Workplace bullying and the role of organizational practices

Olin N, Vartia M, Pahkin K

Bullying at work is a complicated process with multiform causes, and a serious work-related health risk. Studies have shown that various features of psychosocial work environment, for example role conflicts and role ambiguity, high workload and high control over one's work, lack of participation in decision making, substantial changes at work, and destructive leadership style may trigger bullying at a workplace. It has been suggested that the role of organizational culture is important for understanding the onset and escalating process of bullying. Organizational culture may include features that enable, or even reward bullying. On the other hand, organizational practices may include methods and joint rules that prevent and inhibit the emergence and escalation of a bullying process. Research on the associations between the features of organizational culture and workplace bullying has so far, however, been scarce.

The aim of the "Harmonious Work Community - towards zero tolerance of workplace bullying" -research and intervention project (2014-2016) is to support the development of an organizational culture which does not accept inappropriate behavior and bullying at work. The study part explores the connections between the operational culture of an organization and organizational practices, and the onset of inappropriate behavior and bullying at work, as well as intervening in situations where bullying has taken place. The multilevel intervention part is carried out in three levels: 1) management and HR, 2) supervisors and 3) work groups. Pre- and follow-up surveys are carried out to measure the effectiveness of the interventions. Six organization from different occupational sectors participate to the project.

Pre-intervention survey was conducted in spring 2015 among the whole personnel of the participating organizations. Of the 1501 respondents 84% were women. In all, 4% experienced themselves as targets of bullying, and 35% reported that they had observed inappropriate behavior in their workplace.

Observed bullying was found to be is less common in organizations were the distribution of working tasks is perceived as equal, employees appreciate one another, opinions of employees are listened to, decisions made by the nearest supervisor are consistent.

Half of both supervisors and employees reported that experience that bullying at work is a sensitive subject and a subject that is difficult to talk about is the most common factor which hinders interference in bullying. Both supervisors (42%) and employees (49%) also suggested that haste is a significant hinder. Of the employees 52% reported that "it is not my business" as a prevalent mindset hinders interference in bullying. Often also those experiencing bullying do not want to discuss the situation.

The study showed also that intervening in observed bullying is not easy. Of the respondents, 63% reported that in case of observing inappropriate behavior they try to stay as outsiders. Reasons for this were most often ignorance on how to act, and thoughts that those involved should handle the situation by themselves.

The results of the survey will be presented and discussed.