Bullying is hardly new but it’s getting more attention in the workplace, including in the construction industry.

Chances are, you either witnessed or were a victim of bullying while in school. The practice carries over into the work environment and can have costly consequences.

Recent research in the United States and abroad indicates this sort of harassment is a problem that isn’t going away and requires more attention to stop it.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT BULLYING IS

The first step to eradicate bullying is to understand what it is. The Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), a group devoted to the elimination of workplace bullying, defines the practice as repetitive, health-harming mistreatment of one or more targets by one or more perpetrators. It is abusive conduct that is:

1. Threatening, humiliating, or intimidating,
2. Interferes with work getting done, or
3. Is verbally abusive.

The WBI goes on to say that, among other things, workplace bullying:

- Is initiated by the bullies who choose targets, timing, location and methods,
- Results in consequences for the targets,
- Escalates when others side with the bully either voluntarily or through coercion, and
- Undermines legitimate business interests.

Bullying also may raise issues relating to discrimination and bias. Actions could result in violations in laws enforced by the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. According to OSHA, about two million Americans are the victims of workplace violence each year, including incidents of bullying. Depending on the situation, OSHA has authority to impose sanctions on employers.

LONG-STANDING PROBLEM

Some bullying problems in the construction industry have been around for quite some time. It can appear in many forms such as hurtful remarks, “mind games,” physical abuse, harmful physical contact, intimidation, threats and gang up on a worker.

According to research cited in an article on the Initiafy.com website, apprentice construction workers are especially vulnerable to bullying. The main reason is that apprentices are unlikely to report incidents to their worksite supervisors. The article suggests that bullying usually encompasses a wide range of targeted negative behavior that is repeated and ongoing. (Source: Why Bullying in Construction is a Problem, Initiafy.com, November 20, 2015)

Furthermore, a demographic shift of construction workers has had an effect, with more than 1.5 million minorities now working in the sector, according to the Center for Protection of Workers Rights (CPWR), a world leader in construction safety and health. The CPWR shows that Latinos alone represent about one-quarter of the nation’s construction workforce. As a result, bullying against minorities is on the upswing.

WHAT CONSTRUCTION COMPANIES CAN DO

Common sense suggests that construction firms have a social, moral and ethical responsibility for deterring and halting workplace bullying. It can hamper your company’s plans to expand or to recruit top-notch workers. It can also trickle down to the bottom line. Building upon recommendations offered by OSHA, consider the following practical suggestions:

1. Establish a “zero-tolerance policy” toward bullying.
2. Set up a workplace violence prevention program to help demonstrate that the safety of workers, including freedom from bullying, is your primary concern.
3. Provide education for employees so they’re aware of what conduct is unacceptable.
4. Provide procedures for registering complaints of bullying.

5. Include the procedures, with detailed explanations, in the company manual.

6. Have the procedures in the manual reviewed by legal counsel.

7. Investigate reported incidents of bullying and other forms of violence immediately.

8. Take quick and decisive action based on the investigation. Workers must see that your company is doing more than paying lip service to the problem.

WHAT CONSTRUCTION WORKERS CAN DO

Bullying can have a detrimental effect whether you are the actual victim or merely a witness. Here are four suggestions for employees to consider.

1. Consult your employer’s manual to learn the procedures for reporting bullying.

2. Seek input from co-workers who aren’t bullies. See if they interpret the actions as bullying or simple horseplay.

3. Try to resolve the matter informally. This often works out best for both sides. A bully may not realize how offensive his actions are being.

4. Follow the procedures. If solving the problem can’t be resolved informally, lodge a formal complaint. This could result in a worker being reprimanded, suspended or even fired. Depending on the nature of the incident, it could provide grounds for a legal action.

Don’t allow problems to fester within your company. Educate workers about the dangers and the need to refrain from bullying. Be proactive about thwarting incidents and address any reports of bullying promptly. © 2016

LEARN MORE ABOUT BULLYING

The Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) is a valuable resource on bullying.

It provides detailed research and surveys about bullying on its website, including 49 studies conducted between 2000 and the present. In its 2014 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey, the latest such analysis available on the website, it shows that 27% of adult Americans have experienced abuse while 48%, including witnesses, have been affected by it. Also, 72% of Americans now are aware that workplace bullying occurs.

The WBI notes that 93% of respondents want a workplace bullying law, yet no state has legislation. Click here for more information. © 2016

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