

Verbal Violence and Bullying in the Workplace (or Keeping Respectfulness Between Ourselves and Others!)



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I once saw a t-shirt on which the following words were printed: *“The true art of horsemanship is keeping your horse between you and the ground.”* I have failed to follow this oh-so-painfully-true quip many times throughout my horse-loving life including in 2005 when I spent the bulk of that year (and beyond!) recovering from a nasty and most ungraceful hurl from a runaway steer-roping quarter horse. Another description of that particular little horse adventure (it was not one of our horses, thank goodness) would be:

In spite of an extremely messy landing, a non-steer-roping Grandma of five (a/k/a the wannabe rodeo queen) breaks speed and height records in her hurl through space after being launched from the back of a galloping quarter horse who knew what he was doing (unlike Grandma!) and who appeared to enjoy every minute of the launch and fun preceding it (againunlike Grandma!).

My theme for this article is *Keeping Respectfulness Between Ourselves & Others*...more specifically, doing our parts to curb verbal violence and other types of bullying in the workplace. Most of us are concerned with the violence in today’s world whether we’re talking random killings, terrorism, etc. How often, however, do we take time to consider the less obvious forms of violence such as verbal violence and other bullying found right under our noses day after stress-filled day within our workplaces?

When bullying or verbal violence exists within an office, it saddens, angers, embarrasses, shocks and hurts its victims. Even those not directly affected suffer from the negative effects caused by unchecked workplace bullying. It weakens and destroys office morale, energies, productivity and many times entire careers. The types and size of destructive paths left by verbal violence and other forms of office bullying are endless and this article can only touch upon the tip of this vicious iceberg.

How do I define verbal violence or workplace bullying? Like the word success, they should not be defined by a societal definition, but rather individually on a case by case basis. One of my definitions for verbal violence/workplace bullying is: *any words, body language or related actions that persistently attack, demoralize, threaten, destroy or otherwise bring discomfort or harm to those subjected to such constant and consistent abuse.*

Two Minute Self-Audit

Ask these questions about your workplace:

1. Do we have leaders, managers or employees who talk down to or otherwise speak in a demeaning fashion to others?
2. Anyone in our office who curses excessively?
3. Do employees talk negatively about each other behind their backs? Do the managers?
4. Is there loud arguing between employees on a regular basis?
5. Anyone who sexually harasses others?
6. Is distasteful, offensive humor allowed?
7. Are there employees who refuse to talk at all to each other?
8. Do we have any “professionals” amongst us whose verbal attacks, emails, etc. to others could win the “I Make Hitler Look Like a Good Guy” award?
9. How many chronic complainers do we have -- ones who can't be satisfied unless they have something to gripe about?
10. Any just plain ol' loud mouths around – good people perhaps, but annoyingly loud all the time?

Did you answer “Yes” to any of the questions above? If so and it's not a once in a blue moon occurrence, then your workplace is besieged by verbal violence. Can you quantify the damages if these situations are allowed to exist? That can be difficult, but the harm done can be huge, hard to recover from and in some cases such behavior brings about the ultimate downfall of a business.

The Aftermath

Think I'm sounding like a drama queen about this verbal violence stuff? I wish that were the case, however, it is a rare week in my work that passes when I don't learn of yet another business or law firm war story about the fallout from unchecked verbal violence. The injuries are endless and a starter list would include:

- 1) Low office morale/lousy attitudes
- 2) Widespread reductions in productivity and work ethics
- 3) Poor quality work product and costly mistakes
- 4) Costly employee turnover who have finally had enough
- 5) Unspoken permission for employees to act as rudely and immaturely as their supervisors
- 6) The ongoing poisonous tension and ongoing fallout of unresolved employee or management disputes
- 7) Fed up clients/customers who take their business elsewhere
- 8) Unmet goals (leaders spending too much time verbally attacking others instead of building teams who will (and want!) the firm/business to succeed
- 9) Excessive daily stress from the tensions and verbal attacks within

10) Disrespect breeds more disrespect

Tracing the Roots of Verbal Violence

What causes verbal violence? A few of the typical causes are listed below:

- 1) Please re-read #10 above
- 2) Unhealthy stress levels from unrealistic caseloads, unresolved issues at home or the office, unhealthy life styles, not being honest with yourself and others, lack of exercise, poor time management skills, etc.
- 3) Low emotional IQ's (for more information, do a web search to bring up many sites on emotional IQ including information about the popular "The Emotional Intelligence Quick Book" by Travis Bradberry & Jean Greaves
- 4) Immaturity including temper tantrums like a 2 year old
- 5) Self-centeredness overload
- 6) Substance abuse
- 7) Depression
- 8) Enablers at home and in the office
- 9) Undeserved, self-imposed arrogance or holier-than-thou attitudes
- 10) Chaotic, chronically disorganized office management

Why are we allowing verbal violence in the workplace? Again, the reasons are endless, but for starters:

- We refuse to hold ourselves or others accountable for their negative actions or non-actions
- Many of us avoid personal confrontations like the plague
- It often seem easier to stay angry than to put the energies and time into making amends and changing our ways.
- Personal insecurities which lead to "greater than thou" attitudes and actions
- Self-centered "I" or "me, me, me" vs. team oriented "we" or "firm" mindsets (e.g. *my* clients/customer vs. ours)
- Some folks are just inherently unprofessional and unethical
- Attitudes such as "If I bury my head in the sand far enough or just ignore things long enough, they will go away."
- Insensitivity to and disrespect for others' feelings

Verbal Violence/Workplace Bullying Prevention

There are, of course, no easy answers I can offer for your workplace. If I had a magic wand, I would use it to rid all businesses, firms, etc. of this internal and often unacknowledged "terrorism" threat. In my work as a management consultant, I unfortunately continue to see the far-reaching damages caused by the failure of leaders to take a stand against verbal violence and its related allies.

The leaders and their employees who have had the wisdom and courage to finally say “No more!” to verbal violence would never return to an environment where such tactics are allowed because the rewards have been too great including:

- employee turnover is greatly reduced;
- office morale increases (almost instantly) and remains steady;
- stress levels decline significantly;
- more goals are successfully met;
- net profits grow; and
- customer and client satisfaction spirals upward.

Businesses, law firms and other companies that allow such violence to continue in spite of its destructive nature have made a choice which is: verbal violence allowed here. Their unspoken message to their employees and customers/clients would go something like this:

- ***Enter at Your Own Risk -- Destructive Environment Within!***

As you would suspect from my horse wreck story at the beginning of this article, one of my top personal goals is to keep my horse between me and the ground. My success in doing so will be greatly appreciated by my body and family. And, I remind myself often of the importance of keeping respectfulness between myself and others. It's exciting to see in my line of work the improved work quality and productivity, the increase of success stories and the huge reduction of stress levels when verbal violence and all forms of workplace bullying are banned once and for all.

Workplace bullying is only recently starting to get noticed as a major problem in our businesses , law firms, factories, etc. This form of internal violence/assault must be seen for what it is - a form of terrorism within and it should not be tolerated any longer.

In closing, what can we as individuals do about it? Of course we shouldn't tolerate it from others, but that's often easier said than done when we need our paychecks, want to keep families intact, etc. Still, it's pretty easy for most of us to identify and point fingers at the bullies in our lives whether we feel we can speak out about our feelings or not. The more difficult thing to do is to take an honest, comprehensive look in the mirror at ourselves and our work personalities. But we must do just that and it is something we **can** do immediately and should do before judging others negative behaviors. For starters, let's ask ourselves -- What unproductive work habits or destructive ways of communicating do we need to change about ourselves and what's stopping us from getting started?!

About the Author: Nancy Byerly Jones works with attorneys and legal staff and other businesses as a management consultant, retreat facilitator, coach and mediator. A former practicing attorney, she is also a certified mediator. Nancy is a regular contributor to Lawyers USA where a variation of this article was published in 2006. For more information, please visit her website at www.nbjconsulting.com, follow her on Twitter @lawbusiness tips or e-mail Nancy: nbj@nbjconsulting.com.