Abuse in the Work Place
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This is one of those subjects where it is difficult to quantity what is meant by abuse, and what steps or processes can lead to work place abuse. Each person in the office space will have a different viewpoint on what constitutes abuse. While legally we can define abuse, and we can make appropriate actions and sanctions for company defined abuse, it is not always as clear-cut as a company policy or sanctions. While there will usually be tell tail signs of work place abuse, many of them will go unnoticed by the majority of people in the company. We do not want to see abuse, so we will ignore it because either it does not influence us, or we cover it over saying it is not affecting us in the longer run. Most of us will agree that work place violence is someone who walks into the organization with the means and intent to kill. Work place abuse is more subtle and can run the gamut from screaming and yelling or actively sabotaging another's career, all the way through to rumors, ostracizing of the victim, or even blogging about a person either at work or out of work. For many people this may be just a normal function of work and not appear to be abuse, but rather how things are. While for others the problems compound upon each other until the person is taking sick days and vacation time just to recover from the psychological effects of working in a place that they no longer feel welcome at.

The problem begins when that at some point or another in our careers we have worked in an environment that didn't work for us, for what ever reason. These reasons why the environment did not work should be explored so that when looking for a next job, or next move up the career ladder, we pick and choose not only the work, but the work environment that meets individual needs. Not all jobs are fun and have a healthy work environment for the individual. And sometimes bad choices are made by the job candidate because of the need for money or in some cases any place to work, so they take a job that is not in a good place for them to be emotionally. However, abusive behaviors in the world place do impact how others interrelate to each other, how they work in teams, how groups accomplish tasks, and the complete ability of the company to really carry out the day to day task of profitability and survival in the global market place.

The issue of work place abuse becomes more acute in job specifications that carry a high level of trust, such as Network, System and Information Security Administration. Work place abuse when coming from a trusted position within the company can cause extra additional difficulties if the abuser is in that position of trust. It is possible to forge or fake information within systems that would look like the person being abused was doing bad things on the networks, or going to places on the internet that are contrary to good company policy. Abusers will tend to cover up their actions by making it appear that the victim is really the one causing the problem. Moreover, they will provide reams of information to management about the error rates, or examples of logs from systems that indicate the victim is doing things that are against company policy. Managers wishing to trust people will accept the evidence "prima face" and not really question the "evidence" of violating corporate standards. Managers should be ensuring that logs, and records from systems can not be altered without a tell tale sign, however, these trusted and often highly

creative people will work out methods for doing what they intended to do. Looking for signs of abusive behavior amongst highly trusted employees, or divisions within highly trusted divisions of the company is a difficult task. Not only is there a potential for abuse, but the potential to forge or fake information within systems that short of a full forensics investigation would implicate someone who otherwise is innocent. While this may sound like an implausible scenario, Network and System administrators as well as information security professionals are driven by the same human needs as anyone else in the organization. This kind of scenario has happened in the past at companies that resulted in a false fire, opening up the company to a lawsuit against wrongful termination. Just because employees occupy a position of trust within the organization does not mean that they are necessarily all about doing nothing but good for the company and the people in the company.

Case history has shown that some of the most significant breeches to corporations have occurred because the information security or systems/network administrators have used their positions of trust to either time bomb the company systems, or otherwise used company systems for their own needs. Including capturing and selling credit card information, bringing down whole companies because they were fired, access to companies post firing and destabilizing networks or computing systems, or otherwise acting like any other disgruntled employee, only more dangerous because they know the ins and outs of the systems that they protected or maintained. Having an abusive personality in this position only adds to the complexity of management and the ramifications of work place abuse rather than minimizing them.

Different personality types in a mixture of both team and corporate hierarchy can not be fully controlled by the organization. When hiring people we see them at the interview where they are on their best behavior, and we have their resume which is what they want us to see. We can search their name and e-mail address in various search engines, we can look for their blogs and read what they write. In the case of professional people who also write we can read their papers and view points. But, as in with all cases, hiring managers and HR personnel may miss subtle issues or concerns that can be raised by going back and cross checking the data that is available. Many people leave no trail on the internet, and their former employers may say that "yes they worked for us", yet the people HR really wants to talk to, former employees, former co-workers, and others are beyond the reach of the HR department, either legally or knowledge wise. Some abusive personalities in the work force leave no trail to follow on the internet, or in police background records, but still leave behind them a trail of destruction at the place they used to work.

As defined by Kate Lorenz from CareerBuilder.com in the Article "Workplace Abuse: are you a victim" the descriptions that she gives are so generic as they could fit in with almost any work place from High Tech all the way down to flipping burgers. That being said, the generic view point alone should worry most managers about what is happening in the cubicles and offices around the company. Additionally though what she does not discuss is the psychological profile of the abuser as well as the psychological profile of

the victim. These profiles are well known and well understood by HR, Psychologists, and Social workers and in many cases management consultants.

In the book "The Batterer: A Psychological Profile" by Donald G. Dutton, Susan K. Golant the description of an abuser really revolves around their own inadequacies and personal issues as low self esteem, or the need to control or exert power over those that are deemed weaker in the food chain. The book while focused on the idea of the spouse abuser can carry through into the work force, including intimidation through threats, screaming, yelling, and the whole gamut that tie into the tension-release phase of anyone who needs to intimidate or denigrate thinking that this will control the behaviors of other people. While the act of intimidation and denigration works, many will stay in the abusive environment for various reasons that do center on the personality of the victim. While those with good self esteem will simply leave, many do not believe that they have this choice and will continue to stay in the abusive environment.

The HR group at Adelaide College defines psychological abuse as:

- Direct verbal communication such as name-calling, harsh criticism of outcomes, threats to job security, personal attack, incorrect information and ?dressing down?.
- Indirect verbal communication such as gossip, slander and innuendo relayed to the individual.
- Non-verbal communication such as disparaging looks and noises, sarcastic/harsh tone of voice, offensive gestures, ignoring, ?freezing out?, physically standing over another with the intention of intimidating, and thrusting or throwing articles towards an individual.
- Manipulation of the working environment such as withholding needed information, setting unreasonable deadlines, excluding from critical meetings, changing work schedules unfairly, failing to give due credit and retarding opportunities for promotion or higher pay. (Adelaide College, Robyn Mann (2000))

The issues here are well known, and follow repeatable processes, often starting with one person who leaves because of the abuse, then moves onto another person who leaves, keeping up with everyone who hires into the department, and then quickly leaves, or stays on praying for another target to appear. One of the tell tail signs is the revolving door of hires and people leaving the department. Other tell tail signs are the inability of the department to hire locally, as the company assumes a more negative local reputation. Having to hire people out of state because of a lack of local candidates or people willing to work for the company is a direct indication of a poor corporate reputation, often one caused by the work place and people who leave talking about the company. Other issues around the profile of both victim and abuser are a complex interaction of work place tolerance, management tolerance, victim perceptions of self and self worth, as well as the abusers perceptions of self and self worth. All of these complex interactions within the corporate team environment can impact output and interrelations between people, departments, groups, teams and the accomplishment of task. This in no way lessens the

impact of work place abuse, rather these tell tail signs should be something that management, all managers should be looking for.

While it is a psychological utopia to think that we will be able to solve all forms and cases of work force abuse, really the career builder article spells it out, leave; find someplace else that is better suited to your psychological make up unless the worker for some reason is stuck in an abusive work environment. Not all people will be comfortable leaving an abusive environment, the Stockholm syndrome, and "battered wife's" syndrome are indications that psychologically we will stick through an abusive environment, and even support it, all the while not understanding or dealing with the inherent internal contradictions that these environments cause. While leaving will solve the immediate problem for you, the work place will continue on as long as the work environment tolerates abuse. The individual who believes they are a victim should get professional help to overcome the self esteem and self worth damage that has been done. Much like any other violent crime, the victim can begin to believe that they "earned it" or "deserved it" because they let their "team mates down". This is not always the case; many times it can be as simple as the abuser needing to exercise power and control in an environment where it is very hard to be either powerful or in control.

Management on the other hand, needs to be very aware of this issue as it has been demonstrated to cause many issues such as bottom line costs, effectiveness of the work group, absenteeism, revolving door on the hiring process, and a host of other issues that directly tie into a bottom line cost to the company. This does not include the potential for lawsuits if management is perceived as culpable in helping foster and create the environment.

The ILO, International Labor Organization posted findings on incidents and direct costs to employers on costs of workplace abuse. These are 1998 numbers that have most likely risen overall since then.

"In the United States, the total costs of workplace violence to employers amounted to more than $4 billion in 1992, according to a survey conducted by the National Safe Workplace Institute. In Canada, wage-loss claims by hospital workers from acts of violence and force have increased by 88 per cent since 1985, according to the British Columbia Workers Compensation Board. In Germany, the direct cost of psychological violence in an enterprise of 1,000 workers has been calculated at US $112,000 (200,000 DM) per year, along with $56,000 of indirect costs". (ILO, 1998)

Just the numbers of articles alone in Google (11 million plus) shows that this is a subject of interest not just to the academic world, but when career builder and monster talk about work place abuse, it is more than an area of academic interest. Workplace abuse is a very real issue that often goes unnoticed by senior management, because it is a quiet offense. Usually the spots are carefully chosen to reduce the ability of people to see what is happening, or it is so subtle that very few will pick up on it except for the abuser and the victim. Or the abuse may be as simple as spreading rumors or writing about co-workers in a blog that the victim does not know about. There are many ways for the abuse to

happen, and it does not need to be overt. This is why discovering work place abuse can be very difficult for senior management. It can be even more difficult when the abuser is a senior manager, or a person with actual power within the organization, who can and will stand in the way of any investigation of abuse.

The clarion call then to management is that the company probably has clear HR policies on abuse in the work force, but that they also have to be aware of it. Grapevine feedback is a great way to find out what is happening in the work place. Management has to be able to step in and in direct cost and survival of the company or department, be able to spot the warning signs, and then have the courage to act on the information and behaviors noted. Of all the times for management to send a direct clear message, stamping out work place abuse is the best place to start because it has a well known and associated direct cost. Many companies are drug free work places with clearly defined rules that all employees must follow while at work. The same attention to detail about work force abuse should be followed and codified into the company, and when applicable, careful hiring and judicious firing of abusive co-workers or even management needs to take place.

The "Work Doctor" is an independent consulting firm (which I have no affiliation with, or personal knowledge of) that deals with educating management in the art of curtailing work place abuse. From their web site they provide a series of services to organizations that raise awareness all the way through to intervention. While there are also self help books such as "Investigating Workplace Harassment: How to be fair, thorough and Legal" from Amy Oppenheimer and Craig Pratt. There are ways through the morass of personality and politics within the organization. While no one organization is going to work for everyone, the very real costs associated with work place abuse must be addressed by management much as any other form of substance abuse or direct work place violence is being addressed. Management must also be aware that work place abuse can occur at any level in the organization. As well as that abuse happening when the abuser is in a highly trusted position within the company.

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Purchase Investigating Workplace Harassment: How to Be Fair, Thorough, and Legal by Amy Oppenheimer, Craig Pratt from
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