

MOBBING IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract: Presently mobbing is highly debated in the scientific community and it represents one of the most powerful stress sources in the work environment. Mobbing refers to hostile actions, aggressiveness (verbal, physical, sexual), professional discrediting, despise and isolation. Relationships within the work environment can easily degenerate into mobbing, which may have various causes such as faulty leadership, individual characteristics of the employees that could turn them into victims. In this study we will define the phenomenon, type of actions which can be considered ‘mobbing’, causes and effects, as well as the advantages of an early detection of the said phenomenon.

Key-words: mobbing, organization, bullying, aggressiveness

The issue of workplace bullying has received considerable attention in recent times in both the academic literature and in the print and electronic media. The stereotypical bullying scenario can be described as the “bully boss” model, where those in more senior positions tend to bully the staff they supervise. By way of contrast, this paper presents the findings of a three year exemplarian action research study into the lesser known phenomenon of workplace mobbing. Consistent with grounded theory methods, the findings are discussed in the context of emergent propositions in relation to the broader social, cultural, and organisational factors that can perpetuate workplace mobbing in the public sector (Ramsay and Barker, 2008).

Moral harassment is currently the core of numerous debates in the world of enterprises. It obviously represents one of the toughest stress causes at the workplace, but fortunately not the most frequent one.

Studies on workplace harassment can be classified in three categories function of the problems tackled. Most of the research is trying to emphasize the factors involved in moral harassment: the profile of the harasser, the profile of the harassed, and the organizational context which favor the emergence of harassment behavior. The findings of these studies have proved difficult to interpret with respect to the number of the results. In spite of this hindrance, it seems that we are gradually reaching a first conclusion in what regards the dominant discourses: there is no specific psychological profile of the harasser or the harassed (INRS, 2013). Elements of the context would thus be the most important in understanding the appearance of the harassment behavior. Some of these might be recurrent: a change in work organization (which sometimes means a change of roles for each employer), a radical change in the type of management, etc. A question arises from the very beginning in this work direction: what is the red line between the workplace stress and harassment situations? The debate is still open. The second direction of this investigation refers to the consequences of harassment upon the victim. There are countless data referring to this situation and they reveal that harassment complaints are often associated with symptoms such as anxiety, depression, adaptation disorders, etc. The third work direction has never enjoyed too much interest, although it is equally important: it is about the medium range repercussions of moral harassment on a professional level. In other words, what happens with the victims of harassment when the consequences are rather harsh, so that the respective persons eventually require psychological assistance?

The *mobbing* phenomenon is a form of psychological harassment at workplace coming from colleagues or bosses through repeated aggressive actions. The person is humiliated, stigmatized, marginalized.

The tactics used in psychological harassment include the intentional isolation of the victim, a radical increase or decrease of the amount of work, refusal of a deserved promotion. There can also appear attack to a person’s dignity (verbal and physical violence, insults, etc.).

Mobbing is a negative speech act against a person with the deliberate intention of harming the respective person, be it conscious or not (Légeron, 2001/2003, 87); an analogy with delinquent-victim rapport is obvious, and it can take the form of teasing, humiliation through offences, gossip or isolation, even physical threat.

Particularly during periods of changes – for instance reorganization of departments or firm mergers – the roles and positions in departments are changed. Modifications of characteristics of the work organization, duties and team leaders or even the firm might trigger the change or reorganization of the terms and opportunities for promotion or even survival – a fertile ground for *mobbing*. *Mobbing* may manifest in various manners.

1. Factors leading to *mobbing*

There are four factors grouped in four large categories: individual (they apply both to the aggressor and victim, they involve specific behavior linked to workplace, changes in management), situational (insecure workplace, changes in management), organizational (restructuring, environment and organizational culture) and societal (economic changes, unemployment rate, migration).

Mobbing may be vertical, when it is exercised by a higher ranked employee onto another and horizontal, when colleagues are aggressive with another colleague.

Mobbing can also be strategic, when the organization or the management plan actions meant to make the employee turn in his resignation, or emotional mobbing, caused by competition, envy, resentments.

In A.G. Paolillo et alii research (2006) an interesting phenomenon linked to harassment was observed. In short, several kinds of harassment were identified:

- Institutional: which is related to the nature of work force managing strategy;
- Professional: organized against employees in order to avoid the legal methods of firing;
- Individual: only with the purpose of destroying the other in order to impose one’s own power.

But the authors found out that this classification is not practical enough, since most of the times various causes overlap, thus it becomes very difficult to isolate one. Nevertheless, the institutional and professional causes seem to become more dominant in the specialists’ diagnoses (enterprise doctors, work inspectors, etc.), diminishing the occurrence of individual causes. The conclusion of the authors is that it is not the real causes that evolved, but there is a difference in specialists’ diagnoses. They tend to give more and more importance to organizational factors, which might

represent a sign of regression in implicit and scientific theories of exclusively psychological analyses (a long time the perversity of the harasser was the main explanation).

An identification of the mobbing was based on a list of inappropriate workplace relations according to a study of The Quality of Life Research Institute. 25.7 of the people participating in the study declared that a colleague was hurt, offended by other colleagues or bosses, but when it came to their own person only 7.4 percent declared they were offended. 24.7 persons said that a colleague was criticized and 19.5 percent considered that a colleague chose to be the odd one out and not to integrate in the team.

According to P. Légeron (2001/2003), the reasons for an individual to harass a victim are multiple and overlapped:

- The refusal of atypicality in relation with a group with regard to the way of working and particularly the way of being (class, age, social class, sexual orientation, success, etc.);
- Rivalry, envy, jealousy (referring to diplomas, private life, hierarchical relationships);
- Fear, which makes the harasser draw up a defense system and a strategy to destroy if he feels threatened.

Moral harassment takes place in several stages (according to Légeron, 2001/2003, 89):

- First stage: choosing the age (by certain criteria);
- Second stage: their conditioning (the victim must “fall”);
- The third stage: their destabilization (the victim won’t understand what is going on; the behavior of the harasser...)

H. Laymann (1996) differentiates the dimensions of mobbing as follows:

Threatening the social status – it can be expressed through gossip, intrigues, mocking, voice or behavior imitation, or overpassing the intimate space;

Threatening social relations – isolation and ignoring are the main factors in this category;

Threatening the possibilities to communicate – permanent criticism, interruptions, continuous phone calls, threats and corrections are examples for this domain; serious forms of this aggression are represented by humiliations and rebuking on the part of from others;

Threatening the professional and personal quality life – allotting meaningless, humiliating, offensive tasks (or tasks that are too demanding for a person’s ability); these are clues for mobbing in this category;

Threatening health – this dimension is the worst in mobbing hierarchy. For instance, exercising physical force or sexual harassment is expressed through threats to the physical capacity, and psychic prejudices may be brought by threatening the workplace, car or home.

As instruments of manipulation people through ordinary means, mobbing may drive colleagues up to the point they could be fired.

In their landmark work, *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the Workplace*, Davenport, Schwartz, and Elliott describe the target of mob workplace bullying as being “driven beyond endurance”. As traumatic as it is to bullied by a particular bully in the workplace being mob bullied is by far the most devastating form of bullying that can be inflicted upon a targeted employee.

Victims of mob bullying at work are numbered in the millions. Individual targets are isolated and made to feel, by their bullies,

It is important to understand that *mobbing* is not: teasing at workplace, motivating the less successful employees and a singular conflict at work.

Kenneth Westhues (2006) presents 16 indicators systematically to two different mobbing cases, to illustrate variations on common themes:

1. By standard criteria of job performance, the target is at least average, probably above average.
2. Rumors and gossip circulate about the target’s misdeeds: “Did you hear what she did last week?”
3. The target is not invited to meetings or voted onto committees, is excluded or excludes self.
4. Collective focus on a critical incident that “shows what kind of man he really is.”
5. Shared conviction that the target needs some kind of formal punishment, “to be taught a lesson.”
6. Unusual timing of the decision to punish, e. g., apart from the annual performance review.
7. Emotion-laden, defamatory rhetoric about the target in oral and written communications.
8. Formal expressions of collective negative sentiment toward the target, e. g. a vote of censure, signatures on a petition, meeting to discuss what to do about the target.
9. High value on secrecy, confidentiality, and collegial solidarity among the mobbers.
10. Loss of diversity of argument, so that it becomes dangerous to “speak up for” or defend the target.
11. The adding up of the target’s real or imagined venial sins to make a mortal sin that cries for action.
12. The target is seen as personally abhorrent, with no redeeming qualities; stigmatizing, exclusionary labels are applied.
13. Disregard of established procedures, as mobbers take matters into their own hands.
14. Resistance to independent, outside review of sanctions imposed on the target.
15. Outraged response to any appeals for outside help the target may make.
16. Mobbers’ fear of violence from target, target’s fear of violence from mobbers, or both.

Dr. Heinz Leymann identified 45 mobbing behaviors and classified into five different categories:

- Impact on self-expression and communication;
- Attacks on the target’s social relations and interactions at work;
- Attacks on the quality of the target’s profession and life situations;
- Attacks on the target’s reputation;
- Direct attacks on the target’s health.

2. Victims of moral harassment

Women are more exposed than men to sexual harassment, which is applicable for moral harassment as well. An inquiry involving 20.000 employees in fifteen European countries shows the fact that 8 percent of men and 10 percent of women have already been victims of moral harassment in the workplace (according to Institut National de Recherche et de Sécurité, 2003). One of the causes consists in male dominance, both symbolic and numerical, in most professional sectors. On a more general level, members of minority groups would be clearly more exposed to harassment than those belonging to dominant groups. Despite all this, women do not represent a minority within all activity sectors.

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