PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF THE HOSTILE WORKPLACE:

HARASSMENT AND BULLYING

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INTRODUCTION

Among the most difficult questions currently faced by corporate America is: what exactly is harassment and a hostile work environment as prohibited by Title VII sexual harassment and discrimination laws? The purpose of this chapter is to bring context to these complicated workplace issues, as well as to offer employers some guidelines for management of problems. The discussion will begin with an overview of the terms, harassment and hostile work environment. However, in order to understand how this legal term translates into human behaviors in the workplace, more practical, non-legal psychological concepts will be used to describe behaviors as they exist along a Hostility Behavioral Spectrum. The psychological origins of hostility as *inappropriate aggression*, including its interpersonal and intrapsychic dimensions will be discussed as a framework for examining individual employee and corporate psychological responses to hostile workplace incidences. The role of organizational and individual values as well as psychological defenses (both individual and organizational), in the recognition, expression and management of hostile workplace behavior will be discussed. Finally, there will be a discussion of practical steps that managers, occupational physicians, and HR

personnel can take to try to *prevent* harassment and other forms of inappropriately hostile behavior, *address* it once it occurs, and *respond* if the company becomes the target of litigation.

THE CORPORATE DILEMMA

Companies are charged with the responsibility of prohibiting harassment, bullying, and other forms of inappropriate aggression but generally have a poor understanding of exactly what behaviors they are to prohibit. Legal terms such as "unwelcome sexual advances" and "verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature" are not clearly defined behaviorally. Similarly, what constitutes "harassment" that is sufficiently "severe" and "pervasive" such that a "hostile work environment" is created is unclear. Such vagaries have become evident in legal claims brought by individuals and groups of employees, who seek to recover substantial monetary damages based upon allegations of harassment or discrimination.

As companies initially struggled to understand the problem of workplace hostility, early litigation over harassment and sexual harassment brought some clarity to the issue, because these claims usually involved examples of egregious behavior. Companies responded by writing policies that sought to regulate conduct of employees, and litigation stemming from blatant forms of misconduct, such as grabbing, groping, overt bullying, sexual propositions and exploitation, diminished. Increasingly, however, companies have faced claims based upon milder forms of harassment and hostile work environment, such as racial and ethnic slurs and generalized hostile remarks and behavior (6).

The convergence of all of these forces has heightened tension and created uncertainty in the workplace. Neither employers nor employees always understand what specific workplace behaviors are inappropriate. From such uncertainty, the political correctness movement has arisen as a

means of coping with an ever-broadening layperson's definition of harassment and hostile work environment (6). Inevitably, such imposed restraints on speech and behavior have presented costs of their own. As the previously accepted behavioral outlets were eliminated, fewer options remained to allow release of ordinary job tension or constructive use of aggression as an agent for problem solving and change. Because suppression of emotions increases internal psychological pressure, a self-defeating cycle has emerged. Workplace tension may increase, while expression of emotions may decrease, further increasing tension. Morale may decline, but interpersonal conflict continues, and anger and hostility may erupt.

However, expressing hostility can prove to be a dangerous thing. Bosses or peers who yell at others are at risk of being terminated and/or being named in lawsuits, which state that these individuals have created "emotional injury" or "intentional infliction of emotional distress". Most claims also blame employers for condoning the proscribed behavior.

In other workplaces, hostility remains submerged, while interactions become bland, duplicitous, or silently hostile. For example, a supervisor, concerned about criticizing the performance of a minority subordinate, may compose an insipid performance evaluation, which, although non-offensive, no longer becomes a useful tool for improvement.   Peers or subordinates who retain resentment about anything, are often inhibited about expressing it directly. Therefore, the anger comes out indirectly, i.e. in passive-aggressive behavior, for example, intentional inefficiency, forgetfulness, absenteeism, and tardiness.

Whether management overlooks, tries to suppress, or is altogether unaware of workplace hostility, this problem can have consequences beyond the possibility of future litigation. First, employees who are on the receiving end of bullying, harassment, intimidation, domestic violence, and other non-violent forms of workplace hostility can develop psychological and physical complaints leading to performance problems, absenteeism,

and tardiness. Affected employees may be reluctant to complain directly to management, and, instead, seek medical help from occupational physicians, EAP personnel, and outside treaters. These professionals may focus on the symptoms but may not appreciate the connection between the symptoms and the broader problem of hostility at work. Especially in women, complaints of depression, anxiety, and, as will be further described later, somatization (the development of physical symptoms that cannot be explained medically) can be by-products of unresolved workplace hostility, including domestic violence, a form of relationship hostility that intrudes upon the workplace (see chapter by Randel and Wells). Second, behavior that starts out as bullying, harassment, intimidation, and verbal threats may escalate into something more dangerous. According to the University of Iowa Study on Workplace Violence (14), actual employee-employee violence may be preceded by a series of increasingly hostile and aggressive incidents. Corporate sabotage (for example of the company data base) that is perpetrated by disgruntled insiders (10), employee-employee stalking, and domestic violence are all examples of workplace hostility.

Clearly, companies have been left with a formidable dilemma: allow expression of hostility and risk either costly legal action based upon harassment and hostile work environment or possible escalation of behavior into violence against management or other employees. Prohibit expression and risk ongoing conflict that might produce these same outcomes along with eroding morale, poor performance and productivity, medical/ psychological complaints, disability, and employee turnover.   What are companies and clinicians to do?

THE HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT

The term, "hostile work environment," is not a psychiatric or psychological construct, but a legal term that derives from Title VII Civil Rights laws prohibiting discrimination in the form of discrimination of all types, including sexual and other harassment. The law does not attempt to define what specific behaviors are to be labeled hostile, but, rather, allows the trier-of-fact to make such determinations after the fact, based upon the particulars of the individual case. While the law attempts to define the *legal* dimensions of harassment and a hostile work environment, psychiatry explores the *behavioral and psychological* dimensions that the law does not address. It has been difficult for medical researchers and behavioral scientists to study this concept using traditional scientific methods, because there are no objective and universally accepted behaviors that define hostile work environment. What is considered hostile in one workplace may not be considered hostile in another, because of cultural differences, the nature of the job, etc. Absent precise behavioral definitions, the current universe of knowledge about this phenomenon remains empirical, with the behaviors embraced by the term, hostile work environment involving *individual perception* and *contextual factors* broadly encompassed under the heading of *inappropriate aggression and hostility.* Because of the individual variations among the different workplaces and types of workers, management and treaters need to understand certain fundamental concepts about human aggression, in general, and hostility, in particular. These concepts will assist them in assessing and responding appropriately to non-violent hostile work situations such as harassment and bullying.

THE HOSTILITY BEHAVIORAL SPECTRUM

Hostile human behavior exists along a spectrum (see figure 1). As can be seen in figure 1, on the one end of this spectrum are violent behaviors, such as homicide, terrorism, and rape. On the other end are more ambiguous and less severe forms of hostility, including verbal and sexual harassment, shunning, intimidation, physical bullying, and threats. Between these extremes are problems such as stalking and non-homicide-related domestic violence.

Although this chapter largely focuses on the milder end of the spectrum of behaviors, if left unresolved, research as shown that such milder expressions of hostility can escalate into more serious forms of aggression, or Type III (Worker on Worker) violence (14). Alternatively, these behaviors: bullying, verbal and minor physical harassment, and shunning, can become established behavioral patterns that are tolerated by the recipient and can, under certain circumstances, result in physical and psychological morbidity.

The outcomes of such hostile interactions depend upon the particular individuals and situations involved. Sometimes the employee is able to resolve the conflict without assistance from others, and the aggressive negative emotion is defused. Sometimes help is sought from company management or clinicians, who must assess the situation and respond with effective solutions. The following discussion will provide principles that will assist management and treaters in their recognition and assessment of milder forms of inappropriate aggression and hostility.

The first point is that aggressive behavior is not necessarily hostile or destructive. It can be useful. Citing work by Jay Rohrlich, M.D. (11), editors Len Sperry, M.D. and Robert Larsen, M.D. note that aggression can be an agent for change and transformation. They further note that "work, mastery, and aggression [exist…] in balance with the sexual drive and the need for pleasure" (12, p. 243).

Vignette 1:

As an example of the positive use of aggression, in one company, employees hoarded knowledge in order to win favor with the regional manager. There was no particular system for rewarding superior performance or the sharing of solutions to difficult technical problems. In addition, morale was poor, and absenteeism was a problem. Performance evaluations were held only annually, and poorly performing employees were rarely terminated because of company concerns about legal claims of wrongful termination. When the regional manager retired, a new manager restructured practices, so that those who shared knowledge with peers were rewarded and compensation was related to performance. In addition, closer monitoring of employees through more frequent performance evaluations resulted in the termination of slackers. This change raised morale of the remaining work force.

This vignette reveals several types of aggression. First, hoarding knowledge resulted from   intense employee competition (here, a counterproductive form of aggression) that compromised the overall good of the company and its objectives. The structure of compensation and the process for performance evaluation undermined productivity and morale and resulted in increased absenteeism that was related, in part, to the unexpressed resentment. Aggression became a force for positive change, as the new manager implemented bold changes, while overcoming, through frequent communication and team meetings, the resistance, not only of his superior, but also, of his employees.

AGGRESSION, EMOTIONS, and COMPANY VALUES

Within companies, values emanating from top management permeate the workplace and impact how individual and groups of employees both use and interpret aggressive behavior. Thus, company values will, either directly or indirectly, say something about behavioral limits and the extent to which the employer is concerned about the overall safety and well being of employees. For example, company policies on harassment, threats, and violence reflect the company's values relating to these problems as well as its determination (or lack thereof) to address these problems as they arise. How supervisors and human resources personnel intervene in a dispute involving aggressive behavior becomes an affirmation, for better or worse, of the broader corporate values. Therefore, in order to inculcate values that will maximize both employee productivity and workplace morale, it is essential that upper management clarify what the company values are, educate employees about the values, and oversee their implementation from the top down, through policies, procedures, and enforcement of sanctions for violations.

Morrison adds that there is no leadership without aggression and change. There is no change without aggression. Aggression is insignificant without emotion. "Whereas affect [emotion] gives aggression its power, values (i.e. ethics) control and modulate aggression and make it fit within some socially acceptable context. When the leaders instill values into organizations, they are aggressive. If values are instilled without affect, they are powerless. Organizational defenses can inhibit and divert the healthy aggression required to get the job done" (7, P. 271). Thus, within the workplace, good leadership can provide the values structure that permits aggression to be channeled constructively in order to motivate

workers to be more productive and mutually supportive. If used appropriately, aggression can strengthen the psychological contract that exists between employees and employers and the psychological bond that promotes cooperation among coworkers (8).

Morrison points out that aggressive drives receive their power from the *emotions* that are attached to them.(9, 13). For both management and employees alike, the emotions that pervade aggressive behavior can have a positive or negative impact on others. When management takes bold action in order to correct workplace problems or implement initiatives designed to improve conditions, their actions can have a measurably positive effect upon employees. In other instances, management actions can have negative emotional repercussions, creating a pervasive sense of fear, distress, anger, and shame. Among peers, aggressive actions can be widely experienced as hostile because of their decidedly negative emotional overtones. Wherever the behavior exists along the Hostility Behavioral Spectrum, the result may be either active hostility (e.g. resulting in verbal or physical attack, bullying, harassment), or passive withdrawal and inhibition (passive aggressive behavior). Either active or passive aggressive behavior can lead to problems in the workplace.

NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF AGGRESSION-- INTERPERSONAL DYNAMICS

When workplace aggression is attached to negative emotions, it can become destructive rather than constructive, disrupting the work environment by undermining individual and group effort and morale. One useful approach is to examine this problem within the larger context of an individual's relationships inside and outside of the workplace (5). Interpersonal dynamics involving the employee, the aggressor, and management

can relieve or exacerbate a problem, potentially affecting interpersonal distance between employees and the psychological contract that exists between the worker and employer (8). The following example illustrates these points.

Vignette 2:

In this company, a manager had a considerable problem with alcohol abuse and anger modulation. His minority secretary of 10 years, a psychologically fragile, marginal performer of limited IQ, had problems expressing her anger and frustration directly. These dynamics involving anger and aggression became evident in the dynamics of their relationship over time. This dynamic may be described as sado-masochistic, with the manager assuming a sadistic role and his secretary, a masochistic one. The manager was overtly hostile, aggressively criticizing her for typing, filing, and other errors. Over time, particularly when he was under production pressures, his criticisms grew more personal, with use of terms such as stupid, idiot, thus linking his aggressive comments with negative emotions of shame, humiliation, contempt, disgust, and dismissal. In contrast, his secretary's style was passive aggressive. Her intentional inefficiency, procrastination, and tardiness, were her ways of expressing (unconsciously) her anger, rage, and fear of her supervisor.

The company had no corporate values statement and had neither clearly articulated policies on harassment nor effective procedures for handling complaints involving this and other forms of hostility. The performance evaluation structure was inefficient and imprecise making it difficult to terminate poorly performing employees. The destructive dynamic reached an impasse. The supervisor, who should have been confronted and disciplined, was allowed to continue his verbal abuse.

The secretary's poor performance was tolerated rather than addressed early in their relationship through objective performance measurement. The ultimate result of this dysfunctional situation was the secretary's developing a psychological break with reality at a time when she was in a compromised medical state. Just before this break, she had received from her supervisor a particularly scathing verbal attack for forgetting to perform a crucial task that cost the company an important contract. She was terminated in the midst of this attack, was hospitalized psychiatrically, and later brought suit, claiming hostile work environment and race and sex discrimination. Because of the timing of her psychotic break, a causal link was made to the manager's verbal harassment, which was verified by other employees. She was able to recover economic damages for emotional injury caused by the manager, and punitive damages against the employer, who was held legally responsible for the manager's behavior.

This vignette illustrates several important lessons:

1. Failure of the company to establish a framework of company values, which are translated into clear policies on harassment and other forms of inappropriate hostility; the policies should include a statement that such behavior will not be tolerated and that the company will investigate thoroughly and take measures to address any and all complaints

2. Failure to provide procedures by which employees can bring a complaint against a supervisor or coworker who is behaving inappropriately

3. Failure to disseminate widely the values statement, policies, and procedures

4. Failure to provide education on harassment and other forms of discriminatory and hostile behavior

5. Ineffective procedures for measuring performance and addressing problems as soon as they become evident

6. Failure to terminate employees whose performance does not improve

7. Failure to confront and to take disciplinary measures to address inappropriate behavior, including termination of an employee who does not correct hostile behavior

INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL FORCES AT WORK IN AGGRESSION

Unconscious psychological forces can provoke an individual to act in an inappropriately aggressive fashion. Human behavior is produced by an interplay between different internal psychological drives, in particular those governing needs for emotional support, affiliation with others, and mastery/ competence. How a given employee responds behaviorally when these drives are activated depends largely upon genetic and early environmental factors, especially the quality of early life relationships. During a child's formative years, his or her early relationships with parents, guardians, surrogate caretakers, and siblings can establish behavioral patterns that later become re-enacted in workplace relationships (3,4). Whether the work relationship involves employees interacting as peers, or employees interacting with superiors or subordinates, the dynamics of the interplay is likely to be rooted in the early family relationships. Simply put, the way in which employees relate to each other or to superiors can parallel the way in which they related to their siblings and parents or parental surrogates. These dynamics can have either a positive or negative effect on work relationships.

Vignette 3:

In this company, a male supervisor achieved wide recognition for his ability to work effectively with superiors, peers and subordinates, especially women, whom he enjoyed mentoring. He had come from a family in which women were viewed as competent equals of men. His parents were affectionate, both with each other, the children, and with friends and extended family. They shared power and control and used aggression within the family constructively to solve family problems. They worked to maintain communication with each other and the children and encouraged the children to solve problems with each other. This employee's relationship with his brothers and sisters was affectionate, and sibling competition was channeled in ways that permitted each to develop his or her own individual strengths without feeling shame and humiliation for failing to achieve in

areas in which the other children excelled. It is not surprising, then, that this man, in his working life, established the same types of effective ways of relating to peers, superiors, and subordinates that he had learned in his original family.

In contrast, in Vignette 2, that of the sadistic manager and masochistic secretary, the destructive dynamic between them was also rooted in early family behavioral patterns. The manager's father and mother had related in a similar sado-masochistic fashion that resulted in the mother's having a nervous breakdown and, ultimately, filing for divorce, when the manager was grown. Based upon this early experience, the manager had learned inappropriate ways of expressing anger, which, for a long time, his mother had tolerated. The secretary's family had demonstrated a similar dynamic involving poor communication and ineffective expression of anger. This example illustrates the value of a workplace psychiatric consultation, which could have identified the relationship dynamic, the manager's personality problems and substance abuse, and the psychiatric vulnerability of the secretary. Timely psychiatric referral for mental health treatment might have prevented the secretary's emotional break with reality (psychotic episode) and helped the manager to obtain substance abuse treatment and counseling for anger management. Both could have gained insight into the origins of their respective maladaptive ways of expressing anger.

HOSTILE WORK ENVIRONMENT—IMPORTANCE OF PERCEPTION AND CONTEXT: REASONABLE or IDIOSYNCRATIC?

In litigation, the trier-of-fact must evaluate claims of hostile work environment according to a reasonable person standard (2). Occupational physicians, management, and treaters also assess, at least informally, the degree to which an employee's complaint about another's hostile behavior

represents an unreasonable (i.e. idiosyncratic) perception of benign situations, versus a reasonable perception of actions that constitute emotionally toxic aggression. Four examples illustrate a range of possibilities.

Vignette 4:

Several women in this company accused three men of sexual harassment. The company asked for a workplace psychiatric consultation. The psychiatrist interviewed both the women complainants and the accused. Clinical evaluation revealed that the men and the women were psychiatrically normal, meaning that they were all able to perceive and respond to the environment without being grossly out of touch with reality— i.e. psychotic. The evaluation showed, further, that the perspectives of the women were reasonable, i.e., their perceptions were not bizarre or idiosyncratic. The aggressive hostile behavior of the men had evoked in the women emotions of shame and humiliation. The HR Director met with the men and identified the specific inappropriate comments and behavior. They were warned that further complaints, if investigated and validated, would result in disciplinary actions, including possible termination.

Vignette 5:

In contrast to the commonly seen variety of sexual harassment illustrated in Vignette 4, in another company, a woman complained of feeling harassed and persecuted by her supervisor, who had given her a fair but negative performance appraisal. She complained of hearing his voice telling her that she was no good and might as well kill herself. Psychiatric evaluation revealed a psychologically fragile woman, whose psychotic break represented an idiosyncratic/ unreasonable response to appropriate management actions.

Vignette 6

In an altogether different workplace scenario, a paranoid employee accidentally physically collided with another employee, who immediately apologized. However, the paranoid perceived the innocent bump as an intentional provocation and responded by yelling and assaulting his coworker. Investigation of the incident found that the paranoid had exhibited prior bizarre behavior, which had escalated over time. He turned out to harbor distorted beliefs about the employee whom he later assaulted, including the belief that the other employee was trying to take over his mind. Prior to the assault, he had made odd and threatening remarks, which had raised emotions of fear and terror in his coworker. Unfortunately, because the company had never issued clear policies and procedures addressing the issue of threats and other hostile behavior, the coworker did

not know whether or how he should complain to management. Meanwhile, the paranoid's idiosyncratic perceptions, which reflected underlying major mental illness, were not recognized by management before it was too late to prevent an incident of violence.

Vignette 7:

This case involved terminating a poorly performing depressed employee, who, despite accommodation, continued to perform inadequately. Depressed individuals can harbor intense feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, and anger toward themselves and the world. The threatened or loss of a job can unleash rage that is projected onto the manager or coworkers. Alternatively, the rage can be reflected back onto the employee himself, resulting in suicide, which represents one of the ultimate and tragic unreasonable/ idiosyncratic responses to management action that may be entirely reasonable and necessary. Prior to making the decision to terminate, troubled employees often reveal behavioral signs of instability. Training can permit workers to recognize and report early behavioral signs of mental illness, thus alerting management to the existence of a possible high-risk situation. Psychiatric consultants can assess the threat of possible violence or suicide and suggest specific ways to conduct the termination so that workers can be protected and mental health follow up provided for the at-risk employee.

Vignettes 4 through 7 illustrate several points. First, any complaint that surfaces must be evaluated within its context, so that its reasonableness can be determined. Second, mental illness that is unrecognized, untreated, or inadequately treated can have considerable consequences for workers. Therefore, employees and management alike should have some basic education about how to recognize and report any behavior that seems to be out of the norm, bizarre, or unusually inappropriate. Management should be obtain psychiatric consultation for a Fitness for Duty evaluation on any employee exhibiting bizarre behavior. Finally, if it is necessary to terminate an employee that is known or suspected to have a mental disorder (whether or not that disorder constitutes a disability in the legal sense), care must be taken to conduct the termination in a way that takes into account the safety of all employees.

PSYCHOLOGICAL DEFENSE MECHANISMS: SOMATIZATION

Psychological defenses protect humans from experiencing emotional symptoms that might otherwise result in mental illness or inability to work or to relate to others. Defense mechanisms usually come into play when negative emotions are aroused, especially fear, shame, humiliation, and anger. In Vignette 2, the sadistic manager's anger was a defense against underlying and longstanding issues of shame and inadequacy. His secretary's passive aggressive style defended her against the same emotions as well as her fear of her manager's retribution if she expressed her frustration more directly. In Vignette 6, the paranoid's hostility and threats were a maladaptive defense against an intense fear that other people, in this case, his coworker, were out to harm him.

Among workers, especially women, the development of physical symptoms (somatization) seems to be a common psychological defense against all of the negative emotions: fear/ terror, anger/ rage, distress/ anguish, shame/ humiliation, contempt/ dismissal, and disgust. Somaticizers tend to be naïve and to lack insight into their emotions. They usually insist that their problems are medically based despite evidence to the contrary. Although these employees may be under emotional stress, it is sometimes unclear whether their distress, which is being translated into physical symptoms, derives from events occurring *inside* or *outside* the workplace. Such individuals may attribute their physical symptoms to contemporaneous workplace injury, whether physical or psychological, as such injuries may be compensable, but determining whether the symptoms were *caused by* or *correlated with* workplace events can be exceedingly difficult. Aside from issues of compensation and possible liability, is it important to determine whether or not an employee's personal problems may be intruding into the workplace? How does the employer confronting a defensive employee decide whether the problem is the employee, the employee's personal life, or the workplace?

There are no easy answers to these questions. However, because of increasing concerns about workplace violence, domestic abuse, and litigation involving workplace hostility, employers should keep the following issues in mind. On the one hand, some employees may instigate or exacerbate workplace hostility because of their personality styles and prickly defensiveness, which can lead others to see them as having a chip on their shoulders. Management may need to confront these provocateurs and the problematical behavior that is disrupting the workplace. On the other hand, other employees may be working under hostile environmental circumstances that have not been corrected by management, or they may be struggling emotionally at work because of problems at home. These employees may have difficulty coping psychologically and may come to the attention of management because of symptoms of tardiness, absenteeism, and overuse of medical leave, which may lead to resignation or termination. Gentle inquiry into the meaning of the absenteeism may help management to identify problems that are of *mutual concern*. These include workplace problems such as *harassment* about which the employee was reluctant to complain, a *psychiatric or medical problem*, which the employer may be able to accommodate, or *domestic violence*, which may create a risk to the employee or others in the workplace.

ORGANIZATIONAL DEFENSES

Argyris (1) described the phenomenon of organizational defenses, which companies, like individuals, use, without being aware of it, in order to avoid embarrassment and fear. According to Morrison, such defenses may arise in response to all of the negative emotions, or they may permit management to support or appear to support organizational values.

It is useful to see how organizational defenses impede real companies from recognizing, confronting, and dealing effectively with important interpersonal problems in the workplace. For example, in Vignette 1, the company, which had never thought about the importance of a *values policy*, *denied or minimized* the importance of addressing the supervisor's hostile behavior toward the secretary and *rationalized* their ongoing lack of attention to this problem as well as the secretary's chronically deficient performance. Their denial and minimization led them to fail to investigate complaints completely or follow up with the secretary's complaint until litigation had commenced. Their psychological defenses covered underlying emotions of shame and fear; shame that the behavior was occurring in the workplace, and fear of discovering the extent of the problem.

When finally confronted about the problem, the supervisor *rationalized* not firing her because of her long tenure with the company and his sensitivity to her feelings, an example of *reaction formation (assuming a psychological posture that is 180 degrees from the reality, of which the manager was completely unaware)*. Thus, his excuse conveyed a false appearance of supporting a value, which was, in fact, non-existent-- that of sensitivity to a worker's feelings. Further, this supervisor *projected* onto his secretary his own deep sense of inferiority and shame related to his personal problems.

The tendency of management to overlook problems, minimize their importance, or fail to follow up complaints with effective action, including monitoring the effects of warnings or moving to stronger disciplinary measures, is a common problem that can, in today's workplace, as never before, have far-reaching negative consequences. The following case illustrates these points.

Vignette 8:

A company recently hired women, who complained of sexual and racial harassment in the form of inappropriately provocative and racial comments, touches (pat on buttocks, hugs, kisses) and the presence of offensive visual materials, including calendars featuring nude women and pornographic magazines in the lunchroom. The company's Employee Handbook made general comments about not tolerating harassment, including sexual harassment, but offered no strong values statement or specific guidelines on the steps an aggrieved employee should take in order to lodge a complaint.

When the women complained verbally to the plant manager and their foremen, the latter spoke informally to the men, who denied responsibility and said that one of the women was actually provoking comments by her suggestive remarks. One older employee said that everyone engaged in horseplay as a means of relieving tension and boredom on the job. He also confirmed that at least one of the women had repeatedly behaved provocatively and then overreacted when the men responded in kind. During the litigation that ensured, it was learned that this woman, who had a histrionic personality disorder, had brought sexual harassment complaints against four prior employers. Another woman was chronically late or absent and often appeared disheveled at work. Later it was learned that she was the victim of domestic abuse.

The managers did not do further investigation and did not follow up in order to see that the offensive material was removed and the inappropriate comments and touches ceased. Although the foreman told the men to leave the women alone, prohibited behaviors were not specified, and disciplinary consequences were not stated. Not surprisingly, the men continued their inappropriate behavior. The provocative behavior of the woman was never addressed, and the signs of domestic abuse were missed altogether. The women eventually quit or were terminated for performance problems or chronic absenteeism. The company became the target of a protracted and costly sexual harassment and discrimination lawsuit, which had additional claims for emotional injury and punitive damages.

The company's inattention to the global problems occurring in the workplace resulted, first, from their *denial* and *minimization* of problems. In addition, such a stance reflected a *negative company value*, i.e., that attending to the interpersonal dimensions of the workplace is irrelevant to the bottom line. Such a stance proved to be fatal, as seven figure legal fees incurred to defend against a sexual harassment lawsuit ultimately bankrupted this company. This vignette illustrates the company's legal vulnerabilities because of their failure to address discriminatory workplace hostility. These vulnerabilities included:

1. *Lack of overall company values statement*

2. *Poorly defined policies and procedures for complaints of inappropriate behavior, including sexual harassment and discrimination*

3. *Failure of management to address adequately a complaint*

4. *Failure of management to investigate adequately by interviewing the other women*

5. *Failure of supervisor to follow up his own order to remove inappropriate visual materials from the work sites*

6. *Failure of supervisor to clarify prohibited behavior (in the woman and the men) and sanctions if problems continued*

7. *Failure of supervisor to follow up with women lodging complaints in order to see if problem resolved*

8. *Failure of company to have company-wide training and education about sexual and other harassment and discrimination*

The company's shortcomings notwithstanding, psychiatric evaluation of the complainants and the offenders also illustrated the complexities of this particular workforce and revealed changes that the employer needed to make in its policies and procedures:

1. *Thorough investigation of an applicant's prior work history and references. These can give clues that an employee may have a possible personality disorder that can provoke others or lead to future false claims against*

an employer. Had the company known of the provocative woman's past work history, they would not have hired her.

2. Active monitoring of the work environment when a new minority (women, ethnic group) is hired. Management needs to evaluate the overall adjustment of the existing workforce and, if necessary, provide training that will permit the existing employees to accept the new group without behaving in harassing or discriminatory ways.

3. Need to use workplace psychiatric consultants that can help the company assess the reasonableness of complaints. They can also evaluate the possibility that the identified misconduct was, in fact, consciously or unconsciously welcomed by employee—a pattern that might be rooted in a biologically determined personality disorder or dysfunctional early life relationships. In some cases, the consultant can help the complainant recognize and change response patterns that might convey mixed messages to others. In other cases, referral for outside mental health treatment is warranted. Sometimes employees with personality disorders are refractory to intervention and must be terminated, if their problematic behavior does not abate.

4. Need to recognize and educate the work force about the signs of domestic abuse, which one of the women was enduring. This woman demonstrated many of the classic signs, including increased tardiness, absenteeism,

sick leave, presentation to company physician with vague somatic symptoms, and a bodily injury pattern frequently seen in victims of domestic abuse (see chapter by Randel and Kim).

In sum, the consequences of management's action or inaction can be considerable. If management takes inappropriate action or fails to act at all because of their defensiveness, they risk: costly and emotionally depleting litigation, violence in the workplace, absenteeism, over-utilization of medical resources by distressed employees who somaticize, pervasive problems with low morale and productivity, and the departure of otherwise valuable employees, requiring that the company waste resources in order to hire and train replacements.

Is there any way around the formidable obstacles posed by organizational defenses? How can companies maintain sufficient awareness of the emotional climate of the workplace, so that they can avoid incurring such costs?

One pathway involves the establishment of a clear statement of values. Such an initiative by management stands to mitigate organizational defensiveness in two ways. First, it clarifies priorities and focuses management's attention upon topics such as workplace hostility, harassment, and bullying, so that preventive and corrective policies and procedures can be designed. Second, it provides a way to partner with workers, so that problems can be identified early and addressed effectively.

But asserting values and designing policies that enforce them is not enough. Companies need to convey to employees that their statements and policies have real meaning by widely distributing the values statement to all employees, recruiting employees that support the values, providing training on harassment and other forms of violence, and welcoming input from employees about problems and solutions. Lastly, management needs

to review their overall objectives regularly, both with each other and with the workforce, in order to evaluate their effectiveness. In this way, they renew their commitment to the values and policies they have expressed, including that of maintaining an environment free of workplace hostility and violence.

GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING HOSTILITY AT WORK

As the preceding discussions have illustrated, understanding and responding to hostility in the workplace can be exceedingly complicated. What practical guidelines can assist companies in preventing and addressing this problem?

GUIDELINES

Preventing Harassment and Other Forms of Inappropriate Hostility

1. Check with legal counsel to ensure that company policies and procedures related to Title VII and ADA issues are current, concisely worded, and widely disseminated to employees.

2. Review the employment application in order to ensure that applicant's work history is fully explored. Discuss past work experience with applicant in interview.

3. Contact at least three references from three different past employers. These should be the applicant's past supervisors rather than peers. If the reference is hesitant to speak frankly, ask for an additional company

contact person who would know the person well and be able to speak more openly and candidly about the strengths and deficiencies of the applicant.

4. Ensure that there is appropriate and adequate training of executives, supervisors, and managers on sexual and other harassment and discrimination. Do not assume that higher level executives are informed about what constitutes discriminatory and harassing behavior.

5. Formulate a concise corporate values statement, disseminate throughout company, recruit employees that espouse these values, and agree to conduct themselves at work accordingly.

6. Establish a system that provides at least two mechanisms by which an employee can lodge a complaint about what they perceive to be inappropriately hostile behavior by another employee. Examples include providing an 800 telephone number, the names of a particular contact person within the company, or the name and telephone number or extension of the Human Resources manager or other high-level company officer. Ensure that those that review complaints have adequate training in evaluating and responding appropriately to complaints.

7. In any major change within company (such as a merger or acquisition or the unprecedented entrance of a new ethnic or minority group into the work force), consider enlisting the help of a psychiatric consultant in order to facilitate the merger of the two cultures. Retaining existing employees within a six to 12 month

interim probationary period is preferable to offering them unrestricted assurances of ongoing employment by the new management team.

8. Provide basic training for managers and supervisors regarding the recognition of potential signs of mental illness, substance abuse, and or domestic abuse; i.e., change in behavior and appearance in connection with a decline in performance and/ or an increase in tardiness or absenteeism. Workplace psychiatric consultants may be willing to provide in-service seminars to companies at no or minimal cost, if done locally, or for transportation and housing costs, if travel is involved. Others conduct symposia or specialized consultation for fees.

9. Watch for signs of possible somatization as an indication of domestic abuse or distress related to interpersonal problems at work (increase in tardiness, absenteeism, use of sick leave, medically-approved sick days, FMLA, disability). Rather than automatically approving an extended leave of absence or disability, request a Fitness for Duty or Independent Medical Examination. Enlist help of consultant in order to sort out whether the cause of the problem is inside or outside of the workplace.

10. Establish and disseminate to all employees procedures for responding to crises involving escalation of hostile behavior in order to prevent or respond to threats or actual violence in the workplace, including domestic abuse. There are consultants who specialize in this area.

Once Hired

1. Review corporate values and procedures with new hires. Pair new hires with buddies, established employees that can assist integrating new employee into the workplace.

2. Have an adequate probationary period. For instance, monitor monthly for six months, then every six months for a year, then annually or more frequently.

3. Examine structure of the performance evaluation process; consider ways that it can be improved.

4. Examine system of rewards for outstanding performance, loyalty, assistance to others, and long-term commitment to the company and its values. Before making changes or instituting rewards, canvass employees in order to ascertain what rewards are desirable to them.

5. If management becomes aware of a problem, or if a complaint is made, such occurrences must be examined as they arise and within the particular context in which they occur. Such an approach permits a clearer understanding of the type and scope of the problem, so that efforts can focus on possible solutions. The manager, supervisor, HR manager, or other company representative must document in detail, follow closely the established procedures to investigate, ensure appropriate action is taken, and follow up with initiator of complaint in order to see if solution has been effective.

6. *If the nature of the problem is complicated, or if the problem continues or escalates, obtain help from consultant.*

7. *Supervise all EAP referrals for outside therapy and/or psychiatric care.*

If the employee initiates litigation

1. *Obtain assistance from psychiatric forensic consultant, if emotional harm damages are claimed.*

2. *Obtain assistance from psychiatric consultant to the workplace in order to address litigation-related emotions of other employees.*

CONCLUSIONS

The 21st century workplace poses appreciable risks that companies can manage only by establishing well-structured policies and procedures that support company values. When special expertise is needed, consultants can intervene, manage, educate, or evaluate. Careful attention to the guidelines presented here can help to minimize risks and maximize employee productivity, job satisfaction, and overall safety. It is important that companies realize that workplace hostility can involve competing responsibilities and complex psychological issues that sometimes may seem impossible to untangle. For this reason, it is useful for companies to establish alliances with mental health practitioners, who can help them to navigate through such treacherous waters. When problems arise, consultants can help companies to become aware of and to overcome their own

reluctance to recognize and respond effectively to complaints of inappropriate workplace hostility, aggression, and threats. Consultants can evaluate problems, interview complainants and offenders for reasonableness and the presence of any mental disorder, and determine risk, if any, of suicide, homicide, assault, or domestic abuse. They also can look for possible dysfunctional personality styles that may be disrupting an otherwise stable atmosphere, contributing to a pervasive sense of hostility, anxiety, and fear in the workplace. They can help to determine whether problematical employees are likely to be amenable or refractory to change, identify suggest ways in which the company can address conflict between employees, improve communication between employees and their managers, and defuse potentially volatile situations. Lastly, before problems arise, consultants can help a company review its overall values statement and examine ways in which the company can address more effectively the problems of workplace hostility, harassment, bullying, and other form of inappropriate aggression, so that future problems, ranging from ongoing conflict, to litigation, to possible violence, can be prevented.

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Figure 1:   *THE HOSTILITY BEHAVIORAL SPECTRUM*

Less severe	*More severe*	*Most severe*
(verbal aggression)	(physical or sexual assault)	(fatal assault)
(mild behavioral aggression or avoidance)	(employee sabotage of company)	

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Verbal Harassment	Threats	Physical Assault / Stalking	Homicide/Terrorism
Sexual Harassment		Domestic Violence(non-fatal) / Rape	
Intimidation		Employee Sabotage	
Shunning			
Bullying			