

Do Your Policies Include Anti-Bullying

By Holly Culhane, Contributing Columnist



When we hear about bullying, often our thoughts conjure up the image of a young kid being harassed by an older boy on a school yard. But we have read too many tragic stories that demonstrate the problem is much more widespread, complex and sometimes deadly.

Bullying is not confined to school yards. It is often encountered in the work place -- coworkers treating each other disrespectfully, some say harassing each other; supervisors abusing subordinates; and violence erupting when incidents are ignored.

From the sports world comes proof that bullying can occur in every work place, including “non-traditional” ones.

Last fall, the National Football League was rocked by a bullying scandal that spilled out of the Miami Dolphin’s locker room. Rookie right tackle Jonathan Martin left the team in late October, briefly checking himself into a hospital for what was reported to be emotional distress.

In the weeks that followed, Martin alleged he had been repeatedly harassed and threatened by fellow players led by lineman Richie Incognito. The incidents were dismissed as being typical locker room hazing, until a voicemail recording of Incognito allegedly making racial slurs and threatening Martin surfaced. Incognito was suspended from the team.

In a recently released 144-page investigative report, Incognito was identified as the ringleader of three players who repeatedly harassed Martin, another offensive lineman and an assistant trainer. In the wake of the scandal, the Dolphins fired its offensive line coach and its longtime head athletic trainer. NFL punishment of involved players is expected, as the Dolphins address costly contract issues regarding Martin.

Although he kept his job, coach Joe Philbin told reporters the report revealed inappropriate and unacceptable behavior. “I have to do a better job. I’m going to be more visible. I’m going to have a better pulse.”

Although some in the NFL continue to insist the bullying scandal was overblown, it holds many lessons for all businesses: bullying can occur in any work place; turning a blind eye, or even condoning abusive behavior can have costly financial and legal consequences; and a hostile work environment can hurt productivity and result in the loss of valued employees.

While most companies have policies that cover sexual harassment, it is less common for a company to have written and enforced policies that address inappropriate behavior between coworkers that can include threats of violence, the spreading of rumors and the hazing of new employees.

Often business owners and supervisors dismiss bullying incidents as “interpersonal problems” that should be resolved between employees. They decline to get involved unless the behavior escalates. Although bullying is not specifically recognized as a category of unlawful behavior, bullying behavior that is arguably based on a protected status, such as race, religion, national origin, ancestry or physical and mental disability is unlawful. Persons subjected to bullying may file stress claims. At minimum, workplace morale suffers and good, well-trained employees leave.

Companies should not wait until problems escalate to establish policies and procedures to report and address incidents, or to deal with conflict between employees.

Every workplace should have written policies that are broad enough to include bullying and its consequences, and that encourage workers to report incidents. Accusations of inappropriate behavior should be reported in writing, thoroughly investigated, and the investigative findings and resulting discipline documented.

Getting involved after behavior escalates, as was the case with the Dolphin’s scandal, often proves to be too little and too late to head off legal, financial and productivity problems.

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