

Workplace Mobbing

Cindy Hunter

“The traumatic psychological effects of ‘workplace mobbing’ are strikingly similar to those suffered as a result of domestic and/or sexual abuse.”

Such is the observation of Mr. Richard Schwindt, a social worker in Kingston, Ontario, who wrote *Emotional Recovery From Workplace Mobbing*. The book was first published in 2013 and its subject matter remains pertinent. Richard has counselled hundreds of workplace mobbing victims.

I recently interviewed Richard and asked him to explain the difference between ‘bullying’ and ‘workplace mobbing’ (a term created in the 1980s by research pioneer Dr. Heinz Leymann).

“Bullies are common,” said Richard, “but the single bully paradigm is so limiting. When it comes to workplace mobbing, the scope is much broader.”

Specifically, in a workplace mobbing scenario, workers collectively scapegoat a peer by means of relentless goading in addition to snubbing, ostracization and the circulation of demeaning lies. Richard tells me the ratio of male to female perpetrators is 50:50; in terms of victims, women outnumber men.

Richard gave the following example of a prototypical goading technique: You nine-to-five it in an office where everyone leaves personal items out on their desk. On your desk is roughly the same amount of pictures, pens and other personal items as anyone else – give or take a paper clip here or there. Be that as it may,

you, and you alone are issued a formal reprimand for keeping too much stuff on your desk. That evening, you talk to your significant other about what happened. Your nearest and dearest says, “That’s just petty office crap. Forget it.” But the next day, and each and every day thereafter, you’re chastized regarding some brand new, trifling issue that makes no sense. And on and on it goes, ad infinitum.

Richard went on, “This is something different than ‘just petty office crap.’ And you’re not dealing with a boss who’s tough but fair; you’re dealing with a boss who’s a bully. Your composure is being tested on a daily basis.”

In a workplace culture that’s conducive to mobbing, it can be initiated by one, or a few individuals of ill intent who are usually in positions of power. Richard conveyed that these instigators view the workplace as a battlefield – and they strategize accordingly.

In the early stages of mobbing, they groom shills to help with the dirty work. Said shills are made privy – on an individual basis – to ‘hush-hush’ info about a ‘problem’ with the targeted individual and are easily recruited. Why easily? Because, Richard says, much of our behaviour is driven unconsciously by an aspect of human nature known as ‘persecutory unconscious of groups’ (a term borrowed from Kenneth Westhues, Professor of Sociology at the University of Waterloo). Mobbing cultivates a sense of belonging among participants. “Hey, everyone else is doing it!”

The slick alpha welds the loyalty of the draftees in place by bestowing on them exquisite affection and lavish perks. Before you know it, there is a veritable boatload of warriors waging battle against a single person. (It's US against HER!) Even one-time close friends become convinced the target is a threat.

One of Richard's clients was rumored to have stood in front of his workplace and threatened to get a gun and shoot everybody. It was an outright lie but readily believed by the clique of mobbers.

As per Richard, "The more outrageous the lie, the more it will be believed, as we tend to believe what we least expect to hear."

In another mobbing incident, a false rumor was spread that the target was having an affair with a co-worker – a co-worker who had refused to participate in his persecution. (Not kowtowing to the ethos of the herd can be dangerous.)

Over the predictable course of the mobbing process, more and more co-workers avoid the target. Fewer and fewer workmates pause for small talk with her; there is less and less eye contact made with her in the hallway.

Nefarious shenanigans abound – such as withholding information essential to her job performance and skewing her productivity stats. (Forty-five mobbing behaviours were identified by Heinz Leymann; they don't all occur in every case.)

A target can find herself trapped in a toxic work environment such as this for years. If someone is earning good money and has benefits, it can be hard to walk away, but her well-being suffers. "If you talk to lots of people who have been mobbed," attested Richard, "they have suffered extreme stress and something has appeared to impair their physical health."

(Think cardiovascular, gastrointestinal or musculoskeletal ailments for starters.)

The preyed upon party becomes withdrawn, unable to sleep and, naturally, she feels an impulse to fight back. If she loses her cool and lashes out, that's the juncture Richard calls "high-five time for the mob. 'See, she's mentally unstable. She doesn't play well with others. *She's* the bully.'" Based on Richard's experience with clients, many Human Resource departments will believe just that. Most targets, at some point, are accused of bullying and feel abandoned by HR and by their union.

Richard likens the workplace mobbing phenomenon to "punching an employee in the face, then writing her up for coming to work with a black eye."

A small percentage of organizations, Richard believes, are aware of the workplace mobbing phenom and are trying to deal with it, and a small percentage of HR departments are useful, but, in general, HR sees individuals rather than the underlying systemic problem, and they tend to misdiagnose. He used the analogy of doctors treating gastric distress caused by *H. pylori* – before the discovery of *H. pylori*.

"There are two questions to ask when attempting to ascertain who's really being targeted," Richard elucidated. "1) Who's hurting? 2) Who's isolated? That person is probably the targeted individual."

Who gets targeted? "It really can be anybody," Richard explained. A target can be perceived as extremely beautiful, the most intelligent, the least intelligent, the most ethical, the most diligent or from the wrong culture. She can be a prison guard, hotel maid, nurse, hair stylist, short-order cook or medical doctor. But all targets are seen by their peers as being *different*. They are deemed to not belong.

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“The system is losing many of its best people. As a manager I would be thrilled to hire the quality workers who come to me for counseling as targets,” commented Richard.

My interviewee offered up an emphatic “Yes!” when queried on whether the animosity can sprawl into a target’s non-work realm.

Picture this: You’re picking up milk at the corner mom-and-pop. In walks someone you think of as a friend – someone with whom you’ve enjoyed a pleasant rapport for years. Upon noticing you, a look of abject terror instantaneously consumes her face. If you didn’t know better, you’d think she just awoke in the night to the sight of Paul Bernardo at her bedside. Welcome to end-stage mobbing.

Richard cited a case involving anthropologist Dr. Janice Harper to illustrate “just how weird this can all get.” While a faculty member at the University of Tennessee from 2004 to 2009, she was a target of workplace mobbing. The mobbing escalated to such a degree that she was investigated by the Department of Homeland Security based on bogus claims that she had sought classified information on uranium to build a hydrogen bomb. The FBI eventually cleared her of any wrongdoing.

Surely to God, religious folk would never take part in such a sordid spectacle as workplace mobbing. Think again. Members of the clergy have been subjected to mobbing, and conversely, clergy have been known to engage in the mobbing process. Ditto for parishioners. Why? Certain churchy types can be preoccupied with a need to be perceived as playing for Team Righteous – and will compliantly hop aboard

a fanatical mobbing bandwagon as a means of public display for their noble disgust.

And there’s nothing compassionate about gossip that’s accentuated with refrains of “Poor her.” As Parkinson’s disease-afflicted actor Michael J. Fox is quoted to have said, “Pity is just another form of abuse.”

Richard has counselled clients who were debilitated to such an extent from the trauma of being mobbed that they were forced to rely on their partners to literally spoon-feed them during the initial months of recovery.

Most victims do recover. Some only partially recover. Some end up dead. Richard’s clients who “landed on their feet” have all told him they will never again work for a large organization.

They feel the health risks are just not worth it.

Renowned workplace mobbing researcher, Swiss anthropologist Dr. Noa Davenport, has estimated that 5 to 10% of the workforce will be mobbed during their working lives. That’s a lot of cruelty.

After the interview with Richard, I found myself contemplating a quote from Einstein: “Small is the number of them that see with their own eyes and feel with their own hearts.”

Indeed.

It sure would be nice to prove to ourselves that we can do better. •

Cindy Hunter is a middle-aged woman, originally from Ontario, who currently resides in Newfoundland. For most of her adult life, she has worked in secretarial type jobs and is just starting to send out her work as a writer.

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