

TAKING THE LID OFF CYBER BULLYING



CAROL SPIERS

By: Carol Spiers

About The Author

Carol's credibility is rooted in 20 years success as CEO of a leading UK stress management consultancy, working with equal success both in the UK and the Gulf. She is a world authority on corporate stress and BBC Guest-Broadcaster. Carol is an international motivational speaker, and a weekly Gulf News business columnist. Carol's new book 'Show Stress Who's Boss!' is available in all good books shops in the UAE. Contact Carol to deliver a motivation business presentation at your next Conference or Seminar:

info@carolespiers.co.uk
www.carolespiers.co.uk

Workplace bullying is not new, but technology has made a new platform for such activity. Cyber-bullying flourishes in the social networking environment and in a world where email has become the preferred means of communication. We tend to think we are safe behind our screens, but the world beyond the screen can be a problematic place where we can be taken unawares by a careless comment or messages posted with the intent to cause embarrassment; or worse.

What is Cyber-bullying?

Cyber-bullying is when a person, or a group of people, use electronic means such as email, SMS or other digital technologies, to threaten, humiliate or demean another person.

It's just a joke!

It is important to remember that what one person might perceive as amusing, someone else might find offensive. What is said in a personal conversation can be interpreted very differently when it is read in the printed word. Voice tone, body language and sarcasm having been removed, and bare words can easily be misinterpreted. Such misunderstandings can easily take place and they need to be dealt with immediately. Employees need to feel comfortable in coming forward and saying how they feel about any given situation, rather than feel that they are 'making a fuss about nothing!'

There are many ways that cyber-bullies now target their victims:

- **EMAIL SENDING:** insulting or malicious emails to a colleague, even if it supposed to be a joke, in which a person might be offended by the content of the message. This email may, in turn, be forward onto others by going 'viral'. Email cyber-bullying could also include sending emails containing inappropriate videos, photographs, and other content, or even computer viruses.

- **INSTANT MESSAGING (IM) AND CHAT-ROOMS:** Using instant messaging or chat-rooms to send offensive messages to someone and encouraging others to join in – or using another person's account without their express permission, to send such material.

- **SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES:** Creating false profiles for individuals in order to make fun of them and using them to leave offensive messages for others to see. Spreading lies or malicious gossip on social networking sites or blogs are usually the most common ways in which people become victim of another person's cyber bullying.

- **MOBILE PHONES:** Sending abusive text, video or photo messages, by SMS or MMS.

- **ABUSING PERSONAL INFORMATION:** Posting photos, personal information, bogus comments and blogs or pretending to be someone else online without that person's permission.

Cyber-Bullying at Work

Email threats may include relatively inoffensive messages in terms of content, but the implied meaning behind the message can constitute a form of bullying. An example of this might be where a superior is emailing instructions to a team-member with far more work than the recipient can reasonably be expected to handle, whilst other members of the team are not being pressured in the same way.

Often by writing anonymously, or using a pseudonym, cyber bullies employ many techniques to bully, harass and generally upset their victims. Direct and indirect slurs on character or intimidating postings may initially be dismissed or ignored but the intensity of some cyber-bullying has driven certain recipients to breaking point, where they are no longer able to work effectively and eventually become another absenteeism statistic. Cyber bullying may be a passive form of bullying and some perpetrators will try and pass it off as an amusing bit of fun, but it is every bit as serious as direct intimidation. It also has the potential to be more damaging as it can involve a much wider audience and should be treated like any other form of intimidation or aggression, dealt with promptly and treated seriously.

Posting blogs and comments on networking sites can also be offensive. Quite often a person may not experience any direct form of cyber-bullying but instead, the bully may leave behind anonymous comments about them on the internet which can then be viewed by others.

It is always unacceptable to post an individual's personal data on line without their specific authority. To do so is an unwarranted invasion of privacy.

You can take the stress out of cyber-bullying by:

- Filing unpleasant, inflammatory and rude emails that contain bullying messages, and reporting them to your employer if they come from within the organisation.
 - Not using your work email address for anything other than work.
 - Never posting your personal details online i.e. address, telephone number, age etc.
 - Changing your email address if your personal email address is targeted.
 - Using the blocking facility on your mobile phone, and email, to block senders from whom you do not wish to receive texts or mail.
- As bullying and cyber-bullying become ever more ubiquitous, it is increasingly important that it is identified early and dealt with efficiently by managers or others who have been trained to recognise its incidence and its effects.

Dealing with Cyber Bullying in your Organisation

- First of all, the organisation needs to recognise that cyber bullying is an issue that needs to be dealt with firmly.

- The organisation needs to specifically include cyber-bullying within their published policy statement dealing with bullying and harassment.
- Where an employee reports a problem to HR, it must be taken seriously and appropriate action taken. So many problems get out to hand because people don't know what to do and therefore do nothing. Comments like, 'Don't worry, it's just their way' are not helpful and do not bring about a speedy resolution.
- Managers need to be trained to recognise the signs and symptoms of bullying and cyber-bullying behaviour.
- Once it is recognised that bullying behaviour exists, managers need to have the appropriate communication skills training to enable them to manage and to, hopefully, diffuse the situation.
- Ensure that the targeted individual does not feel alone and to confirm that their concerns are taken seriously and if necessary that they receive professional counselling support
- Follow up and monitor the situation. Do not just assume that all has been resolved. Make no mistake, cyber-bullying is an insidious act that can intrude into both our world of work as well as into our personal life. There should be specific remedies laid down by society, and by business, to deal with and eliminate it.

It is also not unknown for competitive firms to use cyber-bullying as a tool to damage their rival firm's credibility with customers or clients, and this situations is something that no firm should ignore.

Bullying in the workplace can destroy people's lives and have a direct impact on the organisation's profitability. Hopefully, when this is finally realised, it will encourage management and HR professionals to build a business case for tackling this very real issue.

CYBER-BULLYING FLOURISHES IN THE SOCIAL NETWORKING ENVIRONMENT AND IN A WORLD WHERE EMAIL HAS BECOME THE PREFERRED MEANS OF COMMUNICATION.