

## From Schoolyard Bully to Workplace Harasser

By Stan Kimer

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Expert Forum



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**SUMMARY AND DEFINITION:** One topic which many more human resource professionals and managers are talking about is workplace harassment and bullying. Frequently, just like in school, those often the target of workplace bullying are ethnic and cultural minorities who may not “fit in” with the majority crowd.

So what exactly is “bullying?” Webster’s defines bullying or a bully as someone who uses browbeating language or behavior to be habitually cruel to someone weaker than himself. This can particularly apply to someone who has physical strength, power by position, or as a member of a majority group, uses this strength to belittle and harm a person. Instead of using their strength to bully others, people should have a positive impact by using their strengths to assist and mentor others.

There are US federal laws against sexual harassment in the workplace, but often bullying can be much less defined and much more insidious than sexual harassment. While there may not be any specific laws against workplace bullying, more and more companies are implementing bullying policy since bullying can have a huge negative impact on productivity, employee retention, and ultimately sales and profitability.

But what causes bullying and where does it start? Most often in school! Therefore companies need to be engaged and should support school anti-bullying efforts in their communities. Just like companies assist with educational programs to help build the pipeline of future talent, companies need to squash the pipeline of future workplace bullies.

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### TWO FICTIONAL SCENARIOS TO ILLUSTRATE THE POINT – BECKY THE SLUT AND CHARLES THE SISSY.

Scenario 1: Becky always seemed to grow fast for her age, and her breasts started to develop earlier than the rest of the girls in her class. One day, the junior high bully James gave her a little shove in the hallway and remarked, “Look at Becky and her tits! She’s a slut and a whore!” while a few of the other boys with James laughed. Becky went to her school’s guidance counselor in tears and told Mr. Williams what had happened. Mr. Williams simply told her, “Boys will be boys. Just ignore him. By the way, you don’t want everyone in the school to think you are a tattletale, do you?”

Fast forward 15 years. Becky is an attractive woman with a degree in accounting working in the Finance department of a large company. She is working late one evening when her boss calls her into his office and shuts the door. He stands very close to her, actually lightly touches her breasts and tells Becky that he really likes her and wants to give her a very good review at the end of the year. He makes it quite obvious what he is expecting from her in order for her to get that “good review.” Becky decides to not report this harassment, she always remembers what her junior high guidance counselor told her and she certainly does not want to get the reputation as the office squealer. She now dreads coming to work every day and her productivity has declined. In fact, it seems that in her office, a few other attractive women in the accounting department are distracted from their work, and the Human Resources department and the senior leadership are puzzled at the declining productivity and morale among the staff. They don’t have a clue.

Scenario 2: Charles was always a small for his age and not very good at athletics, but he excelled in music. The band director actually asked Charles to play a trumpet solo at the next class assembly at his junior high. The next day, a small group of bullies shoved Charles against the locker and the ringleader Robert laughed and said, “This is the little faggot that stays in his room all weekend playing his little trumpet and with dolls.” Charles did not know what to do, he was quite conflicted and did not want to be a “sissy tattletale.” But he went to the guidance counselor Mrs. Thomas and reported what happened. She told Charles that he did the right thing and was very brave to report it, since bullying is something that can damage a lot of people and has to be stopped. Later Mrs. Thomas met with Robert and his parents, enrolled Robert in an excellent three week anti-bullying class which included Robert addressing his own insecurity issues, and told his parents that if Robert was ever involved in another bullying incident, he would be expelled from the school permanently. Not wanting to have to fork out \$15,000 per year to place Robert in a private school, his parents were

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quite stern with him when they got home.

Fast forward 15 years. Charles and Robert now work at the same company. When Charles' boss mocked him for not participating on the office's softball team, and asked him if he was a girl or a man, Charles reported it to the HR department. An investigation found that this manager had bullied a few other male employees over not participating on office sports teams, and was hence fired. Robert (the former junior high bully) was promoted to be the new manager and he worked hard to make everyone on the team feel welcomed and valued for their individual contributions within the department. Productivity increased and at one department meeting, Robert even shared about the time he was once a bully in junior high, but how he went to special class where he learned that treating everyone with respect leads to better relationships and a better life for everyone. **BULLIES IN POSITIONS OF POWER.** Unfortunately, bullies hold leadership positions in corporate America and government, and even some top international leaders are bullies. For example, look at President Putin of Russia and his arcane position about LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) people.

But what is the underlying psychology behind any leader seeking to demonize or bully any group? My belief is that any leader within a corporation or of a major world power is in a pitiful state of mind if the only way he can build support for his regime is by demonizing and setting up the populace against a minority group. That so often is the psychology behind bullying – that a person feels so poorly about their own self esteem that they need to promote themselves by putting another group down.

Instead, any entity seeking to grow and improve should be practicing the psychology of diversity and inclusion instead of bullying and exclusion. When every member of a diverse group is valued for their uniqueness and given the opportunity to grow, flourish and contribute, the whole group is lifted up. At the opposite end, when any group is demonized, they feel excluded, may then move into destructive behavior and become an oppressed drain on the entity instead of a contributor.

**THE MACROECONOMIC OF GAY BULLYING AND OUR RESPONSE:** For example, what can be the national impact of a nation that bullies its LGBT citizens? What is the wider impact? Beside the several teens who have ended their lives which we have read about over the past few years, there are also thousands of other children who are bullied and as a result participate in destructive behavior. These can include dropping out of school, alcohol and drug abuse, and running away from home. This leads to the downward spiral of ceasing educational and vocational development. We then as a country foster a set of second-class

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citizens who have dropped out of society and are not encouraged to grow with their skills to become contributing members of our economy. This will eventually develop into a drain on our country's social services and health programs.

I believe every political voice on both sides of the aisle as well as business, education and community leaders can all unite on this issue to not only save lives, but to also contribute positively to the growth and education of every citizen. To complete in the growing global economy, we need everyone in our country to contribute to their full capabilities. It is good for every person as well as our country for each person to pursue education and vocational development with passion, not having to fear bullying in these same places they attend for this education. Every leader needs to step up to strongly advocate for strong laws as well as in depth education to stop all bullying of all people.

### SOME RESOURCES:

- [Anti-bullying resources](#) from GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network)
- [“Bully Free – It Starts with Me”](#) resources from the US National Education Association.
- Check out a [new cool book](#) for children on anti-bullying by leading diversity, inclusion and anti-bullying consultants AK Consulting.
- Educational Resources from the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#).
- A recent comprehensive article on workplace bullying titled [“Fighting Back Against Workplace Bullies”](#) by Alison Diana on the “Internet Evolution” website.

CLOSING THOUGHT: Bullying is bad for our schools, our country, our economy and our business and together we need to be vigilant to continually battle against it. Let us use our talents and strengths to build up each other and our world!