Workplace Incivility, Harassment and Bullying in Healthcare Organizations: Practical Solutions to Create a Healthy Healthcare Environment

John-Robert Curtin
Senior Fellow, 4Civility Institute

Tony Belak, JD
Professor, Department of Urban and Public Affairs, University of Louisville

Abstract

Healthcare organizations often exhibit a ‘3 Tribe’ mentality that becomes a breeding ground for workplace incivility and fosters workplace bullying. Healthcare cultures can exacerbate the problem when leaders either do not understand workplace bullying, dismiss it as tough management or as a clash of professional cultures.

- In the workplace bully behavior can be subtle or glaringly obvious;
- Bullying is any activity that causes the target to experience negative feelings resulting in the bully receiving some sort of satisfying emotional reward;
- Organizational leaders either do not recognize the detrimental effects of workplace bullying or they do not know how to productively manage it.
- Bullying negatively affects the human body and can cause cardiovascular problems, adverse neurological changes, immunological impairment, fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, diabetes, and skin disorders;
- The most common bullying health effects are anxiety, irritability, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder.

An Ombuds in a healthcare setting can be a valuable resource. Conflict is not a phenomenon, and we should expect it when two or more people interact in any enterprise or endeavor. It is a real part of our workplace, and it cannot be avoided. The Ombuds is the lightening rod of conflict and not only attracts people in conflict but seeks out those individuals who appear involved in disputes or disagreements at work. The key is to interact early before an interpersonal conflict spreads among other members of the group. Sometimes conflict cannot be seen, but it is felt in the form of anxiety, stress, discomfort, suspicion, mistrust, low morale, disharmony, and an emotional malaise. If left unresolved, this latent conflict will emerge as overt hostility, and the risk and cost to the organization is greatly enlarged if appropriate and decisive action is not taken.

An Ombuds can be a form of risk management with the added benefit of allowing people with a problem to work it out in an early and simple way, before it can get out of control or more difficult to manage. Almost every workplace has an unofficial Ombuds in that person who listens well and can give some advice or feedback to friends and colleagues. Even though it is difficult to
measure the value of such interaction, one must assume it does have benefit since it repeats day after day in the workplace. To harness the benefits of intervention by a knowledgeable and competent person identified as the Ombuds in a confidential and privileged manner can be of large value to the workplace.

A civility and kindness system allows convenient and secure reporting of negative behavior to a designated person from any computer or hand held device that can reach the web. The designated staff member can work through collaboration in a secure system that fully tracks all information inputted and documents actions taken. In addition to providing a private, safe and secure reporting system, the civility software provides the organization with a defendable record of activity that can prove invaluable in today’s litigious society.

The Value of a Workplace Ombuds

An Ombuds can be the eyes, ears, and intellect of the company that recognizes the value and importance of alert and pro-active intervention of common and ordinary complaints, reflected as the value leadership places on the people who work in such a caring environment. It is a form of risk management with the added benefit of allowing people with a problem to work it out in an early and simple way, before it can get out of control or more difficult to manage. Almost every workplace has an unofficial Ombuds in that person who listens well and can give some advice or feedback to friends and colleagues. Even though it is difficult to measure the value of such interaction, one must assume it does have benefit since it repeats day after day in the workplace. To harness the benefits of intervention by a knowledgeable and competent person identified as the Ombuds in a confidential and privileged manner can be of large value to the workplace.

Organizations are social systems in which people are strongly influenced by the organizational culture. Therefore, the most potent tool for improvement is cultural change with the goal to increase the long-term health and performance of the organization, while enriching the lives of its members. People can affect systems as much as systems affect people, and part of organizational development is allowing people to influence the systems that influence them.

Core values that promote trust, diversity, personal and professional growth, mutual respect, and productive communications are absolute necessities in modern, innovative hospitals. Unfortunately, even the most well intentioned policies are undermined by unmanaged conflict. The professions within healthcare face escalating problems and changes that directly affect the experiences of patients and the interactions of those who work within the system. Conflicts within these systems and within individuals as a result can reduce the quality of patient care and complicate efforts to reduce cost, as conflict itself becomes a distraction from delivering quality care.

Through design, promotion, implementation, developmental training and learning programs, hospitals with a commitment to excellence can diminish friction, increase productivity, and reduce escalation of disputes within the workplace and the marketplace. The purpose of this program is to promote voluntary, informal, and consensual dispute resolution, promote creative,
efficient, and sensible outcomes in dispute resolution, and reduce the tangible and intangible costs, in time and resources, associated with workplace dispute resolution.

When parties are given the chance to engage each other directly and focus on the conflict between them, they are provided with the opportunity to (1) increase the authenticity of the relationship which allows the principles to experience a sense of increased personal integrity, (2) increase their mutual commitment to improving their relationship, (3) diagnose the conflict, (4) increase their sense of control over the quality of the relationship, and (5) discover and experiment with ways to de-escalate the conflict. This is especially important for on-going relationships.

Conflict exists everywhere and the cost of workplace conflict can be staggering.

• Research indicates that up to 40% of manager’s time is spent engaging in or attempting to resolve conflict;
• Managers sometimes restructure the design and flow of tasks to reduce interaction between conflicting employees, which can reduce the effectiveness and productivity of the original design;
• Exit interviews, which explore the underlying reasons for an employee leaving a company, reveal that chronic, unresolved conflict is a decisive factor in at least 50% of all voluntary departures;
• Absenteeism can be associated with the stress of chronic conflict within the workplace. Nearly every physical illness or injury has a component, which is psychogenic, that is caused in part by psychological or emotional conditions;
• Workplace bullying and disruptive behaviors are a growing concern and can directly impact patient care.

Corporate policies, undermined by unmanaged conflict within the hospital, are not fulfilling their purpose of guiding and directing. Managing conflict effectively can result in low-cost solutions that save time, resources, and relationships. These benefits also directly relate to increased productivity, satisfaction, and retention.

Managers and employees alike can benefit from participating in mediation or other forms of internal conflict management; below are some of the benefits:

• Fosters equal opportunity in the workplace;
• Maximizes cost effectiveness;
• Is a very good tool to address discrimination and harassment complaints;
• Helps to diffuse hostile feelings and emotions that could lead to inappropriate resolution such as violence;
• Facilitates a direct contact and collaboration between managers and employees, something conducive to a more harmonious workplace;
• Allows managers and employees to have an active role in the resolution process;
• Mediation is confidential, fair, not precedent setting, and binding;
• Parties can move from debate to dialogue.

Most conflict within and involving people revolves around unfulfilled needs, primarily the psychological need for control, recognition, affection, and respect. These needs are natural and quite human in that we all crave them, but when unacceptable or problematic behavior has
been rewarded in the past in fulfillment of these needs, difficult behavior motivates the individual. We should try not to reward difficult behavior or reinforce actions or inactions that manifest it. There is no magic pill but there is a prescription to change behavior in others. It takes time and patience to cure such negative characteristics, and it doesn’t help to ignore the problem behavior or respond likewise or criticize rather than cure or just brand someone as a problem and be the therapist to their craziness. We can work to prevent unproductive and negative behavior that leads to conflict.

**How to Deal With Difficult People**

DON’T TAKE IT PERSONALLY…is easy to say but hard to remember when our emotions are blazing with anger, frustration, helplessness, or confusion over the actions of another, who we want to label as stupid, insecure, hostile, inferior, miserable, or other negative coloration. What can happen is that we begin to see that person in that color only and trap them in stereotype with a label that becomes self-fulfilling. Holding onto the resentment of people you have to work with punishes you as much as it does them. You won’t change relationships by trying to control other people’s behavior, but you can by changing yourself in relation to them. You can place your energy in blaming and deriding someone or you can use it to experiment how to find more productive means of interaction. It’s not easy to go back for more of the same old crap concerning somebody time after time, so why do you consistently relate that way? Change something!

FOCUS ON INTERESTS NOT POSITIONS… A basic problem in communication lies not so much in conflicting positions, but in the conflict between each person’s needs, desires, concerns, and fears. One person may say to another, “You’re such a perfectionist in everything you do around here, and I’m tired of you thinking you’re always right.” That position is something the speaker has decided upon, but the interest is what caused that decision. The underlying interest might be a lack of training and a fear of competition with a skilled coworker. The other person may not knowingly be competing but merely trying to do a good job, but the perception enables the conflict. Interests motivate people and are the silent movers behind the hubbub of positions.

Reconciling interests rather than positions works toward resolution. For every interest there usually exist several possible solutions that could satisfy it, but all too often people simply adopt the most obvious position. When you look behind opposed positions for the motivating interests, you can often find an alternative position, which meets not only your interests but theirs as well. Reconciling interests rather than compromising between positions also works because under opposed positions lie many more interests than conflicting ones. We tend to assume that because the other person’s positions are opposed to ours, their interests must also be opposed. In many workplace conflicts a close examination of underlying interests will reveal the existence of many more interests that are shared or compatible than ones that are opposite.

When a coworker feels threatened by a “perfectionist” and that feeling of intimidation boils over into overt hostility, these two people could become locked in conflict. A closer
examination may reveal both want stability in the workplace and a good relationship with each other, but their stated positions separate them and damage their relationship. As positions become concrete and explicit, the underlying interests may well be unexpressed, intangible, and even inconsistent. So, how do you go about understanding the interests involved in a workplace conflict; remember that figuring out the other person’s interests may be at least as important as identifying yours?

PERCEPTIONS CAN BLUR YOUR VISION… We all know how hard it is to deal with a problem without people misunderstanding each other, getting angry or upset, and taking things personally. A major consequence of human interaction in communications is that the parties’ relationship tends to become entangled with their discussions of substance and egos tend to become involved in substantive positions. People draw from comments on substance or unfounded inferences, which they then treat as facts about that person’s intentions and attitudes toward them. People tend to see what they want to see and, from all available facts and information, will select and focus on those that confirm their prior perceptions and disregard or misinterpret those that call their perceptions into question. It is important to discuss each other’s perceptions and look for opportunities to act inconsistently with those perceptions.

WHY IS LISTENING SO IMPORTANT… Listening is an art by which we use empathy to reach across the space between us. Passive attention doesn’t work. Not only is listening an active process, it often takes a deliberate effort to suspend our own needs and reactions. To listen well you must hold back what you have to say and control the urge to interrupt or argue. The art of listening requires a submersion of the self and immersion in the other. This is not always easy, especially when we are interested but too concerned with controlling or instructing or reforming the other person to be truly open to their point of view.

Anytime you demonstrate a willingness to listen with a minimum of defensiveness, criticism, or impatience, you are giving the gift of understanding and earning the right to have it reciprocated. Suspending your needs long enough to hear the other person out is part of willing yourself to listen, but suspending your needs is not the same as becoming irrelevant to yourself. Trying to listen when you’re really not up to it dries up your capacity to empathize. Some listeners are so fearful of exerting their own individuality that they become non-selves, tucked into others, embedded in a safe framework of obligations and duties. These people find it easier to accommodate than to deal with conflict, threats of rejection, arguments, or signs of distress in others. Such compliant people may seem like good listeners but aren’t really listening if they are nothing but a passive receptacle or reluctant sponge. Listening well is often silent but never passive.

Effective communication is not achieved simply by taking turns talking but requires a concerted effort at mutual understanding. A good way to promote understanding is to take time to restate the other person’s position in your own words then ask her to correct or affirm your understanding of her thoughts and feelings. If you work on this process of explicit feedback and confirmation until the other person has no doubt that you grasp her position, she will feel understood, and she will then be more open to hearing from you. The simple failure to
acknowledge what the other person says explains much of the friction in our lives. Furthermore, you don’t have to be responsible for someone’s feelings to be aware of them and to acknowledge them. When two people keep restating their own positions without acknowledging what the other is trying to say, the result is dueling points of view. Whether or not someone is really listening only that person truly knows, but, if someone does not feel listened to, he doesn’t feel listened to. We judge whether or not others are listening to us by the signals we see.

(The Lost Art of Listening by Michael P. Nichols, Ph.D., The Guilford Press, 1995).

WHAT DO FEELINGS HAVE TO DO WITH THIS…Emotions play an important role in everyday behavior, and there is no thought, attitude, idea, or action that does not have a related emotional counterpart. People who have had insecure attachments in childhood are often unable to deal with difficult situations. Because of our childhood conditioning and societal norms, we often suppress or disguise our emotions, but they do exist and exert their force no matter how subtle or indistinguishable a form they take. For example, when a coworker becomes angry at something you have said, instead of expressing the feeling in productive communication he may suddenly request sick leave for the rest of the day. In any relationship between people who are in continuous interaction over a period of time, certain tolerable limits of emotional communication are established and these boundaries are often drawn to not include an honest exchange of feelings. Throughout most of our lives we have developed ways to express disappointment, anger, or discontent in somewhat less than honest terms. Through conditioning and experience some have learned that exhibiting hostility can prove ineffective in solving problems with others and, rather than direct confrontation, circumnavigate the stormy waters by using what is believed to be more socially acceptable forms of expression. This behavior may be functional to a point, since continuous complaining and abrasive individuals become ostracized, but discontent with one’s situation should find some form of expression which is rational and by which solutions to problems may be found. If left unexpressed or if expressed irrationally, emotions will inhibit progress in improving relationships. Honest and open communications are necessary for a healthy, growth-oriented working environment, and people must be made to believe that expressing themselves openly is much healthier for all concerned. This can only occur when people feel safe in that expression, trust in the promises of mutual commitment to resolution, and do not fear retaliation for open and honest participation.

When trust exists in personal and professional relationships, almost everything else is easier and more comfortable to achieve, including problem solving and conflict resolution. When our actions are consistent with our words, trust can be achieved and arises from our interdependence with others to achieve outcomes we value. Because cooperation cannot be compelled, social interactions are valuable as a foundation for confidence or belief one feels toward another or others to overcome doubt or fear. Trust is the mortar that holds together the stones of the arch we walk through in fulfilling relationships. When trust weakens the ruble of broken expectations and implied promises impairs communication and recognition of the other person as value to co-existence or cooperation.
Trust in the workplace is essential for durable, satisfying, and rewarding relationships and is achieved through productive communication, understanding, and respect. It is an assessment that one will not deliberately, accidentally, consciously, or unconsciously take unfair advantage of another and a person’s self-esteem, status, relationship, career, and even life are placed in the hands of another with full and total confidence for safety and protection. Parties must behave consistently over time to build trust and follow through on promises made. In order to achieve this level of trust, all parties must explain expectations, agree to necessary steps to complete expectations, sanctions for not meeting expectations, and procedures to measure outcomes. Trust contains a strong emotional component, and parties should be able to share their expectations for one another, bargain for expected behaviors, and openly acknowledge mutual distrust. Expectations are created with or without collaboration, and unilateral expectations, when broken, always hurt the most.

The link between rebuilt trust and conflict resolution involves de-escalation; for any conciliatory action to be effective it must involve sufficient trust. The paradox is that in order to trust another one must risk personal loss again. We often demand proof of trustworthiness before a willingness to trust again is considered. Regrettably, one side must take the risk in a leap of faith to launch the process over with more accurate perceptions and clearer communication. Unwillingness to do so will irreparably damage the relationship and exacerbate the conflict situation. Reciprocity requires someone to go first with the hope that the risk of trauma to the person or psyche will be rewarded with a response worth the value of what can be. Hope is the winged angel of the double edged sword…one blade is trust and the other despair.

One of the secrets of dealing with difficult people in our lives is to figure out how to play the hand we’re dealt, rather than complaining and moaning about what that hand is. The reason some people in our lives remain one dimensional is because that’s as far as we go with them. Few workplace relationships last long if all one person does is complain to or about the other. Listening to that person, especially to complaints, can be a burden, but if you have an associate who takes advantage of your willingness to listen, without listening back to you, this emotional burden can be difficult to bear. You can let this go on until it begins to hurt, or you can do something about it. Express yourself. When two people are locked in silent conflict, the best way to break the impasse is to elicit and acknowledge the other’s feelings. This applies especially to cases of mutual misunderstanding. Don’t be too quick to tell your side, but concentrate first on listening to the other person. Of course, if that person has hurt or annoyed you and doesn’t know it, saying something about how you feel may be the only way to keep your resentment from escalating the situation.
Two Tools for Reporting Incivility and Promoting Compassion and Kindness

Online Incident/Concern Reporting System

Web based monitored reporting system for nursing, medical staff, administrators, staff, patients and families to report incidents or concerns in a secure system that is accessible 24x7. The trained ombuds will receive the reports and notifications. They can act immediately if necessary check reports, compare data, input actions taken and suggest any corrective measures. The Online Incident/Concern Reporting System gives each organization a secure, web-based, active database of all reported incidents and concerns. The ombuds can collaborate and compile data through multiple parameters and reports. The Software provides secure web based reports, identifies problems, concerns, trouble spots, bullies, targets and bystanders. They provide the organization with a legally defendable record of actions taken. They provide ongoing information, comparisons, trends and statistical information to access the effectiveness of harassment and bullying prevention efforts and the workplace environment.

This technological advance gives organizations the control and accurate information they need to monitor and improve their organizations anti-bullying and anti-harassment environment. The participants can reach the system from any computer connected to the web in a fully secured and protected system. Designed for easy adoption and operation, there is no equipment to buy nor any instructional technology support needed from the organizations busy IT professionals.

Compassion/Kindness Surveys

The purpose of this online tool is to measure each work group’s collective perception about their environment in regard to interpersonal and group relations as part of an anti-bullying and compassion strategy. Participants assess how they and their colleagues are treating others. Participants input how they believe they are treating each other on a scale of 1 to 5, with a 1 being as kind and wonderful as possible and a 5 as awful, mean and cruel. They are asked to cite any significant acts of compassion or kindness they have observed and are also asked to cite any serious acts of meanness they have observed. Organizations can also ask participants to cite any concerns they have about themselves or a co-worker or anything they have seen in Cyberspace about anyone in the organization that upsets them. The reports are automatically compiled by unit or group and the ombuds can review them for information and for any necessary action. Acts of special kindness can be acknowledged and acts of negative behavior can be investigated. Giving participants the ability to anonymously report concerns for themselves or others, coupled with the ability to cite concerns they have from the Cyber-world provides important insight into the world in which the participants exist and provides each organization with an early warning system allowing them to act before more serious incidents occur.

The information, generated form the Compassion/Kindness Survey Tool, can serve as the basis for discussions within units or groups to constantly improve the work environment.
Conclusion

The most significant contribution leadership of an organization can make is in creating a culture that focuses on the continuous growth and vitalization of the system.

To preserve and grow the human capital an employer has developed over time, it must foster teamwork and the internal communities of practice and interaction and encourage social learning from the combine. Individuals can walk out the door and often do so in the face of stressful interpersonal relationships or bullying. These can be the best employees the corporation has and the cost of replacing that talent is staggering compared with the cost of listening to their needs. A skill set, which includes active listening, productive communication, and a trusting relationship as a coach, should be in every administrator’s capability and plan.

Research reveals that the most effective leaders at leading and adapting to change at any level in the organization are those that have the highest level of emotional intelligence. Many intractable problems in the workplace are the result of poor communication, the lack of self-awareness, and other emotional intelligent competencies. The components of knowledge, skills, and abilities that comprise emotional intelligence can be learned. Leadership competencies of adaptability, decision-making, team building, and communication are essential to a healthy workplace with an emotionally healthy workforce. Leaders should focus on engaging their employees knowing that strong performance will follow. Managers who fail have poor people skills or show inappropriate personal qualities, and, when managers fail to demonstrate necessary qualities of effective leadership, successful execution of the business plan can fail.

The workplace culture is a community of individuals, who collectively are the organization and who, individually, are people with real human needs and concerns. The environment in which they work and contribute their time, energy, creativity, and interaction is their community, and the quality of their contributions affects the mission of the company as well as its members. The value an employer places on its people should be a measure of enlightened leadership’s concern for a healthy and profitable workplace.

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