

## The Mobbing Syndrome – Emotional Harassment and Abuse

©2011 Gail Pursell Elliott

The mobbing syndrome is a malicious attempt to force a person out of the workplace through unjustified accusations, humiliation, general harassment, abuse, and/or terror. It is a “ganging up” by the leader --organization, superior, co-worker, or subordinate -- who rallies others into systematic and frequent “mob-like” behavior. Because the organization ignores, condones or even instigates the behavior, it can be said that the victim, seemingly helpless against the powerful and many, is indeed “mobbed.” The result is always injury -- physical or mental distress or illness, social misery, and often, but not always, expulsion from the workplace.

Many ethical human resources professionals don't become aware of a mobbing situation until it is well underway. It can be both frustrating and confusing. Most have seen this happen at least once in their careers but never had a name to put to it, nor did they see that it was a syndrome with a specific pattern. When these are presented, most have said that the “players” in the roles become obvious. As one example, the president of a human resources society in Pennsylvania said he had seen it happen in his own company. His reaction to it was that he was “appalled” and wanted to do whatever he could to make sure it didn't happen to anyone again. He addressed the situation in specific terms with the department in which mobbing had forced out a valuable employee, emphasizing that this emotionally abusive bullying would not be tolerated. It worked. However, within a month a similar situation cropped up in a completely different department. While mobbing/bullying is often viewed as an isolated conflict or as dealing with a difficult employee, in fact it is the product of an organizational dynamic and culture that allows it to exist and persist.

Unfortunately some human resources professionals participate in the mobbing/bullying of employees. Some actually are under orders to do so, while others are inexperienced in handling conflict resolution, mediation or grievance procedures and trigger covert retaliation on the part of coworkers or supervisors. Dr. Carroll Brodsky, a psychologist and anthropologist, opened the discussion of workplace abuse in 1976 with his book The Harassed Worker which was based on claims filed with the California Workers' Compensation Appeals Board and the Nevada Industrial Commission. These claims stated that the workers were “ill and unable to work because of ill-treatment by employers, co-workers, or consumers, or by excessive demands for work output.” He uses the term harassment as a behavior that “involves repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another. It is behavior that persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates, or otherwise discomforts another person.” Today, this behavior is aptly called bullying or mobbing and the environment in which it persists, toxic. It is important to distinguish between organizations that use mobbing as a strategy, i.e., top management participates in the mobbing, and those in which mobbing happens without the intent or knowledge of leadership.

When the mobbing syndrome strikes an organization the costs measured in productivity, morale, human suffering, and dollars can be high. Following are a number of warning signals that can help organizations recognize mobbing.

### Warning Signals Checklist

1. Are the problems of a department being blamed on one individual?
2. Is the person now accused of substandard performance or some other unacceptable behavior someone whose work or performance was previously above average?
3. Are people, particularly in top management, not fully qualified or experienced to hold the positions they hold?
4. Are there sudden losses of key individuals?
5. Is there an unusually high staff turnover?
6. Is there increased sick leave?
7. Is the company experiencing unexplainable low morale?
8. Has the company suddenly experienced change of any kind, such as restructuring, new staff and leadership or new procedures? Has there been insufficient time to inform, involve, and train employees adequately?

In the next issue, the five categories of observable behaviors that emerge during a mobbing will be discussed.

Note: Portions of this article have been excerpted from *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace*, 1999 Davenport, Schwartz and Elliott

Webinar Announcement: *Mobbing and Discrimination: Side Stepping the Law?*  
July 19, 2011 1 – 2 PM CDT