Avoid the perception of bullying: 8 do's and don'ts

Increased sensitivity to bullying in America may have started in the classroom, but it has quickly moved to the workplace.

The growth of anti-bullying laws, policies and public campaigns are making employees ultra-aware to potential bullying situations at work.

For supervisors, that means it’s more important than ever to be alert to how your words and actions are being delivered … and received. Managers should know how to be authoritative and provide constructive criticism without giving employees an excuse to claim bullying.

Is bullying illegal?

Federal discrimination laws don’t specifically prohibit bullying. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), “The laws enforced by EEOC do not prohibit simple teasing, offhand comments or isolated incidents that are not very serious.”

Nevertheless, employees who feel they are victims of bullying due to their race, sex, religion or age are able to file discrimination lawsuits under the federal Civil Rights Act.

Plus, employees have a legitimate legal claim if they can prove poor treatment by a manager was the result of retaliation for some earlier “protected” activity (taking leave, filing a complaint, etc.). Or they can bring bullying claims under the banner of “intentional infliction of emotional distress.”

In addition, legislation has been introduced in more than half of the states to make bullying at work illegal.

Don’t become a target

More than a third (37%) of U.S. workers report they’ve been bullied at work and, they say, the majority (72%) of bullies are bosses, says a survey by Zogby International.

Studies show bullying can affect the victim’s physical and emotional health. Employers, in turn, may suffer the
cost of lost productivity, decreased attendance and increased medical claims and legal risks.

**Advice:** When managers treat employees professionally and with courtesy, bullying will never become an issue. Here are eight do’s and don’ts:

1. **Do know the definition of bullying:** A form of abuse that includes verbal humiliation, persistent and unwarranted criticism, and intentional social isolation and exclusion.

2. **Do stay focused on job performance.** Avoid negative comments that are unrelated to the task at hand, such as remarks about the employee’s personal life, appearance or actions. *Example:* Comments like “any dummy could do this job” could be construed as bullying.

3. **Don’t single out an employee for discipline,** such as taking away work responsibilities without a reason or explanation or setting tougher deadlines that make success more difficult.

4. **Don’t respond to employee mistakes with an accusing tone and loud voice.** Instead, describe the problem and suggest ways to prevent it. A manager’s job is to teach, not scold.

5. **Do be cautious of “jokes.”** Don’t persistently tease employees or make them the target of your jokes. They likely won’t see the humor.

6. **Do keep reprimands private.** There’s no need to publicly berate or disparage the worker in front of co-workers.

7. **Don’t trade in gossip and rumors.** As a manager, you must keep above the fray and not gossip or spread rumors.

8. **Finally, don’t be hypersensitive.** It’s your job to offer constructive criticism when employees’ performance or behavior strays. That’s not bullying. Be alert to behavior that crosses the line, but don’t be afraid to do your job.

**When you are the target: How to calm angry workers**

Sometimes, managers are on the receiving end of aggressive behavior from angry employees. Use the following “Six A’s” to deflect employee anger:

1. **Abstain from interrupting.** Let the other person have his or her say. Eventually, the employee has to take a breath, which helps you move to the second step.

2. **Agree to the extent that you can.** You don’t have to agree on who’s right and who’s wrong, but you can agree that a problem exists or at least that the person is upset. *Example:* “You sound angry about what’s happened.”

3. **Acknowledge the problem.** Even if you think the person is overreacting, it’s important to validate his or her perception. Show your empathy by saying, “I can understand why you’re upset.”

4. **Apologize to the extent that you can.** Know the difference between accepting responsibility and offering a sincere but blame-free apology. *Example:* “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

5. **Act within your authority.** If you can solve the problem, promise that you will ... and follow through. In other situations, you may not have the authority. But you can offer your understanding and forward the complaint (or direct the employee) to the appropriate person.
6. **Assess the outcome.** Take time later to reflect on the confrontation. What did you say or do that helped the situation or made matters worse? Reflecting on your words and outcomes will help you be more effective next time.