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## Column

# Needed: happy endings in workplace bullying cases

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Unnamed, unrecognized and unchallenged. That's how a made-in-New- Brunswick website describes workplace bullying.

The problem isn't new -- what is new is the interest in dealing with workplace bullying. The "Towards a Respectful Workplace" website aims to help employees and organizations deal with it effectively.

I hope it will contribute to the compilation of success stories about dealing with bullying. We need to hear success stories. There are some out there, where common sense or concern for productivity won out, or where a complaint or lawsuit ended well. When the Advisory Council on the **Status of Women** held discussion groups with former targets of workplace bullying a while ago, some told us of happy endings.

One target of bullying worked in a small office and was constantly subjected to sexist and racist comments from her boss. She complained to him about this to no avail. She then took her complaint to the owner of the business. He arranged a meeting with the three of them, and asked the woman what she wanted him to do. She told him she wanted him to tell her boss to stop it and tell him that if he does it again he will be fired. The owner agreed. The boss said he didn't understand that his conduct upset her. This ended the problem.

A group of 18 workers took their supervisor to a tribunal. The proceedings were extremely hard on the complainants, but in the end, the supervisor lost their licence and job, and had to pay a fine.

Then there's the story of Code Pink, which made it around the world but occurred in this province. Some nurses in a New Brunswick hospital could no longer stand being the target of the bad temper of a belligerent specialist, but hospital administrators would not deal with the physician. Marilyn Noble, a Fredericton-based researcher in workplace bullying, tells it best, "When he is on a rant, they call a code pink. Any nurse who can spare the time comes and stands in a circle as a silent observer and watches him. The impact is he looks up, realizes there are witnesses who might report him and he shuts down."

Therein is a lesson for all witnesses of bullying. There are no innocent bystanders. Bystanders are enablers.

Most witnesses of bullying are dramatically affected by it: no one wants to be the next target, so they ignore the behaviour, or enable the bully in order to not be picked on next time. Morale goes down, absenteeism and turnover goes up and the organization is less than efficient because it is coping with dysfunction. The bullied worker who stays in a bully-friendly workplace will often develop self-protective behaviours they carry over to a new job -- they hold back on commitment of time, energy and enthusiasm. That is tragic all around.

Success stories may seem hard to find with workplace bullying, and few laws and policies are in place to prevent or properly deal with the cases when they arise. According to some recent studies, most bullies never have to face consequences and most persons who complain of bullying have already left their job.

Most employers seem blithely unaware of the cost of workplace bullying -- estimated recently at \$20,000 annually per worker targeted by bullying. It has also been estimated that a country that does not have a handle on workplace bullying (and sexual harassment and physical violence in the workplace) likely has a Gross Domestic Product that is one per cent and 3.5 per cent lower than it could be. Writer John Byrne says it all, "For every dollar spent on preventive work, you save nine in corrective work."

Anyone who has spoken out about workplace bullying will tell you how it attracts stories from targets and witnesses. The stories come out of the woodwork. Bullying in a work environment seems to be very common, more common than racial or sexual harassment. Most jurisdictions, including New Brunswick, have legislation protecting people from harassment due to race or sex but none against bullying, though the provincial government has a policy in place for its employees.

Targets of workplace bullying currently have few options. Few employers have anti-bullying policies. Human resource personnel sometimes are at a loss, or advise the victim to get a lawyer, according to bullying targets interviewed in New Brunswick.

Bullies are co-workers almost as often as they are bosses. It is sad to see small employers, or non-profit organizations go under or become weak because of bullying situations. It is even sadder to hear of burnouts and careers gone awry because someone was a bully's target and the organization did not deal with it.

Canada Safety Council recommends establishing proper systems for investigating, recording and dealing with conflict. Organizations that manage the problem outperform those which don't by 30 to 40 per cent.

As a participant in the discussion groups on workplace bullying said to the Advisory Council, "If the workplace is toxic due to psychological harassment, the employer should be fined just as they can be fined for pollution."

When workers are harassed or bullied on the job, their physical and mental wellbeing is affected, which can jeopardize workplace safety. That's why some jurisdictions have included workplace bullying under their workplace health, safety and compensation legislation.

Bullying is a health and safety issue.

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