

The Common Thread of Communication: Mobbing Behavior Categories

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The workplace mobbing research done by Dr. Heinz Leymann in the 1980's identified 45 behaviors that emerge during a mobbing process. They were then grouped into five categories as follows:

1. Attacks on self expression and communication.
2. Attacks on a person's social relations.
3. Attacks on a person's reputation.
4. Attacks on the quality of a person's professional and life situation.
5. Direct attacks on a person's health.

All of these categories include various forms of negative communication as well as other activities. Although much of the workplace bullying literature has addressed supervisor bullying of employees, recent studies have found that a large percentage of the disparaging communication and behavior is peer to peer. The fragile state of employment and the uncertain nature of the current economy serve to exacerbate these situations. Regardless of whether mobbing is initiated laterally or supervisor to employee or employee to supervisor, eventually the targeted individual is attacked from all directions.

When my coauthors and I wrote Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace in the late 1990's we interviewed people from a variety of industries and occupations. Incidents of aggressive forms of communication intended to humiliate or denigrate were consistently described to us. Some of the behaviors that were identified by our interview partners ranged from laughing in the person's face and making inappropriate jokes about him or her to yelling, slamming doors and pounding fists on the table. However outrageous and unprofessional these may seem, not only did they occur but also when some sort of action was attempted, targets generally reported that the situation became worse rather than better. One of the main points made during our interviews as well as in Leymann's research was that help consistently was out of reach.

Willingness to report misconduct is a key to maintaining an ethical workplace culture. In organizations in which retaliation goes unrecognized or uncorrected, conduct violations go unreported. Mobbing inhibits needed communication when not only targets but other employees are reluctant to report what they observe or experience. It must be remembered that communication consists of more than just verbal elements. Non-verbal signals, intonation, innuendos, implication and written communication also are included. Some more recently, commonly reported behaviors include glaring at the target, others storming out of area when the person arrives, being given "the silent treatment", derogatory name calling and negative comments about intelligence. Although some of these seem reminiscent of adolescent behavior, they are indeed reported workplace activities. Others even have reported being

subjected to mean pranks. Though it is not unusual for employees to have occasional conflicts, to engage in good natured humor or joking or even to occasionally make a joke about someone, what we're talking about here is quite different.

Withholding information necessary to do the job, interfering with work activities, failing to return calls or emails, spreading rumors or gossip, failing to deny false rumors about the target or refusing requests for assistance are more indirect forms of negative communication. The subtle, less obvious behaviors are engineered to confuse, intimidate, isolate and to set up the target for vilification. Managers and supervisors may either perpetrate deliberately or participate unknowingly. Some of the behaviors exhibited by management that have been reported are being accused of deliberately making an error, attempts at turning other employees against the person, being constantly interrupted when speaking, demanding attendance at a meeting then being treated as invisible, reprimanded or "put down" in front of others. When a manager or supervisor is the target, he or she may be falsely accused of some of these behaviors.

While the behaviors themselves are indicative of mobbing, patterns of behavior are equally important. If the woes of a department are blamed on one individual or if complaints of being set up or work being sabotaged are reported, it is time to take a closer look. Unreasonable workloads, unrealistic deadlines or changes in reporting or accessibility to others in the organization are also indicators that there is more going on beneath the surface than may be apparent. Mobbing is an organizational dynamic that requires correction on more than just the interpersonal level. Protecting employees, by creating an organizational culture that exhibits dignity and respect as the standard and demonstrated expectation will experience fewer instances of abusive, retaliatory or unethical conduct. This results in more than just controlling the damage that can be done to individuals. It also helps build employee morale, sets an important ethical tone and encourages an environment that leads to success.

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