

THE COMMUNICATIVE CONSTITUTION OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

Presenter: Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik, Ph.D., University of New Mexico

Given the range of destruction wrought by workplace bullying, it is crucial to understand how bullying comes into being and persists. It is also essential to look beyond individualistic, “bad apple” explanations to understand the phenomenon’s complexity, but to date, little scholarship does so. To address this issue, this paper presents a model for analyzing and addressing the different ways that bullying comes into being, persists, and changes through a confluence of communication flows. As such, I identify typically abusive message types in five different flows of organizational communication: Organizational self-structuring, membership negotiation, activity coordination, institutional positioning, and cultural/historical superstructure.

By identifying these different flows, organizational members can analyze and address the root causes of workplace bullying. This perspective examines both the micro-interactions and macro meaning systems that shape abusive organizational behavior. As such, it pulls attention away from individual, psychological explanations for this complex social phenomenon. The communication flows model provides a diagnostic tool for examining organizational message flows, unmasking the institutionalized meanings, and identifying message types contributing to workplace bullying. For example, although upper-management often discourages circumvention, that is, employees going “over their managers’ heads,” this hands off approach usually results in failure to intervene in bullying situations and pushing bullied workers to solve the problem themselves—usually a futile move. Organizations may consider opening up communication and encouraging interactions that move up, down, and sideways, as well as those that weave in and out of formal designations.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR: Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik, Ph.D., Assistant Professor,
Dept Communication and Journalism, University of New Mexico, MSC03 2240; 1
University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131 USA