

HR NEWS



**Improving the Employee Experience
Without Breaking the Bank**

5 Ways to Combat COVID-19 Bullying in the Workplace

By Michele Ruiz

More workers are returning to offices and other worksites across the United States. For all the talk of a bold new future in which talent logs in from anywhere that offers a Wi-Fi connection, many organizations are experimenting with hybrid and fully on-site work arrangements. Employees are not uniformly pleased.

Some employees have balked at resuming in-person work because they grew accustomed to the greater flexibility of the COVID-19 era. Others have not missed the commuting, dress codes and chats around the watercooler that accompany life in the office.

Now, many more employees face an additional challenge with the rise of COVID-19-related bullying in the workplace. This has significant implications for human resources professionals.

Workplace bullying in any form can be seen as a symptom of bias. This is because bullying is a type of exclusion that stymies performance and, worse, creates an unsafe working environment.

It is no secret that tensions ran high over the past several years as political, cultural and geographic differences shaped sharply different responses to COVID-19. As employees return to the workplace, they may encounter heated reactions from colleagues who do not share their views on pandemic precautions. Without realizing it, colleagues may act in ways that co-workers perceive as bullying.

Defining Workplace Bullying

An office or workshop is a long way from the playground. So, let's set the level for the following discussion by agreeing on a working definition of bullying.

In the workplace, bullying consists of repeated hostile behaviors meant to intimidate, dominate or cause fear in others. Bullying a co-worker involves taking overt actions in the pursuit of power. When the actions are primarily verbal, bullying may sound like comments or insults based on a colleague's race, gender, religion or other identifiers.

Workplace bullying can also manifest itself in heated exchanges and subtle behaviors such as microaggressions and

microinvalidations. It could take the form of intentionally not using a colleague's preferred pronouns, which is a way of refusing to support that colleague's gender identity. Bullying could even look like one colleague teasing another for not wearing a mask.

The point is that workplace bullying often takes the form of subtle but repetitive and hostile behaviors. Dr. Crystal Miller, who serves as chief learning officer at BiasSync, describes bullying and harassment as "really similar. They're on the same spectrum. It's usually that what you're seeing in terms of hostile behaviors intensifies with harassment. So, one act of harassment is never permissible."

What HR and Organizational Leaders Can Do

The bottom line is organizations must take responsibility for ensuring the workplace is harmonious and devoid of acrimony, especially when it comes to issues related to COVID-19. Organizations must also hold bullies accountable.

So, what steps can HR and organizational leaders take? Consider these five.

Step 1. Institute and Implement Zero-Tolerance Policies for Bullying and Harassment

Now is an excellent time to reevaluate existing policies to ensure they accurately reflect the values of your employees and support your intended culture. There is surely room to disagree on public health measures, particularly at this stage of the pandemic when we are slowly returning to something approaching normal. But everyone should agree there is no room in the workplace for behavior that overtly targets and belittles peers.

Ideally, your organization already has rules on the books that target bullying as a firing offense. If not, consider updating your policies to remove all ambiguity about the matter—not only on issues related to COVID-19, but for bullying across the board.

Anti-bullying policies should also include clear procedures for reporting and investigating complaints of abuse. Employees must



feel assured that their concerns will be taken seriously and looked into by leadership.

Step 2. Promote Self-Awareness

We often think of bullying as something an organization has a responsibility to mitigate. We can also leverage self-awareness tools to help employees better contemplate whether they may intentionally or unintentionally be allowing their biases to manifest as bullying and harassment.

Step 3. Provide Ongoing Updates on Health Guidelines at Your Facilities

Make sure employees are not in the dark on your organization's latest expectations and requirements regarding potentially hot-button issues such as vaccination status for business trips, masking and COVID-19 leave.

Step 4. Encourage Active Communication and Check in With Employees

Do more than require research-based training on workplace harassment. Consider providing opportunities for employees to provide confidential updates on their well-being and holding public forums in which employees can learn about the support they can receive from leadership. Giving employees chances to be heard helps HR and organizational leadership take actions aimed at reducing employees' frustrations over having nowhere to voice their concerns or have them addressed.

Step 5. Model Language That Widens the Circle Instead of Narrowing It

Look to your people managers as resources for helping you carefully reflect on the language used in all employee communications across all channels. As much as possible, strive to widen the circle of inclusivity by using people-first language that empowers and respects diversity.

A simple example of something you can do immediately involves talking about COVID-19 in terms of people rather than cases. Doing this underscores the reality that the disease is not an abstract policy debate but, rather, a matter of health, life and death for colleagues and teammates.

In conclusion, permit me to ask what steps you have taken to reduce instances of bullying and harassment as more employees return to in-person work at your organization.

Michele Ruiz co-founded [BiasSync](#), which helps organizations effectively assess and manage unconscious bias in the work environment. She is an adviser to senior executives at Fortune 20 multinational corporations and some of the highest-profile thought leaders and elected officials. You can connect with Ruiz via [LinkedIn](#).

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