New and Noteworthy

Workplace Bullying: A Silent Epidemic

Jennifer A. Bartlett

Bullying and cyber-bullying (online bullying) are all too often in the news these days, particularly in schools. Being made fun of, threatened with physical violence, excluded from activities on purpose, hurtful information spread among classmates – the frequency and severity of bullying behavior has an enormous impact on children's emotional and physical well-being. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, one in four school children from ages 12 to 18 report being the victims of bullying or cyber-bullying.[1]

Less prevalent is news about bullying of adults in their places of work, but some statistics are comparable. A 2014 Workplace Bullying Institute reports that 27% of survey respondents are currently experiencing or have experienced abusive conduct at work.[2] Constant criticism, yelling, exclusion from meetings and office events, overwork, gossip, and even sabotage of projects can indicate bullying. Further, bullying differs from workplace rudeness and incivility in its intention and degree. Bonnie A. Osif offers a basic definition: "Workplace bullying is behavior that threatens, intimidates, humiliates, or isolates people at work, or undermines their reputation or job performance."[3] Workplace mobbing refers to similar behaviors perpetrated by a group of people.

As with other forms of harassment, victims of bullying and mobbing may be reluctant to report incidents for fear of retribution, ridicule, or job loss, leading some researchers to call it a "silent epidemic."[4] As library supervisors, how can we be aware of workplace bullying, its effect on our employees, and ways to address and prevent it? Do we even know how to recognize it?

The literature on workplace bullying in library settings is not extensive. An excellent recent quantitative study about workplace incivility and bullying in academic library settings comes from Shin Freedman and Dawn Vreven, writing in the November 2016 *College & Research Libraries*.[5] In addition to examining the relative scarcity of LIS studies on workplace bullying,[6] the authors identify factors identified with this problem and offer suggestions for addressing it. They classify behaviors using three measures: Person-Related (humiliation, exclusion, criticism, practical jokes, etc.), Work-Related (withholding of information, excessive monitoring of work, overwork, etc.), and Physically Intimidating (shouting, invasion of personal space, threats of violence, etc.). According to their study, factors strongly correlated with bullying include ethnicity, length of service in the library, and administrative status. Overall, 24 percent of survey respondents indicated that bullying occurs on a daily and weekly basis, and ethnic minority librarians, in particular Asians and Black Americans, experience more incidents. The key to addressing workplace bullying, Freedman and Vreven conclude, is for

library administrators to recognize and acknowledge the problem and conduct organizational climate surveys to gauge the tone of their work environment, as well as consider establishing workplace anti-bullying policies.

Vanessa Hale and Jean Haertl, writing in *Young Adult Library Services*, offer a brief and helpful primer for managers unfamiliar with their responsibilities in addressing bullying.[7] What are the signs of bullying? How do you manage bullying situations? Haertl, the CEO of the consulting firm Safety and Respect at Work, LLC, emphasizes that bullying goes farther than personality conflicts: bullies target one or more individuals consciously and their behaviors are minimized in the presence of supervisors; they aim to humiliate and gain control; they are known as bullies to others in the workplace; their targets are afraid and unwilling to report their behaviors; and they deny, minimize and blame their targets. Given the fear and often poor communication regarding bullying behavior, it is vital to have a clear policy for harassment so that the behavior stops. The article suggests policies and procedures to educate managers and employees about workplace bullying and offers suggestions to implement policies if none are already in place.

Northwestern University's Marianne Ryan has written an excellent overview of workplace bullying in the Summer 2016 *Reference & User Services Quarterly*.[8] Although not specifically tailored to a library setting, "Besting the Workplace Bully" outlines key facets of the problem, including physical abuse, emotional antagonism, and cyber bullying. This last is particularly interesting from a library environment standpoint, as "bullies love to control information" (268). Workplace cyber bullies are prone to manipulating e-mail messages, message threads, and addressees in such a way to render information flows incomplete and confusing. They may choose to abandon e-mail completely in an attempt to "divide and conquer" by saying different things to different people in person. And of course, this sort of behavior can go on well after standard work hours, since many people check their e-mail from home and while on vacations.

The April 2016 pages of this journal saw the publication of Steve Staninger's article "The Psychodynamics of Bullying in Libraries."[9] Of particular interest to library managers is Staninger's focus on the role of organizational structure as an environment ripe for this behavior, and how supervisors themselves can exhibit bullying, even unintentionally. Although the academic library setting is the focus, the same could be said for large public libraries as well:

> "In academic libraries, librarians have hierarchical ranks, and there is usually an adjacent group of library staff with their own ranking structure. This structure lends itself to bullying because it creates a superior-subordinate dynamic wherein everyone knows where they stand in the hierarchy. Superiors may then be encouraged to bully in the name of increasing productivity or and/or meeting goals, and subordinates grow to expect it." (1)

Staninger echoes Freedman and Vreven in the recommendation that supervisors carefully examine not only their employees, but also themselves for bullying behaviors. Further,

although action may be difficult if there is no documentation, administrators must attempt to identify and rectify the behaviors before they become embedded in the institutional culture.

It is well established that workplace bullying can have an adverse effect on individual employees, resulting in health problems, loss of efficiency, and increased time off work. Michael A. Crumpton examines the very real implications that these behaviors may have on library finances in his 2014 article for *The Bottom Line*.[10] Although limited information is to be had regarding library finances in particular, Crumpton cites a related Association of College and University Housing Officers conference presentation estimating that the costs associated with bullying at a minimum of $250 million for costs including litigation, health expense retraining and lower productivity (18-19).

As with so many other stereotypes involving libraries, the image of the library as a tranquil, harmonious work setting characterized by cooperation, generosity and intellectual inquiry is not always realistic. Libraries are as prone to poor employee behavior as any other setting, and library managers and administrators must be aware of the very real threats that workplace bullying and mobbing pose to the well-being of their employees, their patrons, and their institutions.

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[1] U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), 2013. Available at http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2015/2015056.pdf.

[2] Namie, Gary. 2014. WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey. Workplace Bullying Institute. Available at http://workplacebullying.org/multi/pdf/WBI-2014-US-Survey.pdf. The WBI website at http://www.workplacebullying.org offers resources on bullying and mobbing including links to research, articles, tutorials, conferences, management strategies, and more.

[3] Osif, Bonnie A. "Workplace Bullying." *Library Leadership & Management* 24, no. 4 (September 2010): 206-212. In this piece, Osif offers an excellent review of relevant books and articles from a general perspective, including: Teresa A. Daniel, *Stop Bullying at Work: Strategies and Tools for HR and Legal Professionals* (Society for Human Resource Management, 2009); Charlotte Raynor, Helge Hoel, and Cary L. Cooper, *Workplace Bullying: What We Know, Who is to Blame, and What We Can Do?* (Taylor & Francis, 2002); Pauline Rennie Peyton, *Dignity at Work: Eliminate Bullying and Create a Positive Working Environment*

(Hove, U.K.: Brunner-Routledge, 2003); Kenneth Westhues, *Winning, Losing, Moving On: How Professionals Deal with Workplace Harassment and Mobbing* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2005); and Darla J. Twale and Barbara M. DeLuca, *Faculty Incivility: The Rise of the Academic Bully Culture and What to Do About It* (Jossey-Bass, 2008).

[4] McAvoy, Brian, and Murtagh, John. "Workplace Bullying: The Silent Epidemic." *BMJ* 326, no. 7393 (2003): 776-777.

[5] Freedman, Shin, and Dawn L. Vreven. "Workplace Incivility and Bullying in the Library." *College and Research Libraries* 77, no. 6 (2016): 727-748. Available at http://crl.acrl.org/content/77/6/727.full.pdf+html.

[6] Freedman and Vreven include an excellent literature review in their study; of particular interest is their summary of Thomas E. Hecker's 2007 *Journal of Academic Librarianship* article, "Workplace Mobbing: A Discussion for Librarians (vol. 33, no. 4, pp. 439-45). Another article not mentioned in the review is "The Internal World of Libraries and the Challenge of Civility," by Gina D. Matesic, in World Conference on Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning for the Library and Information Professions, Jana Varlejs, and Graham Walton. 2009. *Strategies for Regenerating the Library and Information Professions: Eighth World Conference on Continuing Professional Development and Workplace Learning for the Library and Information Professions, 18-20 August 2009, Bologna, Italy*. München: Saur. Available at https://www.degruyter.com/downloadpdf/books/9783598441776/9783598441776.3.158/9783598441776.3.158.xml.

[7] Hale, Vanessa, and Jean Haertl. "Surviving a Bully at Work." *Young Adult Library Services* 14, no. 3 (2016): 36-38. The Safety and Respect at Work, LLC site may be found at http://www.makeworksafe.com.

[8] Ryan, Marianne. "Besting the Workplace Bully." *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 55, no. 4 (Summer 2016): 267-269.

[9] Staninger, Steven. "The Psychodynamics of Bullying in Libraries." *Library Leadership & Management* 30, no. 4 (2016): 1-5.

[10] Crumpton, Michael A. "The Costs of Having a Bully in the Library," *The Bottom Line: Managing Library Finances*, 27, no. 1 (2014): 17-21.