims of bullying lose their energy and voice to defend themselves very quickly. According to a 2017 survey by Workplace Bullying Institute, 29% of targets (cyber and otherwise) remain silent about their experiences.

The same study found that employers are failing to take responsibility for its prevention and correction.

Learn to Recognize Cyberbullying
Examples of Repetitive Harassment/Cyberbullying Posted on Social Media

● “I know who the thief in our practice is—Susie (tagged) I am watching you!”
● “Some people think they’re smarter than the rest of us. But Susie, (tagged) I can’t see any credentials behind your name!”
● “I work with the best people—well except for Susie (tagged).”

Example of an offhand cyber comment posted on a social media platform

● “I work with jerks.”

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Employers should treat bullying complaints as seriously as they do sexual harassment complaints, and use the following best practices to protect the victim:

- Encourage open dialog about workplace challenges including interpersonal challenges
- Encourage hearsay reporting of witnessed or overheard bullying to help the victim who may have gone silent
- Do not minimize reported bullying behavior—investigate to determine its truth and severity
- Document all bullying complaints and investigations
- If the bully is in a position of power (supervisor or manager), remove their power over the victim
- Give the victim time off
- Give the victim access to psychological counseling
- Change work orders (temporarily or permanently) to remove them from a hostile workplace situation
- Create a social support system for the victim
- Stay close to the employee with frequent check-ins

Cyberbullying related to workplace relationships can wreck careers, strain cultures, and cost practices dearly due to lost productivity, stress-related absences, unnecessary turnover, and bad employer reputations. An employer could be especially at risk if it was informed of the behaviors and did not take action. Developing a sense of awareness about workplace cyberbullying prevalence and its effects is a good starting point, but taking responsible steps to correct it should include instituting workplace controls like adjusting workplace dynamics, confronting the bully, and protecting the victim. TVN

References