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HR Management Forum

Define Dignity: Catholic Institutions and Bullying in the Workplace

Rev. Craig B. Mousin

To read the research, bullying in the workplace throughout the United States has reached alarming proportions. Some claim that bullying impacts one in six workers. Research on faculty bullying leads to similar conclusions suggesting that the particularities of the academy nurture a thriving environment for bullies. In a recent article reviewing academic bullying, "Faculty Experiences with Bullying in Higher Education," Loraleigh Keashly and Joel H. Neuman reported that "the rates of bullying seem relatively high when compared to those noted in the general population." Nor is bullying unique to the United States as the European Union, and France especially, have explored solutions to tame harassing and demeaning treatment of employees. Workplace stress, absenteeism, and stifled initiative all may stem from bullying.

Based on Catholic social teaching, many mission statements of Catholic institutions find their grounding in human dignity to inspire education, service, and employment relations. The idea of ennobling the dignity of our co-workers resonates positively in mission statements, but to what end operationally if dignity remains isolated in the mission statement and unused as a management tool? Naming dignity as essential to a Catholic institution's mission, but failing to define it as an operative part of employee relations may cause more damage than not including it within the mission statement in the first place. Does not honoring dignity while ignoring its trespass in the day-to-day administration of employees undermine institutional efforts to serve the common good?

Many argue that it does not. Instead, some contend that remaining competitive today necessitates strong management that might be misinterpreted. Sports metaphors adorn management styles. "Nice guys finish last" has generally been attributed to former Chicago Cubs Coach Leo Durocher. (Although allegedly aimed at the opposing team, Durocher's Cubs have now passed over a century without winning the World Series, suggesting even sports metaphors may be improper guides.) Should toughness on the athletic field translate into the workplace? In a competitive global world, where margins rule the day, do we need the acute edge of the driven manager squeezing all out of the workforce to remain at the top of their game? The competitive manager may elide into the bullying manager when the game is on the line.

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Such unfortunate manager transformations may occur or remain unresolved because bullying is so difficult to define and prove. Federal and local laws have assisted management in understanding the parameters of illegal discrimination or harassment based on protected categories, but bullying becomes harder to define absent a protected category. Most researchers emphasize repeated mistreatment by one or more employees aimed at a specific employee as the core of bullying. If additional employees target a vulnerable employee, their conduct becomes a subset of improper conduct called mobbing. The power a manager has over an employee's career, especially in employment at will workplaces, makes it difficult to discern when the manager demanding accountability crosses over to repeated mistreatment of employees, at least according to those who claim that developing anti-bullying policies are too difficult.

As modern management seeks greater productivity through reliance on technology with fewer employees, demands on all employees increase. Denial of bullying precludes accurate demarcation of the line distinguishing the demanding manager from the demeaning manager. Human Resources professionals seem to know conduct that meets the definition of insubordination when an employee acts out against a manager, thus meriting termination. When a manager exploits the power of position to constantly demean

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an employee, however, do those same leaders possess similar tools to address bullying? We certainly know it when physical violence crosses the line, but what of the daily communications in the workplace? Although physical violence also crosses into potential criminal behavior, addressing non-physical violence must also be a priority. Human history has revealed that violence over the mind and spirit can damage a person as much as physical pain.

In addition, the difficulty in actually witnessing the alleged bullying or mobbing, the fear of reporting bullying, the difficulty in assessing the truth from two conflicting assessments, the difficulty in discerning if a one-time harsh word implicates a greater concern and reveals a pattern and practice of harm, all increase the challenges of addressing the problem. The academic world faces particularly complicated issues. Some of its greatest strengths tend to work against mitigating faculty bullying. Keashly and Neuman pose the following dilemma: "Collegiality and autonomy are critical for academic freedom and the work of the academic, yet these norms are interpreted as preventing action to address what faculty view as problematic behaviors that, in turn, create a climate of noncollegiality, hostility, and incivility, increasing the likelihood of bullying and mobbing." Given such parameters, developing an anti-bullying procedure that protects all parties faces extensive challenges.

Dignity also requires fairness in procedures to protect against false claims and a rebound mobbing against alleged bullies if charges are not managed properly. Mary Rowe, Linda Wilcox and Howard Gadlin remind us that workplaces need training in conflict resolution to provide managers with the tools necessary to demand accountability without straying into bullying behavior or discouraging employees from reporting bullying behavior. Fair procedures that encourage reporting, but accord fair treatment to all parties, discourage false claims, and provide incentives to seek win-win solutions are required. Rowe, Wilcox, and Gadlin suggest implementing informal solutions such as Ombuds Offices which offer safe harbors for both employees and managers to explore options that serve the employees and the mission. Finally, they propose all parties should expand their curiosity to research why bullies exist so that the environment can be modified to eliminate the sources of bullying while protecting the valuable contributions of all.

Addressing bullying in the workplace may further prove the value of Catholic Social Teaching with regard to employment. One General Counsel and Director of Human Resources at a for-profit corporation reported that he worked with a senior manager who seemed indispensable to the company's success. Unfortunately, that senior manager persistently bullied and humiliated subordinates. When the senior manager was finally terminated, the relief in the business was almost palpable; it seemed like a huge rock had been lifted from everyone's shoulders. And most surprising, employees at all levels in the company, particularly middle managers, suddenly flourished and brought new ideas and programs to the workplace once freed of fear of the demeaning boss. Catholic social teaching encourages developing the full human potential of all workers. In furthering the dignity of each colleague in the workplace, the environment then encouraged the flourishing of the human spirit and human capability.

Mission matters. Keashly and Newman's review of bullying literature reveals that an "organization's culture and related climate play an important role in the manifestation of hostile behaviors at work." Defining dignity's operational role in the workplace may serve to counteract bullying that might otherwise be tolerated.

Finally, if defining bullying proves too difficult, what Martha Nussbaum suggests in another context, may be helpful for those seeking to increase mission's impact on the cultural climate. In writing about justice, she recommends "we need to have some sense of what it is to respect human dignity, of what treatment human dignity requires from the world, if we are to be clear about what treatment violates it." If we move from the world stage to the employment context, what does it mean to honor the dignity of employees? What treatment of human dignity may we expect from a Catholic employer? By starting with defining what works to foster dignity, it may become clearer what actions by managers or co-employees may violate dignity and offer solutions on how to mitigate bullying in the workplace.

The opinions expressed in this column are mine alone and do not represent DePaul University's.

We invite you to respond to this column through our blog at http://hr-forum-ccu.blogspot.com/ to help define dignity in the workplace. What must we expect from each other to honor the dignity of all employees? We look forward to your responses.

We invite you to post links of your mission statements as well as HR and compensation philosophy documents on our blog if you would like to share them with our readers. This will permit a fuller discussion of how mission and CST influence the employment process. Please let us know if you would like us to link to any of your institution's documents.

Resources relied upon for this column include:

The paper reviewing research on faculty bullying by Loraleigh Keashly and Joel H. Neuman, "Faculty Experiences with Bullying in Higher Education," can be found in *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, March 2010, Vol. 32, No. 1, 48, 50, 59, 60.

Information on the extent of bullying including the one in six workers statistic can be found in Gary Namie and Ruth Namie, *The Bully at Work, What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity on the Job*, (Naperville, Il, Sourcebooks, 2003), 11.

The website http://www.workplacebullying.org/ (accessed on June 7, 2010) contains information on efforts in 17 states to legislate safe workplace laws that seek to define bullying behavior and control bullying against employees.

Mary Rowe, Linda Wilcox, and Howard Gadlin make their suggestions in "Dealing with—or Reporting—'Unacceptable' Behavior (With additional thoughts on the 'Bystander Effect')" found in the *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*, vol. 2, number 1, 2009, 52, 54, 62-3.

For a discussion of bullying in the European Union and France, see Claire Stievenard's "France's Approach to Workplace 'Bullying'" in Workforce Management, http://www.workforce.com/section/03/feature/27/06/88/index_printer.html

(accessed on June 7, 2010).

Martha C. Nussbaum's quote on justice and dignity can be found in *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*, (Cambridge, Ma, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 277.

Mission of the HR Forum and Discussion Blog:

Through our respective professional experiences and shared desire to fulfill the mission of our institution, we will raise questions, seek resources, and explore how to successfully live the institution's mission and effectively apply Catholic social teachings and principles to daily management practices and employee-related policies.

In commencing publication of this column, we intend to explore how mission and business considerations influence the design and administration of HR programs, services and work-rules. But then, we plan to go a significant step farther by exploring if any core Catholic principles and social teachings should receive equal weight, or even trump business considerations. We envision our role as facilitating this conversation for interested HR professionals in all Catholic colleges and universities.