

# Opinion: Bullying needs to be abolished

By Nancy Kerry

Recent articles and studies across America provide evidence that bullies are costly to our society. Bullies in the schoolyard have resulted in a substantial increase of *suicide* among *children*. After the 1999 Columbine massacre, the federal government passed anti-bullying legislation that swiftly swept across the nation with similar legislation adopted by all states.

However, most of those laws apply specifically to schools.



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It is thought that by the time we become adults and enter the workforce, we would have matured enough to treat each other with respect, professionalism, and communicate effectively. Unfortunately, that isn't always the case as evidenced by the need for anti-harassment laws.

A bully in the workplace can do substantial damage to an organization. Bullying is harassment and is just as costly in the workplace as the schoolyard, if not more so. Bullying is most often demonstrated in abuse of authority by those in leadership positions; it results in high turnover, lost productivity, emotional damage to those victimized, stress claims against employers and millions in settlements paid by

employers who failed to take action.

The Declaration of Independence was adopted 239 years ago, setting forth the foundation of principles guiding our government as to how we should respect one another. Although the United States is much more complicated today, the tenets remain the same: *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable **Rights** that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."*

What does the **right** to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" mean in the workplace? It includes the right to pursue one's civil liberties; it means employees have the right to enjoy a workplace free from harassment, bullying and discrimination. Following the 1883 Pendleton Act, it also means the right for government employees to retain employment based on competency instead of political connections and influence.

The evidence of bullying is found by listening to the receiver's point of view, not the bully. A bully will likely have many friends and family members who don't agree with a victim's perspective of the conduct because they may not have experienced the same behavior. Bullies often deflect the concerns of those who have the courage to confront them and typically characterize their victims as complainers.

An employee who finds themselves bullied at work often has little recourse. It's very difficult to *prove your perspective*; after-all it is the victim's opinion of the conduct that is at issue. Multiple people witnessing the same conduct will have multiple perspectives. When the bully is a supervisor or leader in an organization, the perceived risk by the employee for reporting is increased. When it is from the highest level in the organization, the risk is real. As a result, employees are reluctant to speak up about the abuse they have suffered.

Workplace bullying is more prevalent than most employers realize. A 2014 study by the Workplace Bullying Institute found that nearly one-third of all employees experienced abusive conduct at work; “72 percent of employers deny, discount, rationalize or defend the conduct and in the absence of legal prohibitions against it, employers are failing to take responsibility for its prevention and correction.” Sometimes, a bully is *not aware of the impact* of their behavior, which is why it’s important for employers to address the issues early on to provide opportunity for change. If the behavior doesn’t improve, corrective actions will likely intensify. A person who fails to acknowledge how their behavior impacts and causes harm others may either be a bully or become one if left uncorrected.

A bully may defend their behavior as just being “their style” of communicating. Outside of an employment situation, their style may only be a societal harm. However, in the workplace, it’s not acceptable and can result in litigation for an employer. Being rude is not the same as being a bully; a bully is abusive. Abusive bullying behavior is typically persistent, aggressive, denigrating, hostile and intimidating. A bully seeks to shift a real or perceived imbalance of power through the misuse of their authority creating a climate of fear among employees. A bully will often strive to dominate with tactics to humiliate and belittle others using both subtle and blatant threats to restrain efforts to stand against such treatment.

When the behavior is a persistent pattern of conduct, it interferes with the employee’s ability to perform their jobs to the best of their ability. When it’s pervasive, it affects the organization’s legitimate business interests and undermines confidence. When it’s left unaddressed, the bullying may increase and victims can experience a variety of illnesses including anxiety, depression, migraines, stomach ailments and worse.

Whether bullying is illegal or not, it is the employer’s moral

and leadership responsibility to protect their employees from all forms of harassment. Occasionally, all it takes is a conversation so everyone is aware of the problem and changes can be made. If that doesn't work, putting an end to bullying in the workplace should be a high priority for every employer.

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