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Workplace Violence Specialist

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Consultant helps companies tackle damaging problem

By Mike Dempster

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Heather Gray knows all about heartbreak.

As a former Saskatchewan police officer who spent considerable time as a hostage negotiator and a detective in a child-abuse unit, she's been a key character in many distressing stories.

Today, she's playing a new role as a consultant on workplace violence. Again there are many depressing stories, all chillingly real.

Her workshops revolve around complex issues – discrimination, diffusing hostility, abusive power and threat assessment. Heather Gray

This week she spoke to the Human Resources Association of Calgary about an equally dangerous and insidious component – the corporate bully.

"What bullies do is horrible, humiliating," says Gray, who is stunned by the stories she's heard since starting her business full-time in January.

"After every talk I give, someone comes up to me afterward and says: 'You nailed it on the head, that's exactly what happened to me.'"

Just who are the bullies? Gray offers this sketch:

* Bullies are managers 81 per cent of the time, according to Campaign Against Workplace Bullies, an online survey of people who have been directly bullied;

* Their numbers are equally split between men and women;

* Bullies are marginal workers who've moved into supervisory positions. Inadequate at frontline work, they now control information which gives them power;

* Usually they've "wormed" themselves into a relationship with a more senior manager. Quoting from *The Bully at Work*, by Gary and Ruth Namie, Gray says the most important defining characteristic of a bully is that his or her action damages the target's health, self-esteem, relation with family and friends, economic livelihood or some combination of them all.

In an online survey (see www.bullybusters.org), the Namies heard from people directly affected. The results were disturbing.

Of those responding, 41 per cent said they had been diagnosed with depression. Four in five people said the effects prevented them from being productive at work because of severe anxiety, lost concentration and sleeplessness.

For those who said the bullying had stopped, 82 per cent said it was because they lost their jobs (44 per cent involuntary departure, 38 per cent voluntary departure).

"Can you imagine one manager taking out just one employee each year for 20 years?" asks Gray. "The victims leave (as) wounded, broken people, and the company has lost what was once a productive, happy worker."

And the bully, who thinks he or she has just done the company a good service, selects a new target.

"We call them serial bullies," says Gray. "And the thing is, most bullies wouldn't recognize themselves."

"Most have low self-esteem, and have their own issues about power and control."

As a police officer, Gray witnessed serial bullies first-hand. Over several years her group leader managed to get rid of six quality people (in a 12-person unit) through bullying.

"As soon as one (victim) was gone, you could see who the next target was going to be," says Gray. "He zoomed in. It was amazing to watch. Once you understand it, it's shocking to see how predictable it is."

"He was very effective at self-promotion, schmoozing, very good at convincing people above that what he was doing was the right thing."



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How does a bully bring down a target?

Imagine that a previously good employee joins a new work unit, says Gray. Slowly, the worker finds it harder to please the new supervisor.

“No matter how many hoops you jump through, there is some nitpicking, some flaw, in the way the work’s being done.”

After a while the target second-guesses himself, starts making mistakes. Productivity drops as the victim spends the day answering to the bully, or seeking support within the unit.

Meanwhile the bully is talking to his ally in upper management, casually slipping in hurtful comments.

“They are little things,” says Gray. “ ‘Oh, I’m having a hard time with so-and-so. He isn’t listening. I don’t know what the problem is.’ ”

It’s called slow sabotage.

The target, meanwhile, has taken a long time to realize what’s happening, not anticipating such nasty behaviour.

When the target finally seeks help, he has often already been labelled as a discipline problem (through the bully’s comments). No one will listen.

“Just imagine how devastating that is,” says Gray.

And don’t expect help from your co-workers.

Gray recalls that when her own work unit was under the bully’s thumb, no one liked what was going on. But no one stuck his or her neck out to help.

“There is a human side of us that is very self-protective that says: ‘I’m just glad it’s not me.’ ”

Gray believes companies are now accepting that bullies exist, and that something must be done.

Gray, whose company Dynamic Consulting is based in Regina, says organizations can ferret out bullies.

If people are clamoring to get out of a unit, if an employee with a previously good work record is now underperforming, or if sick days are being maxed out, senior managers should be asking serious questions.

As for the bullies?

They should be dismissed, demoted to frontline work with close supervision or transferred to another area where they don’t have power, says Gray.

“If a company really cares, it will take action,” she says.

Otherwise good people will continue to be devastated, and co-workers will be looking over their shoulders – praying they’re not next.