

## Stress hazard: the jerk at work

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Kim DiFrancisco, a suburban saleswoman, describes it as "absolute terror running down my back." Megan Larson, a Chicago marketing manager, says it gave her an ulcer. Others report nightmares, headaches and bouts of depression.

What they experienced can destroy morale, lower productivity and chase good employees out the door. It's workplace bullying, and experts say it is an epidemic.

Office ogres can be bosses or co-workers, men or women — and they are everywhere, says psychologist Gary Naimie, director of the Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute in Bellingham, Wash. "It's a dirty little secret and it's not catching the eyes of executives."

By far most victims are women, and about half of all bullying incidents involve women harassing women, Mr. Naimie says. Nearly 70% of bullied employees end up quitting, most without confronting the problem. Victims fear retaliation, ridicule or being labeled a troublemaker. Those who do seek help often encounter managers and human resources professionals who don't know how to handle the problem or blame the victim.

Ms. DiFrancisco, 39, works in the food industry. Seven years ago, she was the top seller and the only woman in a six-person office. Young and ambitious, she became the target of an older colleague who seemed threatened by her success and began gossiping to co-workers and customers about her abilities and her character.

"He'd make snide comments and tell others disgusting things about how I got to the top," she says. "He turned the entire office against me and forced me to consider leaving. I was doing a great job, but I just couldn't stomach going in anymore."

Ms. Larson, 27, who worked at a mid-sized manufacturing firm in Chicago, says she was badmouthed and belittled by a colleague who also tried to sabotage her work.

"He'd shoot me down in meetings and twist things around," she says. "But it was subtle, so when I complained, I looked like the jerk."

"People who report being bullied also report more physical symptoms like headaches and insomnia and use more sick days," says Suzy Fox, a Loyola University Chicago professor who studies bullying and other workplace issues. "We're in the same place with bullying as we were 10 to 15 years ago with sexual harassment. No one knew how to define it. Does it mean I can't smile at a female co-worker? Where do you draw the line?"

While sexual harassment or discrimination based on race, national origin, gender, religion or disability are now prohibited by law, bullying still falls into a gray zone.

This year, six states, including New York, Connecticut and Montana, introduced bills prohibiting bullying in the workplace. Several other states have tried to pass legislation but failed; Illinois hasn't considered a measure. According to a 2004 study by the Washington, D.C.-based National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), one in four companies surveyed reported bullying, defined as "repeated intimidation, slandering, social isolation or humiliation."

Helen Brown, 35, once had to endure a screaming boss who seemed to enjoy making the women in the office cry. "He'd call them in, close the door, scream at the top of his lungs and they'd come out crying." She lasted five years there before quitting to start her own consulting business, but the memory lingers.

"There's nothing worse than going to work and hating every minute," says Ms. Brown, now president of Elmhurst-based Desert Rose Design. "I hung in there, but it was awful."

## **PERSONAL OUTBURSTS**

Had there been a law on the books, Loraine Edwalds, 49, now a vendor manager at UBS Financial Services Inc. in Chicago, says she would have handled things differently when an employee at a previous job sought her help with an abusive co-worker.

While Ms. Edwalds was a manager at a professional association in Chicago, an employee told her that her co-worker berated her in meetings, exploded over trivial mistakes and made offensive remarks about her clothing and other personal matters. "I said: 'Maybe the bully is hormonal. Your work is fine; try to avoid her.' " Ms. Edwalds saw it as a classic personality clash. Both women were competent, but the bully was a high performer whose "take no prisoners" approach fit better with the company's culture.

The bully's outbursts became more personal and less work-related. Eventually, Ms. Edwalds told the beleaguered employee to leave if she couldn't take it. And that's exactly what she did — something Ms. Edwalds still regrets.

"As a manager, I could only make her stop things that are work-related," she says. "There's not much we can do about personality issues. Now I see that that was shortsighted."

A few months ago, the bullied employee contacted her to talk about her experience. "She tracked me down out of the blue," she says. "I thought, wow, after seven or eight years, she was telling me about how bad the bullying had been like it happened yesterday."

Rick Samson, a Chicago labor and employment attorney, says courts are reluctant to take on the issue in the absence of laws prohibiting it. "Too bad, you have a lousy boss, but is that a legally actionable situation?" he says. "After all, one person's bully is another's demanding boss."

Leonard Ingram is founder and director of the Anger Institute of Chicago, which provides counseling to corporations, school districts, police departments, hospitals and other organizations. He says a bully's primary motive is to throw others off their game.

"They are like hunters," he says. "They can smell the victim, sense their fears and insecurities. Each bully has to first find that quality before they attack."

And they are skilled at sniffing out vulnerabilities because many have themselves been bullied, Mr. Ingram says. "The bullying is a direct response to how they've been bullied either at home or at school," he says. "It's a cycle of abuse. They bully their wives, their employees, their children."

And co-workers often tolerate it, he says, because "most people just don't want the hassle, so they give in."

Ms. Larson and Ms. DiFrancisco both fought back.

Ms. Larson complained to her supervisor and kept an incident log that she presented to the company's human resources department and to the CEO. They listened, investigated, conferred — and then did nothing.

"It's an injustice, and no one does anything to help you," Ms. Larson says. "The woman in human resources asked me if I was taking things the wrong way, that maybe he's just having a bad day. Management just wanted me to go away and shut up about it."

Disgusted, she found a new job. Three years later, Ms. Larson still takes medication for the ulcer she developed at the time. "It just eats away at you," she says. "But I'm proud that I stood up for myself."

## **DRASTIC MEASURES**

Ms. DiFrancisco took a more drastic approach. She suspected her tormentor was badmouthing her but didn't have proof, so on several occasions she hid a tape recorder on a ledge beneath the office printer.

"I couldn't believe the stuff he was saying. They'd talk about me until the second I walked back in the door," she says. " 'Did you see what she wore, what a long lunch she took?' Sometimes it went on for 45 minutes to an hour."

She intended to confront the owner and the bully with the slanderous tapes, but her plan backfired: One day, the recorder went missing.

"The owner called me in and said, 'What's this?' I said, 'Play it,' " she says. "But (the tape) was blank. Everyone thought I'd get fired — I'm sure it was illegal — but he's the one who should have been let go."

Afraid to confess to the other taping sessions, Ms. DiFrancisco bided her time until she found a new job four months later. Still, she doesn't regret bringing the situation to a head.

"It put everything out in the open," she says. "After that, I had no fear of saying what was on my mind. I was being pursued by the company I'm with now, so I had some extra testosterone in me."

A few months into her new job, she nabbed a huge account from a competitor who had managed the client for years. She saw it as both a professional and personal victory: The competitor was her former bully.