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Workplace Violence Experts See Lessons from Littleton

By Robert W. Thompson

June 14 -- Employers everywhere--in towns large and small, with workforces both stable and rapidly changing--have reason to be concerned by the recent tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., experts on workplace violence say.

It's not just because working parents may be distracted and less productive as they worry about their children being in peril at schools once regarded as safe havens.

Since Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold fatally shot 12 students and a teacher before taking their own lives on April 20, the world, it seems, has been consumed with the gruesome task of trying to figure out why the tragedy occurred.

Violent popular culture, neglectful parents, a resistant gun lobby and lax school officials have all come in for their share of blame. But relatively little has been written or said about the psychological conditions that led to the Littleton shootings.

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Several experts on workplace bullying told *HR News Online* they hope the debate ultimately will address the taunts, cliquishness and other types of bullying that Littleton students say Harris and Klebold both endured and committed. Such bullying also occurs frequently in the workplace, where--if unchecked--it can lead to both physical violence and psychological damage, they said.

People who have been subjected to bullying, including British author Tim Field, know how devastating its effects can be.

Field had worked happily for 15 years in computer systems and support until he was transferred to a new department with a new boss. Soon, he became the target of constant criticism--sometimes aggressive and impatient--and was forced to seek approval for even the smallest actions.

The new boss piled work on him and, when he protested, responded with implied threats.

His contributions dismissed, requests ignored and decisions overruled, Field suffered a stress breakdown in 1994. By early 1996, he had recovered enough to found the U.K. National Workplace Bullying Advice Line--a hot line to which employers, students, spouses and others have brought more than 2,000 complaints.

Field detailed his experiences in a book, *Bully in Sight*, and created a [World Wide Web site](#) with the motto "Those who can, do. Those who can't, bully."

Field said he wouldn't hazard a guess as to the role that bullying may have played in Littleton. However, he said employers would do well to increase their awareness of the types of bullying, signs of the malady and ways of reducing and coping with bullying.

Like many people who have studied bullying, Field draws a distinction between harassment, which can be manifested by a single incident, and bullying, which by definition involves repeated incidents and sometimes a pattern of behavior.

Richard V. Denenberg, co-director of Workplace Solutions, a Red Hook, N.Y.-based consortium of conflict management and crisis management professionals, said officials in Europe sometimes refer to the malady as "mobbing."

Denenberg, co-author with Mark Braverman of *The Violence-Prone Workplace: A New Approach to Dealing With Hostile, Threatening and Uncivil Behavior*, said bullying often occurs when a clique forms and those who aren't invited into the exclusive circle are picked on. "It's almost like you've run into organized crime," he said.

The Littleton tragedy, according to Denenberg, involved a "garden-variety, intergroup dispute spiraling into violence." He said the shootings appeared to be strongly linked to "bullying and taunting and harassment. You had a sort of

group dispute that never was taken seriously. No one seemed to believe that bullying could escalate to that level of violence."

One dilemma with bullying, in both schools and the workplace, is that those in charge often fail to realize the seriousness of the problems until much too late, experts say.

"One of the key problems is that employers tend to get dismissive," particularly if they realize that the inappropriate behavior does not rise to the level of a contract dispute or legal action, Denenberg said.

Loraleigh Keashly, an associate professor of urban and labor studies at Wayne State University in Detroit, called bullying "very much a part of the workplace experience" despite the misperception--especially popular in the United States--that it is a problem largely for schools.

Psychological aggression in the workplace, she said, can have "devastating" effects leading to physical, mental and emotional illnesses, as well as reduced productivity and increased absenteeism by employees.

"Media reports give the impression that physical violence is the norm, but it's not," Keashly said. Bullying involves more subtle types of aggression, including ignoring a person's contributions, flaunting status, pulling rank, making unwanted eye contact and openly belittling individuals, she explained.

"You should never berate someone publicly," said Keashly.

Other types of bullying include vandalism, gestures, withholding of important information and making faces--"even smiling the wrong way," said Denenberg. "It can be very subtle."

Much bullying seems designed, either expressly or subconsciously, to undermine the target employee's self-confidence and to cause the worker to perform poorly, he said.

One reason employers have tended to dismiss psychologically aggressive behavior, experts say, is that it is much more difficult to define and diagnose than physical violence, which causes damage that is often clearly visible.

And some of the symptoms of bullying--substance abuse, declines in productivity and increased absenteeism--may be caused by other factors or a combination of factors.

Another reason for bullying being overlooked is that employees may be hesitant to report it.

Often, Denenberg said, these workers don't like to admit that they have been victimized, and they are fearful of retribution from both bullies and employers. He said employees who have borne the brunt of bullying may worry that their managers will consider them either chronic complainers or "shirkers" looking for

an excuse to avoid work.

Most people on the receiving end of aggressive behavior, when asked what they did about it, say they did nothing, according to Keashly. That's because they assume--sometimes correctly--that their organizations will be unresponsive, she said.

However, employers should remember that organizations can be "very influential" in affecting the amount of aggressive behavior, Keashly said.

A third explanation for the underemphasis on bullying, Field said, is that employers who admit that the problem exists among their workers also might have to bear responsibility for some of the conditions causing it to flourish.

Field said most people who call his advice line work at organizations where bullying is "rife" and is used to hide managerial inadequacies. If employers were to take the problem of bullying seriously, he said, they might have to stare their own shortcomings in the face.

Keashly said employers often focus on the individual as the source of a problem when, in the case of bullying, they should cast a wider net. "We tend to have a bias toward fixing the individual, when the organization also has a responsibility," she said

Denenberg said that while bullying of subordinates by bosses occurs, peer-on-peer bullying is more of a problem for employers because there are fewer means of redress. If an employee is bullied by his or her manager, for example, the worker could sue under anti-harassment laws or file a grievance through a labor union, he said.

In contrast, Denenberg said, employees often have nowhere to turn when they are being harassed by a co-worker. "What happens when the source of the harassment is another employee?" he asked rhetorically.

Organizations that may be prone to bullying include those that are adversarial or unusually competitive, Keashly said. Also, European studies have pointed to organizations that are autocratic or rigidly hierarchical, she added.

The most dangerous type of bully, Field explained, is the "serial bully," who is not merely reacting to stressful or unhealthy workplace conditions but engages in psychological aggression regardless of the circumstances.

The serial bully, he said, is very aggressive and dysfunctional and often is an introvert, which would make him that much more difficult to detect and deal with. Field said introverted bullies tend to be very intelligent and "very subtle," leaving little, if any, evidence of their handiwork.

Some countries have addressed the workplace bully, including Sweden, which enacted a "dignity at work" law. Field said the British Parliament, under pressure from organized labor, considered a similar bill several years ago. He said the

Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union, the bill's staunchest supporter, has indicated it may renew its push for the legislation.

Keashly said the United States lags behind many western European nations in addressing workplace bullying. U.S. government officials and employers place relatively more emphasis on physical attacks and on racial and sexual harassment, she said, compared with "generalized workplace harassment."

Denenberg recommended that employers concerned about bullying watch for it on a continuing basis and, if they spot a problem, establish a mediation process. He said one model might be the community mediation programs that San Francisco and other municipalities have used for years in addressing problems related to gang violence, ethnic conflicts and sexual orientation differences.

He also said some school systems have had great success with peer mediation programs in which students are taught to be alert to bullying and other problem behaviors.

A positive policy on bullying would go beyond prohibiting certain behaviors, Keashly said, to describe what a healthy work relationship is. A good start is to "focus people on what respectful relationships are like," she said.

Robert W. Thompson is managing editor of HR News.

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