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by Corro

A community to help you grow, scale and thrive.

Break the Cycle of Harm Caused by Exclusionary Behaviors and Cliques in the Workplace

It is human nature for people to connect and gravitate to others, who understand them or where they feel safe. Sometimes a group of employees are drawn together by common interests, work style, location or personality, and their connection develops into excessive togetherness. They form a clique that practices exclusionary behaviors. Their expanding views or purposes can end up being detrimental to overall employee morale and productivity. Anyone can be a target of disrespect. Allowing cliques to thrive is bad for business.

Break the Cycle of Harm Caused by
Exclusionary Behaviors
and Cliques in the Workplace

Every organization wants harmony in the workplace and their clients to be treated with respect. After all both are fundamental to how well a company thrives. It is human nature for people to connect and gravitate to others, who understand them or where they feel safe. People can be comfortable connecting around the water cooler or the occasional lunch. Others need to be more involved by being part of a big group that meets for drinks after work or play slow-pitch on Wednesdays. Connection at any level can be good thing. Great business ideas sprout from group conversations. Lifetime friendships and many successful marriages begin from workplace relationships. According to a recent study by Ernst & Young, people who feel like they belong are more productive, motivated, and engaged.   Beyond work performance, feeling a sense of belonging is a basic human need that is vital to our emotional health.

Less Desirable Human Connections

Are there less desirable human connections? Yes, when any group makes others feel alienated or excluded. Sometimes a group of employees are drawn together by common interests, work style, location or personality, and their connection develops into excessive togetherness. They form a clique that practices exclusionary behaviors. Their expanding views or purposes can end up being detrimental to overall employee morale and productivity.

Cliques that are allowed to thrive:

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- o   Alienate others and disrupt the work environment,

- o   Often build an agenda that exploits the company and other employees,

- o   In the upper ranks of a company, they can cause employees outside to feel they are less important, less worthy.

- o   Spur the formation of other cliques because of their actions.

- o   At the very least, they are distractions. Those on the outside may spend more time coping with the clique than they do on their own work.

- o   At the very worst, they open the door to bullying that causes good employees to flee the organization when they have had enough.

- o   Can quickly kill company culture or define the company culture.
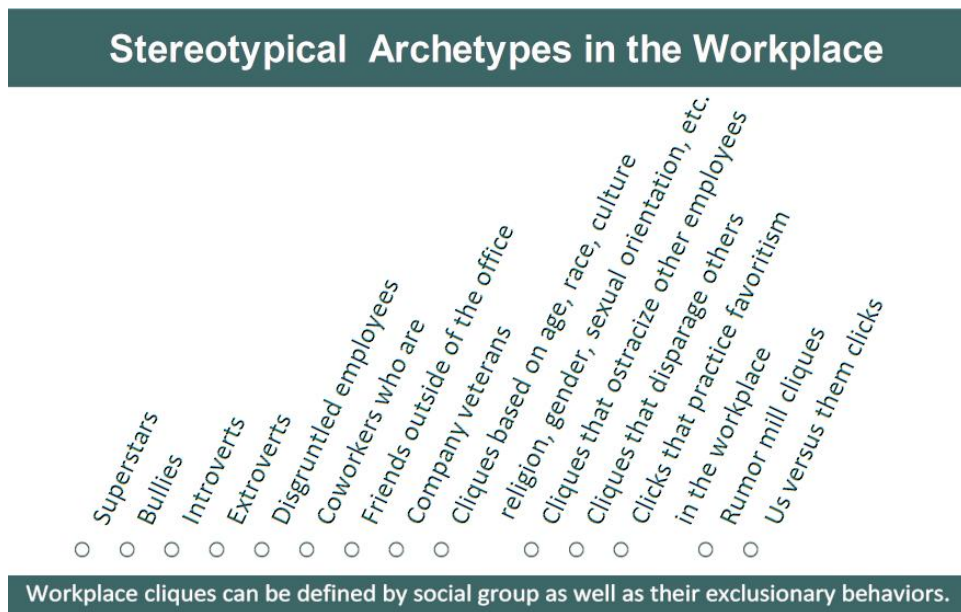
Cliques are Bad for Business

At any level, cliques are bad for business.   Exclusionary behaviours are not confined to the office, lunchroom, or loading dock. Clique behaviours are evident between staff and customers.

When coworkers are left out of office events, meetings, or even important emails, they can start to feel excluded. Acts of exclusion can lead to employees not feeling comfortable voicing their opinion or contributing to the team. When they feel left out, they slowly stop participating, which leads to fewer bonds with teammates and less involvement at work.

Too often, the effect of this exclusionary behavior is reflected in how staff interacts with customers. Clients pick up the vibes and form opinions that might not reflect well on the organization.   Anyone can be the target of disrespect.

Recognize Workplace Archetypes

In high school people fit into a stereotypical archetype – athlete, cheerleader, geek, class clown, teacher's pet. In an office environment the former class clowns, geeks, and athletes fit into different categories:

Stereotypical Archetypes in the Workplace

Superstars — Bullies — Introverts — Extroverts — Disgruntled employees — Coworkers who are Friends outside of the office — Company veterans — Cliques based on age, race, culture religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc. — Cliques that ostracize other employees — Cliques that disparage others — Clicks that practice favoritism in the workplace — Rumor mill cliques — Us versus them clicks

Workplace cliques can be defined by social group as well as their exclusionary behaviors.

Individuals and cliques that practice exclusionary behaviours use a form of power which can include social power, seniority, intellectual power, job knowledge, and subject matter expertise. There is also power in gossip, lies, and secrets. Power does not necessarily involve one's position or rank. People who practice cliquish behaviours have either assumed, perceived, or real authority in relation to their target.

Exclusionary behaviours, left to thrive, can escalate to bullying or violence.

It's important to remember that we are all responsible for creating and maintaining safe and respectful workplaces.   Exclusionary behaviour at any level can exist only in environments and cultures that tolerate it. If you see it, say something about it.

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Cliques Create a Force Field

Several universal human instincts can spur the formation of a clique: desire for familiarity and certainty, desire for control or dominance, and the need for security and support.

Most cliques form at work as a means of self-preservation. People need others around them that support them and validate their perceptions. This is especially so when people feel vulnerable. Say for example, a group contributes to product development with diligence and unwavering support. The manager overlooks their contribution and neglects to include them when handing out praise or a bonus. The manager focuses attention on a select few and this support group is barely a cringe-worthy afterthought. What do like-minded individuals do when they are made to feel that they have been dismissed, mistreated, or neglected. The go away to their own corner of the building so they can talk about how undervalued they feel. They relate to one another on a tangible level. They are a clique which is less enthusiastic about their work and the company.
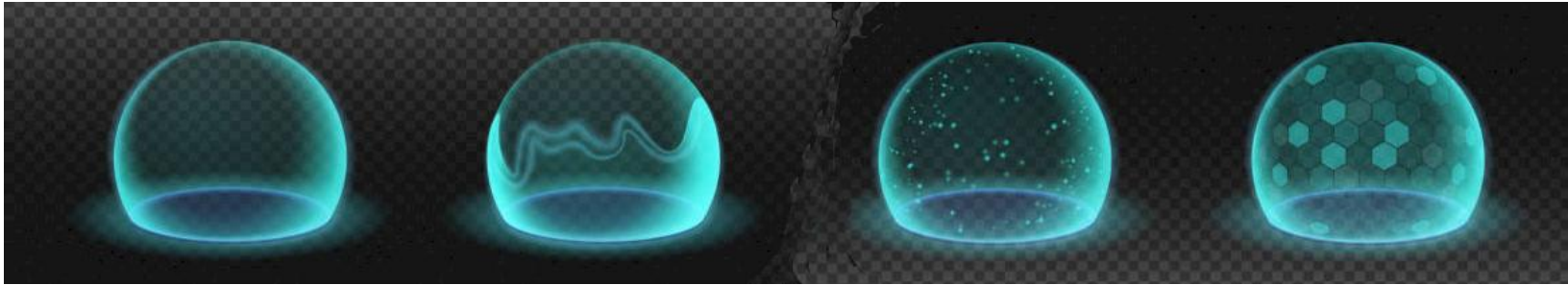
And what happens next? The group that received the accolades is strutting and buoyed up for their next production. They also form a clique, defined by their greatness and acknowledged respect. They create a force field around themselves and might not even want to associate with underachievers who are complaining or sulking in the back room, but they will expect their unwavering support again, as will the manager.

In this example, the two cliques are not the problem; they formed an identity because of an exclusionary behavior, a problem that is rooted in upper management.

Cliques are Counter-Productive in the Workplace

Not every company is rife with cliquish behaviors and where cliques do exist, not everyone in the organization chooses to identify with any group. Yet, usually everyone becomes aware of their behaviours and may act differently because of them. Everyone is somehow affected.

The force field created by the clique, usually means the people inside spend so much time together they miss out on what other coworkers have to offer. Cliques tend to lack diversity. Experts say that statistically, very few cliques are populated by the highest performers in a company and a survey quote in Forbes stated that, "About 13% of workers said the presence of office cliques has had a negative impact on their career advancement." People who are aware of the negativity that surrounds cliques do choose to distance themselves.

Cliques are Nasty for a Newcomer

Cliques are nasty business for a newcomer who can sense where the force fields lie. Newcomers see groups of people sharing inside jokes, sauntering off for lunch or a secret meeting. Collaboration or gossiping? Which crowd is the right crowd?

The newcomer just wants to fit in. At the same time he or she wants to steer clear of cliques.

Cliques wield social power and might. They try to decide who is popular and who is not. Yet, members of a clique are not usually respected on a professional level. No newcomer wants to be branded by affiliation. He or she wants to fit into the company as a whole, and gain credibility for who they are as individuals. That is true for most professionals.

When you are the newcomer, your coworkers are busy evaluating your strengths and weaknesses, while you are feeling everyone out to see how you fit in. Until you figure out how your own expertise complements the team, you might feel you need to ingratiate yourself with everyone. Tread lightly when it comes to making alliances in the workplace.

There is a difference between collaborating with co-workers on a work related assignment and siding with them when they practice exclusionary behaviours. We all want to feel validated and connected, but there is a difference between smart socializing and desperately partnering up with a group for short-term satisfaction, to get ahead, or to feel accepted.

Smart Socializing – Align yourself with People that Push you to be your Best

Cliques often give the illusion of safety in numbers. Companies hire and fire individuals, not the cliques. The biggest pitfall of any office environment is office gossip. Cliques are rife with gossip. If you get any signal of gossiping within a group, tread very carefully or stay clear. Anytime you appear to be attached to a group, the signal goes out to your coworkers and it can be very difficult to wash away any stigmas of that association with a group that practices non-exclusionary behaviours. A group may seem harmless enough, until their true colors start to show.

The best alliances will be with those workers and leaders who can work and empathize with many different types of people. When you find yourself falling into a specific clique in the workplace, work on expanding your social circle. Try to diversify your workplace connections so that you are not just talking to people that are all in one clique. Mingle with a variety of people during working hours. Strike up conversations with new people. Refuse to get caught up in gossip or speaking negatively about people or other departments, or leadership. Do not rely on friendships or alliances in the workplace for your social activities. Prioritize your job performance over socializing with coworkers and maintain a healthy connection to a peer group outside the office.

It is best to align yourself with people who are going to push you to be the best you can be and focus on how your efforts can help others. Should a workplace clique make your work life problematic, seek outside guidance from a mentor, a counselor or a career coach. If your company is rife with cliques, consider a job change to a company with better leadership.

Become a Non-Clique Role Model – Break the Cycle of Silence

Desire for approval is what allows us to create bonds with one another, cultivate trust, and cooperate together to achieve things that we never could on our own. Fundamentally, that is a good thing.

Everything we do, say, and think is at least partly influenced by this kind of social pressure.   We become comfortable with being agreeable, being accepted and getting approval from our peers.   However, when we get too comfortable or too nice for the sake of fitting in, we humans have a tendency to stop thinking for ourselves. We get so tuned into the opinions of those around us that we not speak up about issues in public or among family, friends and co-workers when we believe that our own point of view is not widely shared. This tendency to submit to social pressures and not speak up can be detrimental to our personal and professional lives.
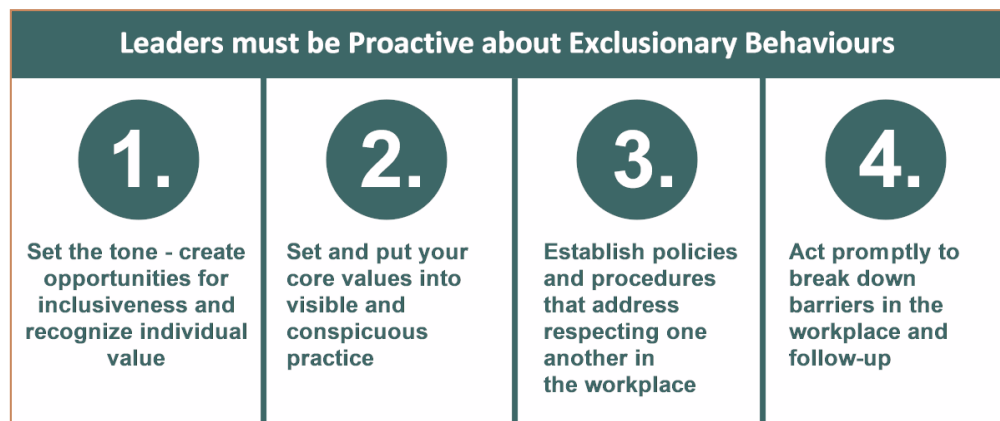
Our perception of public opinion often comes through news and media which can give the false impression that certain beliefs and attitudes are more unpopular than they really are. Based on a false impression from the media, popular culture or supposed norms in the workplace, a person may not speak out their true views because they feel that their views are too unpopular and outside of the mainstream to be taken seriously.   This leads to a "spiral of silence," because individuals will fear social isolation and not want to speak their views, which only leads to more and more people believing their views are unpopular.   This holds true for cliques in the workplace.

o   We need to resist blindly following an authority figure that practices unacceptable exclusionary behaviours.

o   We should be ready to defend something we truly believe is right, even if it is unpopular among our peers.

o   Dissent is appropriate and necessary.   Without dissent in our society, we cut off communication and limit our understanding of others and their point of views. Ultimately, we limit ourselves from being able to solve the really tough problems that exist in our world and thus society never evolves and moves forward.

Being comfortable with disagreeing, disobey unjust authority, rocking the boat – call it what you will – we should all think strongly about becoming a non-clique role model in all areas of our lives: politics, religion, culture, fashion, hobbies, and other social norms. We all play a role in breaking the silence. Preventing and stopping these types of behaviours can start with any one of us.

Leaders must be Proactive about Exclusionary Behaviours in the Workplace

No one said running a company was easy. If you are an entrepreneur there are so many things to consider. Now, we are suggesting you might need to add one more concern to your list.   It is better to be proactive than reactive when it comes to exclusionary behaviours or cliques in the workplace. While you cannot dictate with whom employees eat lunch, you can implement protocols that strongly discourage cliquish behaviors among employees or between leadership and staff, and between employees and clients.

Leaders must be Proactive about Exclusionary Behaviours

1.	**2.**	**3.**	**4.**
Set the tone - create opportunities for inclusiveness and recognize individual value	Set and put your core values into visible and conspicuous practice	Establish policies and procedures that address respecting one another in the workplace	Act promptly to break down barriers in the workplace and follow-up

Commitment to a Workplace Prevention Program

The most important component of any workplace prevention program is management commitment. Respect starts at the top. It is up to managers and leaders to build an atmosphere of safety or bring down the walls of distrust. They do that through their focus on understanding, value and respect.

Management commitment is best communicated in these 4 ways.

1. Set the tone

Show them how it's done.   If you set the tone, your team should follow your lead.   The tone includes being genuinely interested in your staff. People are intuitive about recognizing how genuine another person is by their non-verbal communication signals.

o   Create opportunities for inclusiveness, and make it easy.   However, do not make it mandatory for employees to participate in all company activities.   Be considerate of the fact that peoplehave personal obligations, tight budgets, special diets, health concerns, etc.   And, just because they say no today, do give up and stop asking.

o   Recognize individual value.   Too often, we focus on the superstars. Superstars cannot do their jobs without the support of the entire organization.

o Show respect and appreciation to every individual. You hire people because of their skills. Acknowledge their contribution to your success.   Never forget that often they contribute in other unique ways. For example:

- The person who never complains
- The person who unravels software issues before the technical consultant arrives
- The person who always arrives first or is the last to leave at night
- The person that keeps everyone in coffee or high spirits

o Create a comfortable environment as well as opportunities where people feel free to express themselves and have healthy debate and dialogue about controversial issues.

o Embrace a growth mind-set: Individuals who believe their talents can be developed worry less about looking smart and put more energy into learning. They report feeling far more empowered and committed. Provide greater organizational support for collaboration and innovation to eliminate cheating and deception among employees, who feel it necessary to use those tactic to gain an advantage. It is okay to reward effort and success, but rewarding learning and progress emphasizes the processes that yield these things, such as seeking help from others or trying new strategies. A company that plays the talent game makes it harder for people to be accepting, inclusive, practice growth-mindset thinking and behavior, such as sharing information, collaborating, innovating, seeking feedback, or admitting errors.

Learn more about Growth Mindset for Individuals and Organizations

o Discourage like-minded thinking: Being part of a group can make employees feel safe. When being part of the group also discourages them from thinking or being different it hinders productivity. As a proactive measure, stress to your employees that you are looking for fresh and new ideas and that you do not want cookie-cutter approaches to problems.   Encourage your employees to suggest new ideas, think outside the box, rock the boat. Try to get them to see that you do not want them to be like everyone else at work. Be sure they know that you value creativity and authenticity from your employees. When you do that, you will discourage the like-mindedness that holds cliques together.

o Keep your ear to the ground and always be willing to listen:

- Be willing to listen, if you want an open dialogue with your team.
- If you want inclusion, you have to be inclusive.
- If you want trust, you need to provide transparency.
- If you say you want your employees' input – you have to accept it.
- That means you do not meet their inquiries with defensiveness.
- Respect their opinion, whether you agree or not.

2. Define and practice your core values:

Your core values should dictate how you treat each other and your customers.

o   They should be available for all to see. Post them in conspicuous locations.

o   Put them into visible practice.   Bring your employees together for a common cause.   Take a look at the core values of your company for some ideas of a common cause. For example, if your workplace values giving back to the community, arrange a day for you and your employees to volunteer with a non-profit organization. Coming together for a common cause breaks down all kinds of barriers.

3. Establish Policies and Procedures that Address Respecting One Another in the Workplace

Define a written policy that covers a range of exclusionary behaviours from bullying and harassment to physical violence. Establish a prevention program that applies to management, employees, clients, independent contractor and anyone who has a relationship with your business. Your policy should address respecting one another in the workplace, anti-clique or anti-exclusionary behavior, and bullying.

o   Set clear expectations regarding interactions among coworkers?

o   Is there a clear channel for reporting workplace incivility or bullying? Include a confidential process for reporting and assurance that no reprisals will be made against any employee who does report.

o   Implement workshops/training to educate all your staff on clique behaviors and their counter-productive effect on the moral of the employees and the business.   Workshops make staff aware of how workplace cliques affect morale. Often a group of coworkers might not realize that they are alienating others in the workplace by making a big deal of the things they do together. When they laugh and share inside jokes that their co-workers do not get, their behavior can they leave some people feeling like outsiders rather that part of a team. Managers need education to learn what triggers clique behaviours. Some people need educational awareness, and some people need reminders about this type of behavior because if they are allowed to continue they will precipitate a toxic environment that is psychologically unbearable for others.

Because they are being trained on the company's time and dime, they feel the organization values them enough to invest in them to develop wonderful and desirable qualities, traits and skills. Workshops are interactive; they gives people a richer sense of who they are and a greater awareness of others and what they stand for. This awareness can be an eye-opener for how they want to move forward in life and within the company.

o   Make workshop education and training a regular part of your workplace culture.

o   Make yourself visible in emphasizing your commitment to the prevention of exclusionary workplace behaviours, including bullying, violence, cyberbullying, gossiping, etc. Provide clear examples of unacceptable behaviour and working conditions. Tell your employees in clear language that you expect them to be inclusive, that you expect everyone to feel included and welcomed. Make it clear that if you see anyone being bullied or excluded on purpose, there will be consequences.

- Have every employees sign the anti-clique or anti-exclusionary behavior directive.

- Make a commitment to provide confidential support services to victims of bullying or exclusionary behaviors. Encourage employees to meet privately with supervisors, HR, or management regarding issues with workplace cliques.

- Seek out impartial third party help with establishing protocols or resolution, as necessary.

- Surveys: Another proactive measure is to ask employees to complete a survey (name withheld) about the cliquish practices within the company. Make it an annual survey.

- Listen to employee concerns both formally and informally. Be aware of sudden shifts and pattern changes in behavior.

4. Act Promptly when Signs of Clique Behaviours Appear

Mission statements and directives are wonderful things that espouse lofty values like growth, empowerment, or innovation. However, they are meaningless to employees at any level of the organization if the company does not act and follow through to make the ideals real and attainable. It is important to address issues with exclusionary behavior and cliques as soon as they occur. Leaders need to be seen breaking down barriers in the workplace.

- When you see something inappropriate, be sure to address it right away.

- It is equally important not to overreact.

- Implement a standard investigation process to evaluate every reported incident and process complaints fairly. Ensure you set aside time to handle it properly and also make time to follow-up.

- Establish a universal disciplinary policy for instigators of bullying. Be cautious in making exceptions for any internal or external customer who has been accused of incivility or bullying, and ensure a thorough evauation of the information gathered.

- When you find something insidious going on – people not caring to be civil with one another, incessant gossiping, rumour spreading, cyber bullying, harassment, backstabbing, and overt or covert bullying behaviours, determine who the leader is. Most cliques have a leader. Make sure you are right, and do not hesitate to take decisive action with the leader and the group. Be guided by your organizational protocols.

- When one individual behaves inappropriately, deal with it promptly and privately. You may deal with a group differently, but you must still handle it carefully, and not let the group set the tone. Depending on the situation, you may still deal with each member of the clique individually.

- You want to be sure you know the difference between a demoralizing clique and a group of friends before you step in. You certainly have to be careful not to punish employees for having close friends at work. Coworkers who are also friends and who do not include other employees in their after work activities is not harmful behavior. It is only harmful when that group acts out in the workplace by ostracizing or disparaging others, feeding the rumour mill, showing favoritism, and pushes an "us versus them mindset".

- Consider that an employee might be guilty by association. They may look cliquish because they mingled a few times, and rather than risk ostracism, they remain friendly from a distance.

- Take into consideration that some employees may not know they are engaging in inappropriate (gossiping) or unacceptable (playing favorites) behavior.

- Threats of death, threats of physical violence or indications of stalking behaviors are against the law and should be reported to the authorities. The same applies to any report of harassment that continues over an extended period of time as well as any correspondence that includes harassment based on race, religion, or disability.

Delve Deep into the Boss's Force Field

Any action you take may not start with the clique members. You must consider the possibility that you or management can create force fields that cut you off from the rest of the company. A clique can form because of something you are doing – or not doing. You may not realize how your actions, leadership atmosphere, or unclear policies create an atmosphere that is ripe for clique behaviours. When Harris Interactive did a poll of 3000 working Americans almost 1500 respondents perceived that their boss was part of a clique. If you are a manager, you do not want to be perceived as a leader who hands out recognition, promotions and raises based on politics rather than merit.

Is it Time to Hit the Reset Button?

If your company culture or has drifted toward exclusionary behavior, it is never too late to get back on track. You have to be humble and intentional about it. Prepare for dubious looks or whispering. Your staff might not trust what is really happening.

Let your people know you made a mistake by not defining the type of culture you want. If you've acted improperly, say so and take action to be more transparent or inclusive. **Do not say the words unless you intend to take action.** Solicit honest feedback and respect the individuals for doing so. Listen, and always follow through. It might take time to build a positive environment, but if you want to have an inclusive culture, increase employee engagement along with productivity you do have to have patience, listen and act with intention, and trust that your staff will follow your lead. If you run into roadblocks, examine your actions. If you are not the troublemaker, find out who is and fire them.

Bullies in the Workplace

In the workplace, the bully may not be easily to identify.   Bullies are aggressive but their actions are not all the same. While some bullying is obvious, there are types that are difficult to recognize because the bully's actions can be covert, manipulative, and subtle. Cliques that use gossip, backstabbing, and rumor-spreading are considered one type of bullying.   The workplace is not immune to cyberbullying, either. The truth is the actions of any clique can escalate to bullying behaviours.

It is the duty of employers to protect employees from risks, and these risk include harm from both physical and mental health aspects.   In certain situations, human rights laws may apply when it comes to harassment or bullying related to race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, marital status, family status, disability, pardoned conviction, or sexual orientation.

What Constitutes Workplace Bullying

First, it's important to understand that workplace bullying is defined as persistent and ongoing acts of disrespect directed toward an individual or group.   Anyone can be the target of a bully. It is a misconception to think that most workplace bullying is inflicted by bosses. Bullying involves power, but there are many forms of power: social power, seniority, intellectual power, job knowledge, and subject matter expertise. There is also power in gossip, lies, and secrets. Power doesn't necessarily involve one's position or rank. People who bully typically have either assumed, perceived, or real authority in relation to the target.

Examples of bullying that happen in a workplace.

- Spreading malicious rumours, gossip, or innuendo.
- Excluding or isolating someone socially.
- Intimidating a person.
- Undermining or deliberately impeding a person's work.
- Regularly withholding essential information.
- Repeatedly and intentionally not including a person in meetings that are essential to their job.
- Ignoring a colleague every time they disagree with you.
- Making gestures or invading personal space deliberately to cause fear or concern for safety.
- Physically abusing or threatening abuse.
- Removing areas of responsibilities without cause.
- Constantly changing work guidelines.
- Establishing impossible deadlines that will set up the individual to fail.
- Withholding necessary information or purposefully giving the wrong information.
- Making jokes that are 'obviously offensive' by spoken word or e-mail.
- Intruding on a person's privacy by pestering, spying or stalking.

- Assigning unreasonable duties or workloads which are unfavourable to one person (in a way that creates unnecessary pressure).
- Underworked – creating a feeling of uselessness.
- Yelling or using profanity.
- Criticizing a person persistently or constantly.
- Belittling a person's opinions.
- Unwarranted (or undeserved) punishment.
- Blocking applications for training, leave or promotion.
- Tampering with a person's personal belongings or work equipment.

If you are unsure when an action or statement could be considered bullying, you can use the "reasonable person" test.   Ask, "Would most people consider the action unacceptable?"

Inspired and Committed, We Celebrate Your Journey

At Corro, we believe in the power of people. We are inspired to expand humanity's capacity for wisdom, compassion, and courage.

In our commitment to helping you achieve long-term personal development and use your organizational platform for positive impact, we celebrate the journey of lifelong learning while fostering an all-inclusive community driven environment of meaning, personal connection, and fun.

Corro is not just a Work Space – Our Aim is Helping the Community Thrive through People Success