



# Abuse in the Workplace

1 August 2013

## *Hello*

Some years ago, a lady came to see me in a very stressed and agitated state. She was a competent, intelligent lady, with an MBA and good performance reviews. She told me that every day her boss would call her a "f\*%#ing bitch". And this had now been going on for some months.

Verbal abuse (and it is mostly verbal abuse although I have known physical abuse to occur in the workplace as well) can include: Belittling you or your work, blaming you unfairly, name-calling, swearing, and profanity. Some abuse, such as screaming and name-calling, is easily recognized. Other types of abuse are more subtle and difficult to detect. ***No matter the type of abuse, however, the negative effects are lasting and powerful.*** The person who loses his or her cool once, apologises, and never does it again, is someone who makes a mistake. Verbal abusers disrespect others regularly, and heap the blame for their atrocious behaviour on everyone but themselves.

## *Effects*

The effects of verbal abuse in the workplace can be traumatic and long-lasting. Repeated abuse may lead to sleep disruption, headaches, eating problems, high blood pressure, and other physical problems. In the April 2007 issue of the "Harvard Mental Health Letter," the writers report that people who experience persistent and severe verbal abuse are at risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder, dissociation disorders and depression. Abused workers can withdraw or even stop communicating with others. They tend to skip work more frequently and the quality of their work suffers, creating a variety of problems for the company as well as the individual. Verbal abuse in the workplace makes coming to work a very unpleasant experience.

## *Actions*

- Take action as soon as you recognise it. The longer you or someone else experiences abuse the more damage is done, and the harder it is, and longer it takes to undo the damage.
- Because abuse demeans the victim, it can be very difficult to find the strength to confront the bully.
- If you are being abused then talk to someone you trust, either in or outside the workplace. Knowing you are not carrying this alone will help. Abusers work by isolating you, controlling you and blaming you, until you doubt yourself and your sanity.
- The first step that many people will suggest you take is to confront the abuser directly. Only do this if you will not be harmed in the process. Having a colleague or someone from HR with you may help you confront the bully.
- If you feel unable to stand up to the abuser then report it to someone at work. This could be a manager (if this is not the abuser), or the HR department, or a mentor.



- Collect evidence. Write down every single incident as it occurs. Write down exactly what was said by the different parties, and the date, time and place. You can voice record the abuser as he or she berates you. Recordings may not stand up in court, but they give you evidence to use within the department or company.
- Talk to the abuser directly and tell him or her to stop. Explain why his or her behaviour is unacceptable. Give the abuser the opportunity to realise their behaviour is wrong and to apologise and make amends.
- If the abuser refuses to stop the behaviour then you need to escalate it to higher levels of management.
- Different actions may be taken by the company –including sending the abuser on training, requiring mandatory coaching or counselling, disciplinary action, or transfer to another department.
- If you have tried everything and nothing is done, you may need to find another job. Leaving is a solution, and sometimes the only solution for many people. You need to protect your health and finding a new job may be the only way to do this.



## ***Responsibility of Leadership***

- Managing abuse in the workplace is the responsibility of top management. HR is there to help out, but leadership is accountable. So if leadership don't condone abuse in the workplace then they need to make sure they stamp it out.
- Educate employees and managers about appropriate behaviours. Teach managers how to constructively critique work and deal with performance and attitude issues. Many, many managers and employees engage in abuse because they have no idea how else to deal with day-to-day issues.
- If the company doesn't already have them, then draft policies and procedures for banning abusive behaviour and make sure employees and managers understand this. Include the consequences for abuse.
- Be specific about behaviours that are not acceptable.
- Outline consequences for abuse and enforce them.

I really hope you are not someone who is experiencing abuse at work. But if you are, know that the sooner you deal with it the better. Letting it continue is not good for anyone, least of all you.

*"I believe the root of all evil is abuse of power."*

~ *Patricia Cornwell*

**Have a wonderful August.**

With best wishes