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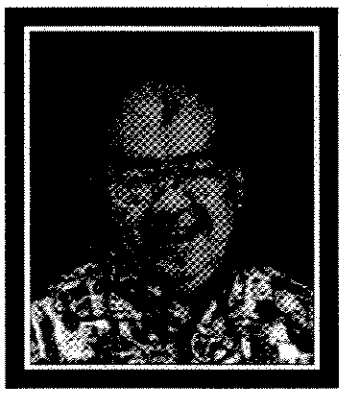

*Workplace bullying is an oft overlooked, insidious practice encountered by countless workers today. Such harassment has taken a toll, not just on the physical and mental well-being of the individual directly affected, but on his or her familial and social relations, job productivity, and overall workforce morale. As with more subtle forms of sexual harassment, incidences of bullying are often unreported or if investigated, brought to a quick and usually ineffective conclusion.*

# Workplace Bullying and Ethical Leadership

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## Introduction

Workplace bullying has been defined as "the repeated, malicious, health-endangering mistreatment of one employee . . . by one or more employees" (Namie & Namie, 2003, p. 3). It may come in the form of the yelling and screaming boss who regularly inflicts high-decibel tirades upon a subordinate. It may be in the way of workers who deliberately sabotage the reputation of a co-worker by spreading lies and rumors about her performance and character. In any of its overt and covert varieties, bullying inflicts serious harm upon employees and organizations alike, causing psychological and physical injuries to workers and sapping productivity and morale from the workplace. Studies indicate that most people will be exposed to this behavior at some point during their working lives.

Workplace bullying presents serious challenges to organizations, but it remains one of the most neglected problems in the realm of employment relations. Accordingly, this article addresses the implications of workplace bullying for organizational leaders and suggests measures that can be undertaken to respond to it. First it will describe common bullying behaviors and their effects on individuals and organizations. Next it will examine how organizations can act preventively and responsively to this destructive phenomenon. Finally, it will tie together these threads in the context of individual dignity and the practice of values-based leadership.

## Understanding Workplace Bullying

The term "workplace bullying" may be relatively new to American audiences, but it is widely recognized in many other countries. Most researchers agree that the work of Heinz Leymann, a Swedish psychologist and professor, constituted the starting point for conceptualizing and understanding this phenomenon. During the 1980s, Leymann drew on his experience as a family therapist and began investigating various forms of interpersonal conflict at work. He used the term "mobbing" to describe the kinds of hostile behaviors that were being directed at workers (Leymann, 1996). His pioneering research forms a seminal body of work on psychological abuse in the workplace.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, British journalist Andrea Adams popularized the term "bullying" to describe these workplace behaviors, using a series of BBC radio documentaries to bring the topic to a larger public audience. In 1992, she authored the first book to use "bullying at work" as its operative term (Adams, 1992), clarifying that:

Bullying at work is like a malignant cancer. It creeps up on you long before you – or anyone else – are able to appreciate what it is that is making you feel the ill effects. Yet despite the fact that the majority of the adult population spends more waking hours at work than anywhere else, the disturbing manifestations of adult bullying, in this particular context, are widely dismissed (Adams, 1992, p. 9).

Although the term "workplace bullying" did not reach the United States until the late 1990s, the occurrence of psychologically abusive behaviors at work and the harm created began to attract more attention from American practitioners and researchers during the early to mid 1990s. The initial works came from specialists in the mental health and human resources fields, examining the impact of these behaviors on individuals and organizations (Bassman, 1992; Hornstein, 1996; Stennett-Brewer, 1997; Wyatt & Hare, 1997). In addition, a spate of "bad boss" books, often filled with anecdotes about working for horrible supervisors and intended for a more popular audience, appeared around this time (Bing, 1992; Sartwell, 1994; Tien & Frankel, 1996). Of course, this also was the prime decade of *Dilbert*, the syndicated cartoon series about cynical cubicle dwellers and their dysfunctional workplaces.

Finally, the husband and wife team of Drs. Gary and Ruth Namie, both trained in psychology, introduced workplace bullying into the vocabulary of American employment relations. In response to what they had witnessed and experienced in the workplace, the Namies consulted the works of Leymann, Adams, and other European writers and scholars. They determined that an American campaign of research and education was necessary to expose this widespread form of mistreatment at work, and they chose to use the label *bullying* because they believed it would resonate with the public. Their ongoing efforts led to the establishment of the non-profit Workplace Bullying Institute (www.bullyinginstitute.org), the publication of a leading book (Namie & Namie, 2003), and a pioneering array of public education, consulting, and advocacy initiatives.

Workplace bullying is on the verge of entering the mainstream of American employment relations. In recent years, the *New York Times, Wall Street Journal,* and many other leading newspapers and periodicals have run feature stories on bullying at work (Parker-Pope, 2008; Tuna, 2008), and popular television news programs have devoted segments to the topic. Business journals for managers and employment relations specialists are taking particular note of workplace bullying (Badzmierowski & Dufresne, 2005; Fox & Stallworth, 2005; Vega & Comer, 2005; Gardner & Johnson, 2001). The Labor and Employment Relations Association, Society for Human Resource Management, American Psychological Association, and Association of American Law Schools are among the learned and professional associations that have sponsored panels and lectures on workplace bullying and related topics nationally. The Internet, perhaps the leading indicator of emerging societal trends, is awash in commentary devoted to workplace bullying, workplace mobbing, and psychological abuse at work.

During the past decade, researchers in the United States have followed in the footsteps of their European colleagues to help build a significant body of data and information on workplace bullying and related mistreatment at work. We now understand the most common bullying behaviors, the frequency of this conduct, and the potential impact on workers and employers. The following represent a sampling of the more relevant findings:

## Behaviors and Frequency

Workplace bullying comes in many varieties, overt and covert, direct and indirect. It is intentionally hurtful, typically repeated, and often malicious in nature. Among the most frequently reported behaviors are yelling, shouting, and screaming; false accusations of mistakes and errors; hostile glares and other intimidating non-verbal behaviors; covert criticism, sabotage, and undermining of one's reputation; social exclusion and the "silent treatment"; use of put-downs, insults, and excessively harsh criticism; and unreasonably heavy work demands (Namie & Namie, 2003, p. 18; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003, pp. 36-37).

Workplace bullying does not concern everyday disagreements at work, the occasional loud argument, or simply having a bad day. Furthermore, it does not involve interpersonally difficult aspects of work, such as giving a fair and honest evaluation to an underperforming employee. It also is not about gruff vis-á-vis easygoing bosses, as bullying often transcends management styles. Rather, bullying encompasses a power relationship, whether vested in organizational hierarchies, interpersonal dynamics, or both, that has crossed a line and become abusive.

Because of different measures used to define workplace bullying, surveys and studies have varied widely on determining the frequency of this conduct. By any measure, however, workplace bullying is common. For example:

- In 2007, pollster Zogby International conducted a national survey and public opinion poll on workplace bullying in conjunction with the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI/Zogby, 2007). The survey responses indicated that some 37 percent of American workers had experienced bullying at work.

- During the mid-1990s, social psychology professor Harvey Hornstein analyzed information about abusive supervision from nearly 1,000 workers in a wide variety of occupations and concluded that approximately 90 percent of the workforce experienced abuse from their bosses at some time in their careers (Hornstein, 1996, p. xiii).
- In 2000, social psychologists Loraleigh Keashly and Karen Jagatic cited numerous studies showing the frequency of bullying-type behaviors, including their own survey of Michigan residents in which "about 59 percent of the representative working sample indicated they had experienced at least one type of emotionally abusive behavior at the hands of fellow workers" (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003, p. 35).

## Harm to Employees and Others

Severe workplace bullying can inflict serious harm upon a targeted employee (Namie & Namie, 2003, pp. 53-68; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003, pp. 52-57). Common psychological effects include stress, depression, mood swings, loss of sleep (and resulting fatigue), and feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, and low self-esteem. Some targets have developed symptoms consistent with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Common physical effects include stress headaches, high blood pressure, digestive problems, increased risk of cardiovascular illness, and impaired immune systems.

Workplace bullying is a profound violation of one's personal dignity. To illustrate, a study by a team of communications researchers examining how bullying targets perceived their experiences found that targets' narratives "were saturated with metaphors of beating, physical abuse, and death" (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik & Alberts, 2006, p. 160). One target reported feeling "maimed" and "character assassinated," while others used terms such as "'beaten,' 'abused,' 'ripped,' 'broken,' 'scarred,' and 'eviscerated'" (Tracy et al, 2006, p. 160). The bullying process was described alternatively as a "game or battle," a "nightmare," "water torture," and a "noxious substance" (Tracy et al, 2006, p. 159). In describing themselves, targets used terms such as "slave" or "animal," "prisoner," child with "an abusive father," and "heartbroken lover" (Tracy et al, 2006, p. 159).

Targeted workers are not the only ones negatively impacted by this mistreatment. Co-workers who witness or learn of this behavior may become intimidated and fearful, experiencing anxieties that affect the quality of their work lives as well. Targets of severe bullying are likely to bring their experiences home with them, affecting family and social relationships. For example, targets who are suffering from clinical depression due to bullying may be so consumed by their own situations that they are less attentive to the emotional needs of their children.

## Harm to Employers

Employers pay a heavy price for workplace bullying. Human resources specialist Emily Bassman found that "(e)mployee abuse can have major bottom-line consequences" for employers, including direct costs, indirect costs, and opportunity

costs (Bassman, 1992, pp. 137-49). Direct costs include a significant increase in medical and workers' compensation claims due to work-related stress and the costs of litigation emerging from abusive work situations. Indirect costs reflect the impact on employee morale and engagement, including "fear and mistrust, resentment, hostility, feelings of humiliation, withdrawal, play-it-safe strategies, and hiding mistakes" (Bassman, 1992, p. 141). High turnover, absenteeism, poor customer relationships, and acts of sabotage and revenge may result from such environments, as well as opportunity costs reflecting losses from a worker's job effort falling "between the maximum effort of which one is capable and the minimum effort one must give in order to avoid being fired" (Bassman, 1992, p. 145).

The residual effects of bullying on organizational performance can be significant. For example, social worker and attorney Eliza Vanderstar observed that in health care settings, workplace bullying directed at physicians and nurses can have a negative impact on the quality of patient care (Vanderstar, 2004). In one particularly vivid example, she summarized an interview with a kidney dialysis patient who saw his nurse being yelled at right in front of him by another nurse as "she was drawing up medication" (Vanderstar, 2004, p. 466). The patient reported that he was reluctant to say anything "for fear of any retaliatory effect as the nurses stick him with large needles each time he has treatment" (Vanderstar, 2004, p. 466).

Employers ignore workplace bullying at their peril. Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik analyzed what she called the "communicative generation and regeneration of employee emotional abuse" and found that when bullying is left unaddressed by the organization, targets become more motivated to engage in retaliation and the likelihood of further aggression or violence increases (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2003). This is compatible with the findings of organizational behavior professors Robert Baron and Joel Neuman, who have characterized overall workplace aggression as the "iceberg" beneath the "tip" of workplace violence (Baron & Neuman, 1998). At times, the link between bullying and violence at work can be very direct. According to workplace violence expert Joseph Kinney, "there have been numerous instances where abusive supervisors have baited angry and frustrated employees, pushing these individuals to unacceptable levels of violence and aggression" (Kinney, 1995, p. 132).

## Targets and Aggressors

In the United States, workplace bullying appears to be a very "top-down" phenomenon and disproportionately harmful to female workers. The WBI/Zogby survey found that "72 percent of bullies are bosses, and 55 percent of those bullied are rank-and-file workers" (WBI/Zogby, 2007, p. 1). In addition, "women are targeted by bullies more frequently (in 57 percent of cases), especially by other women (in 71 percent of cases)" (WBI/Zogby, 2007, p. 1). Peer-to-peer bullying, though less common, also presents significant challenges to organizations, leaving them in a position to sort out what may resemble schoolyard aggression or a group of teens mercilessly ganging up on someone who does not quite "fit in" with the dominant clique. On other occasions, subordinates may band together and "bully up" a supervisor they do not like.

Targets of workplace bullying are not easily categorized. They range from strong to weak performers, with varying personality types. High-level performers may trigger reactions from insecure bullies who see them as a threat. Some workers may be vulnerable to bullying due to marginal job performance or certain personality characteristics. Others may be targeted on the basis of race, sex, or other characteristics by those harboring certain biases.

## Legal and Employee Benefit Impacts

A full assessment of the potential legal and employee benefit impacts of workplace bullying is beyond the scope of this article, but given the significance of liability exposure in today's business climate, a short summary is in order. As of late 2008, there is no direct legal claim for workplace bullying, although advocacy efforts have been underway in over a dozen states to enact variations of the Healthy Workplace Bill, model anti-bullying legislation drafted by this author that would provide targets of severe workplace bullying with a legal cause of action and provide incentives for employers to engage in effective preventive and responsive measures (Stephenson, 2008; Yamada, 2004). There is an emerging debate over the merits of such proposed legal protections, with proponents arguing that a workplace bullying statute would fill a large gap in the law, and opponents asserting it would result in too much frivolous litigation (Davis, 2008).

Although the risk of actual liability for workplace bullying is low to moderate, employers would be well-advised to consider the potential legal costs. Claims for bullying-related behaviors may arise under a number of legal theories, including discriminatory harassment on the basis of sex, race, disability, or other legally protected classes; retaliation and whistle-blowing claims; and tort claims such as defamation, intentional interference with employment relationship, and intentional infliction of emotional distress (Yamada, 2004; Yamada, 2000). In addition, workplace bullying may cause greater resort to employee and public benefit programs, including workers' compensation, health insurance coverage, unemployment insurance, and public and private disability plans.

## The American Workplace and Bullying

The growth of the service sector economy and the dynamics of high-pressure corporate work environments have combined to fuel the likelihood that workplace bullying will occur with greater frequency. Because service-sector work is so dependent on personal interaction, it becomes a form of "emotional labor" in which the psychological consequences of work, both positive and negative, are easily exacerbated, especially in comparison to the more mundane yet steady working conditions of a manufacturing plant. Frequent, ongoing personal interaction between workers often becomes a basic element of a job, especially in work arrangements between supervisors and subordinates. The more people interact, the more likely it is that personalities will clash.

This is especially true when employees must confront economic pressures, layoffs, and the challenges of doing more work with fewer resources. In fact, Baron & Neuman found that popular cost-cutting measures such as downsizing and layoffs, and organizational changes such as corporate restructuring, were "significantly related" to acts of "verbal aggression and obstructionism" in the workplace (Baron & Neuman, 1998). Hornstein, examining the corporate work environment of the early 1990s, described a "siege mentality" whereby managers felt "that they must stamp down subordinates to stay on top of things and alive" (Hornstein, 1996, p. 29). This environment "ignited explosions of brutality both from innate bullies who thrive on their mistreatment of others and from overburdened bosses who might never have behaved that way in less stressful times" (Hornstein, 1996, p. 143).

## Prevention and Response

Genuine organizational commitment, effective education and policies, and attentiveness to people and their behaviors will go a long way towards reducing workplace bullying and responding fairly and effectively when situations occur. A sound organizational approach to workplace bullying should incorporate these practices:

### *1. Organizational Leadership and Culture*

It starts at the top. Organizational leaders must send a message that workplace bullying is unacceptable behavior. Executives and managers who preach and practice dignity will see that quality resonate throughout an organization. Establishing a culture of open, honest, and mutually respectful communication will have the salutary effect of reducing bullying and other forms of employee mistreatment.

The presence of socially intelligent leaders will go a long way towards creating healthy organizational cultures. Social intelligence, according to Daniel Goleman, requires "being intelligent not just *about* our relationships but also *in* them" (Goleman, 2006, p. 11). Qualities such as empathy and concern for others are at the core of socially intelligent behavior. Organizations that value their workers will hire, promote, and empower socially intelligent managers, including mid-level supervisors and human resources directors who deal extensively with employees at all levels. These managers should be educated about workplace bullying and authorized to handle concerns about bullying promptly and fairly, and they should be supported by their employer when they do so.

### *2. Education and Policies*

Workplace bullying should be included in employee education programs and employment policies. Over the past decade, concerns about sexual harassment and workplace violence have dominated discussions about counterproductive behavior in the workplace and led to training programs and company policies addressing these behaviors. Although workplace bullying is a more serious problem in terms of

pervasiveness (and sometimes in severity), by comparison it has been sorely neglected by most employers.

Gary Namie of the Workplace Bullying Institute recommends that employers adopt a comprehensive blueprint to address bullying (Namie, 2003). This approach should include a "values-driven policy," "credible enforcement processes," "restorative interventions" for targets and offenders, and "general and specialized education" (Namie, 2003, pp. 5-6). All of these measures can be incorporated rather seamlessly into any good set of existing personnel practices and policies.

Education and policies are only the beginning. The next step, a much more difficult one, is to enforce policies relating to bullying by conducting genuine follow-up investigations and where necessary, assessing reprisals, when complaints arise. Unfortunately, bullying targets often report that organizational responses to their complaints about bullying made their experiences worse. One of the most common laments is that "HR was useless" in handling complaints about bullying and in some cases turned out to be complicit with the aggressors, especially those higher up on the organizational chart. In the WBI/Zogby survey, respondents reported that when employers were made aware of alleged bullying behaviors, 62 percent either ignored the complaint or exacerbated the situation (WBI/Zogby, 2007, p. 1).

## Telltale Signs

Good leaders listen and observe, and they are attuned to what is going on in the office or on the company floor. By operating in this mode, they can pick up on indicators of workplace bullying and employee discord. These signs may include:

- Sharp increases in attrition and absenteeism and declines in productivity after supervisory change;
- Sudden actual or alleged reductions in performance by workers with otherwise consistently satisfactory work records;
- Declining employee morale after downsizing, merger, and reorganization situations;
- Heightened levels of interpersonal aggression levels of all types, regardless of situation.

Such advice may appear to state the obvious. However, employers must understand that the worst bullies are often very good at covering their tracks. In addition, legitimate fear of employer retaliation or indifference often causes targets to remain quiet about their experiences. In such instances, circumstantial evidence may be the only outward signs that bullying is a problem in an organization.

## Unionized Workplaces

Unionized workplaces present both opportunities and challenges in terms of addressing workplace bullying in several ways. First, a growing number of unions have expressed concerns about workplace bullying, especially abusive supervision. Some have proposed adding anti-bullying provisions to collective bargaining

agreements. (As one might expect, employers have not been agreeable to this.) Second, when an alleged bully is a union member, the union has a legal duty of fair representation in the event of a disciplinary proceeding. Finally, some unions have taken undue advantage of their power to engage in intimidating, bullying-type behaviors.

The best approach is for management and union leaders to address bullying as cooperatively as circumstances permit. When a union alleges instances of abusive or bullying supervision, an employer should take these concerns seriously. Establishing positive, informal lines of communication between management and union leaders may help to foster effective resolutions of bullying situations, without resort to grievance or disciplinary processes. Also, effective union leaders can play valuable negotiating and mediating roles when allegations of bullying arise, whether between a manager and a bargaining unit member or between bargaining unit members.

## Making the Tough Calls

One of the most difficult decisions from both an ethical and business perspective is what to do with an abusive manager or executive. He may be seen as a "rainmaker" who is good at attracting business. He may be socially popular with others in management, including those who will determine his fate. Oftentimes, a workplace bully will have mastered "kiss up, kick down" tactics that hide his abusive side from superiors who review his performance. *"Oh, I cannot believe he'd do anything like* that *to someone"* is a common refrain from those who have been shielded from a bully's conduct.

Through coaching and counseling, some aggressors can be reformed. Frequently, however, these behavioral changes are temporary or limited. In such cases, dismissing a serial bully not only is the right thing to do in terms of ethical treatment of the remaining employees, but also may be good for business. Even if an incorrigible bully brings some value to the organization, the prospect of increased productivity due to better morale and lower attrition (not to mention reduced employee benefit and legal expenses) may make this a sound decision from a cost-benefit standpoint.

## The Bigger Picture

Although the preceding commentary has focused on workplace bullying as an individual phenomenon, it should not be regarded as an isolated problem — to be dealt with in a discreet and surgical manner. As noted above, workplace bullying is strongly associated with other forms of aggression and misconduct at work. From a standpoint of employment relations practice and policy, it should be incorporated into an overall program of education, prevention, and response. The "mainstreaming" of workplace bullying as an employment relations priority will ensure that we continue to devote attention to it.

Furthermore, workplace bullying is strongly tied to the notion of dignity at work

and the practice of values-based leadership. Understanding these connections can help any thoughtful practitioner or researcher to grasp its broader significance. Accordingly, these two considerations will be the closing focal points for this article.

## Towards Dignity at Work

For all too many, the notion that one is entitled to be treated with dignity at work remains a somewhat revolutionary concept. Business and labor writer Robert Levering has aptly observed that the contemporary workplace frequently is severed from the rest of human activity in terms of everyday rights and privileges:

> We generally accept as a given the contrast between our time at work and the rest of our lives. Once you enter the office or factory, you lose many of the rights you enjoy as a citizen. There's no process for challenging – or changing – bad decisions made by the authorities. There's no mechanism to vote for people to represent you in decision-making bodies. . . .
>
> We take for granted that such rights and protections don't apply to the workplace partly because most of us have never seen examples to the contrary (Levering, 1988, p. 62).

As discussed above, currently employees do not enjoy generalized legal protections against workplace bullying. Nevertheless, the idea that one *should* enjoy some right to be free from workplace bullying – however publicly or privately defined and enforced - - is grounded in an idea as basic as the freedom to perform one's job and earn a living without undue and disabling interference. This "right to be let alone" transcends political and social ideologies and goes to the very core of individual dignity.

If workplace bullying is to be taken more seriously, it may unfold as part of a deeper overall societal interest in human dignity. On this point, we may turn to Robert Fuller, a physicist and former college president who has attracted national attention for his examinations of dignity in the context of hierarchy and rank. According to Fuller, the primary obstacle to building what he calls a "dignitarian" society is the persistence of "rankism," which may manifest itself as discrimination on the basis of constructs such as race, sex, or age, but also may generate from unnecessarily hierarchical relationships in our private, public, and civic institutions (Fuller, 2006). Fuller has devoted considerable attention to occurrences of rankism at work, including bullying. His continuing work reminds us that denials of dignity occur throughout society and thus call for connected rather than atomized responses.

## Values-Based Leadership and Workplace Bullying

Values-based leadership, like many inherently appealing but unavoidably imprecise concepts, is most easily practiced at the level of exhortation. For example, generations of best-practices gurus have been advocating for inclusive organizational leadership, as exemplified by this passage from *In Search of Excellence*, the popular management bible of the 1980s:

> Treat people as adults. Treat them as partners; treat them with dignity; treat them with respect. . . . In other words, if you want productivity and the financial reward that goes with it, you must treat your workers as your most important asset (Peters & Waterman, 1982, p. 238).

Similarly, calls of "thou shall not bully" sound good and flow easily. Without much ado, they can be included in employee handbooks and repeated at meetings for managers. The real test appears, however, when leaders who profess to abhor bullying are asked to address specific, inconvenient occurrences of such behavior. To borrow from Michael McCuddy's characterization of values-based leadership, these scenarios truly illuminate how one's moral foundation leads to "stewardship decisions and actions" (McCuddy, 2008, pp. 11-12). For example:

- What does a manager do when she learns that one of her best friends in the office has been a serial bully and most recently was responsible for the departure of an excellent worker who resigned to avoid facing further mistreatment?
- How does an organization respond to an administrative assistant who is suffering from depression because of bullying and retaliation that occurred after she rightfully accused her highly-productive supervisor of engaging in an unethical business practice?
- What does a human resources director do when confronted with a socially quirky, adequately performing employee who fears going to work because he is being bullied and ostracized by productive, more popular co-workers?

To anyone who understands the myriad ways in which workers have been bullied, mobbed, and otherwise emotionally pummeled by fellow employees, these questions are not abstractions. People have lost their careers, livelihoods, and health due to these destructive behaviors, and too many others in positions of power and influence have chosen to ignore their pain and torment. The question of what to do about workplace bullying may not always yield comfortable, easy answers, but hopefully the foregoing commentary has identified some basic steps forward for leaders who want to take ethical action.

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## Author Biography

David Yamada is a Professor of Law and Director of the New Workplace Institute (www.newworkplaceinstitute.org) at Suffolk University Law School in Boston. He is a leading authority on workplace bullying and psychologically abusive work environments. He founded the New Workplace Institute in 2007 as a multidisciplinary research and education center to promote healthy, productive, and socially responsible workplaces. In addition, since 1998 he has been affiliated on a *pro bono* basis with Drs. Gary and Ruth Namie and their Workplace Bullying Institute. This article draws in part from his previous writings on the topic, especially the two law review articles listed in the references. He is a graduate of Valparaiso University (B.A.), Empire State College (M.A.), and New York University School of Law (J.D.).