

Workplace bullying and harassment is a safety and health issue that can compromise the mental and physical health and safety of workers and the work place. Harassment is defined as objectionable conduct that creates a risk to the health of a worker or extreme conduct that adversely affects a worker's psychological or physical well-being.

Bullying and harassment affect people differently. Reactions may include one or any combination of the following:

- Decreased concentration or capacity to make decisions, which could lead to safety hazards (such as lack of attention when working with dangerous equipment or in dangerous areas on a site)
- Distress, anxiety, anger, sleep loss or the potential for substance abuse
- Physical illness
- Reduced work performance.
- Retaliation in manner which may cause damage to material, equipment or harm personnel

Bullying and harassment can also affect the overall workplace and may contribute to the following:

- Reduced efficiency and productivity due to poor morale
- Increased stress and tensions between workers
- Increased absenteeism
- Increase turnover, resulting in increased workloads or hours of work
- Lower levels of client/ owner satisfaction

What Should you Do?

1. Employee presents problem to immediate supervisor after incident occurs. If supervisor is unavailable or employee believes it would be inappropriate to contact that person, employee may present problem to any other member of management.
2. Supervisor responds to problem during discussion or after consulting with appropriate management, when necessary. Supervisor documents discussion.
3. Employee presents problem to Human Resources Department if problem is unresolved.
4. Human Resources Department counsels and advises employee, assists in putting problem in writing, visits with employee's manager(s), if necessary, and directs employee to owner for review of problem.
5. Employee presents problem to owner in writing.
6. Owner reviews and considers problem. Owner informs employee of decision and forwards copy of written response to Human Resources Department for employee's file. The owner has full authority to make any adjustment deemed appropriate to resolve the problem.

Not every problem can be resolved to everyone's total satisfaction, but only through understanding and discussion of mutual problems can employees and management develop confidence in each other. This confidence is important to the operation of an efficient and harmonious work environment, and helps to ensure everyone's job security.

BANTER vs BULLYING:

We've all witnessed someone miss the mark on a joke. A well-meaning, but too cutting, remark about someone or something that lands all wrong. We've all hopefully witnessed the opposite, too, when a joke lands just right, creating an environment where good-natured banter is thriving.

Sometimes, the difference is obvious. We notice the mood shift when the joke isn't in good humor, along with people's body language and their resulting behavior.

Sometimes, the difference is harder to notice. Perhaps we're in an environment where banter is highly valued (think "locker room talk" cultures), or we're observing someone in a position of power cross the line, where people don't feel able to speak out. Perhaps the banter is repeatedly targeted towards a vulnerable individual and goes unchecked (e.g., ribbing the "new kid" in the office), or the content of the banter is harmful but feels socially OK (e.g., making fun of religious beliefs in a mostly non-religious group setting).

When we notice banter-gone-wrong and rectify it immediately, we can put it down to a mistake or isolated incident. This isn't bullying. When banter is repeated, targeted towards someone (or a specific group of people), and it is harmful, this can constitute bullying.

And, if this kind of questionable banter is common in a workplace, it might contribute to a culture of workplace incivility. This culture lays the groundwork for a workplace where bullying spreads like wildfire and is hard to squash once it starts. When this happens, we see numerous negative impacts; team cultures becomes poisoned, productivity plummets, absenteeism and turnover increase, and health and wellbeing suffer.

We want to note here that the best way to turn the tide on workplace bullying is not to get rid of banter altogether. Having good-natured fun at work is important, if not crucial, for a thriving team culture and relieving stress.

So, where do we draw the line at work?

A "banter safety checklist" was trialed, suggesting that for banter to be safe, all three of the following criteria need to be met (additions are our own):

1. Everyone involved understands it is banter.
2. Everyone finds it funny (or that it is intended to be funny).
3. Everyone feels included and safe.

Next time you observe banter, check in. Is everyone in on the joke, or is it targeted towards someone without their consent? Does everyone find it funny or is someone being harmed by it? Does it build inclusion and fun, or build in-groups and out-groups?

Some other questions you might ask yourself if you're still not sure:

- Was the *intent* of the joke to include someone, or belittle them?
- Is the *subject* of the banter shared among the group, or is it always targeted at the same person?
- Is the *content* of the banter discriminatory in nature? For example, focusing on poking fun at someone's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, or religion?