

# STALKING IN THE WORKPLACE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

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This article highlights the seriousness and importance of the topic of psychological terror at workplaces. Each chapter describes the current status of issues solved in Slovakia and abroad, theoretical knowledge on the issues, analysis of the psychological terror at workplaces and also analyze the problem in a particular company. It contains proposals and measures to minimize the occurrence of such negative phenomena. The intention of this article is to explain and clarify this issue and its negative impact on any working environment and also to the entire society.

Key words: psychological terror, psychological violence, mobbing, bossing, staffing.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to describe the theoretical knowledge of the matter and to highlight the importance and seriousness of this issue.

Article evaluates the current status of issues solved in Slovakia and abroad, theoretical knowledge of Stalking in the workplace, its forms, methods, characteristics of the persons involved, the causes and consequences of bullying. The fourth part contains an analysis of psychological terror at work, in the public sector, and the private company. The fifth part contains the proposal and measures to address the problem of psychological terror in the workplace.

## 2 CURRENT STATUS OF THE PROBLEM IN SLOVAKIA AND ABROAD

### 2.1 Tackling this issue in Slovakia

In Slovakia, the term harassment is not that commonly known. Exception are some individual cases in which were in media and thus attracted attention. Harassment or another type of psychological terror in the workplace occurs in a much broader spectrum than we might think, even though we don't hear about it that often.

Every day we hear about layoffs, or company going out of business. and it gives the workers fear that something similar can happen to them. Thanks to such psychological pressure from the media and environment around them, worker often goes beyond their limits and tolerate things that should not have. This leads to various psychological

second abuse in the workplace in the form of mobbing, bossing, staffing, sexual harassment and the other.

In Slovakia, unfortunately, there is no law which would define the notion about psychological terror in the workplace and its implications. To ban bullying can be found only in criminal case law but not in the Labour Code. [1] [2]

### 2.1 Tackling this issue abroad.

Sweden was one of the first countries, which began to deal with harassment, thanks to Heinz Leymann. Gradually other countries joined in such as Finland, Norway, France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and Austria. [1]

In early 90's, Sweden was the first country in the European Union to implement in the legislation the concept of emotional abuse in the workplace. In 2002, France adopted law on social modernization, where amendments to the Code have been incorporated stating that emotional abuse in the workplace is the employer's responsibility in the field of mental and physical health of workers. In 2001, England issued law on the protection of the dignity of employees in the workplace, which contains definitions applicable to the protection of employees' rights in the event that the various acts and behavior violates the dignity of the employee. [1]

In 2001-2003 the Czech Republic conducted research about this issue for the first time. The results showed that in 2001 there were 16% of harassment victims and in 2003 there were 28% of them. The most common harassments were criticism, unappreciation, extra work, gossiping, mockery, which led to decreased self-esteem of the

victim. In 2003, more than half of the victims were harassed at least once a week for up to one year. According to the agency GfK, in 2006, victims of harassment were younger women with lower education. [1]

### 3 THEORIES TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

#### 3.1 What is mental abuse?

What it exactly means to be mentally abused? They are persistent, systematic and intensive attacks and bullying of a worker / senior staff member/ or against an individual or a small group that lasts for at least six months. [4]

In the literature we meet with the various concepts of this phenomenon, such as emotional abuse, psychological violence, terror and other. Under psychological abuse in the workplace understand different forms of emotional violence, such as: harassment, bossing, staffing, bullying, emotional abuse, whistleblowing, defaming, chairing and stalking. No matter what we call it, it is for sure a discriminatory speech just without the aggression and pathological phenomenon. [4]

Almost all definitions are based on the definition of harassment by Professor Leymann, who intensely specialized in workplace relations. Harassment includes systematic, purposeful and in particular the repeated individual attacks or group attacks on a specific person. [4]

The author of a term Bossing is Nór S. Kile, who has defined it as a kind of psychological terror that performs superior to his subordinate or group of subordinates. This is a top-bullying that targets subordinate staff that end up reflecting at their job performance. [5]

Staffing refers to inappropriate behavior of subordinates towards supervisor. The goal of staffing is firing supervisor, destruction of a leadership, business or personnel policy. [5]

The term stalking means the harassment through phone calls, threats of violent activity or public verbal abuse. [5]

Chairing is use of unfair and inconsiderate attacks among leaders in the struggle for 'chair'. [5]

By some authors in the U.S., bullying includes harassment and bossing, others distinguish them.

Bullying differs from harassment in that, that includes the physical violence. [4]

Under the psychological terror in the workplace clearly include sexual harassment, which includes verbal and non-verbal, physical or sexual attitudes towards the victim. Such behavior undermines the dignity of the victim as well as creates offensive and demeaning environment. [5]

In literature, we are often faced with the fact that all forms of psychological terror is called one-word - mobbing, despite the fact that its significance is precisely defined. Harassment word comes from the English word mob (bother, pounce on, ...) The person who came up and introduced the word mobbing into psychology is Swedish physician and psychologist Heinz Leymann (1932-1999). [4]

#### 3.2 Who is harasser?

Harasser is actually the aggressor, who develops an active, constant relentless pressure to colleague at least once a week for at least six months to intentionally hurt him. Usually these are individuals with immature personalities with child like behavior, or insecure individuals, who are thus trying to increase their self-esteem and escape from the fear of personal failure. They may also be people who do not recognize anything but their own rules, and don't hesitate to assert their goals at the expense of others. Also it might be person who can't handle their promotions or their financial security that will change their perception of oneself to things around. [4]

Authors of harassment books agree that there is no typical profile of the perpetrator of harassment. It is possible to observe only certain characteristics, which may be repeated in each case. Among the most basic characteristics of harasser include his temperament, which is reflected in its aggression, sense of importance, competitiveness and manipulation. Also relationships with others, emotions and character, avoiding responsibilities and exit strategies. [4]

Hubber, in her book divides harassers to three groups: 1. harassment instigators, 2. casual offenders and 3. casual contributors. While the harasser is acting alone, casual offenders participate in meaningless conflict that grows into permanent dispute between two, until one of them

obtains superiority over opponents. The third group are the contributors, who are actively involved by their actions and behavior, or when they pretend that they are not involved, or that nothing is happening. [6]

### 3.3 Victims of harassment

According to the authors of literature on psychological terror, there is no typical profile of victims of harassment. Any person can be the victim. Usually it is someone who excels in something, or someone who is unique (can be in negative or even positive way). For harasser that person is an easy prey, or vice versa, a potential threat. [4]

The most common signs of victims of harassment is a physical difference (body structure, skin color, hair color, freckles, style of dress, etc.), or psychological difference (introverts, sensitive people with low self-esteem). Victim may become a new employee, who in harasser, raises potential threat or collectively selected 'scapegoat', which tends to pass on all the setbacks and problems that arise in the workplace. [4]

### 3.4 The cause of harassment

There are several causes of harassment. The most important factor of the harasser is its character. There are always motives behind his behaviors such as envy, jealousy, money, fear of competition, or the need to prove anything. A key play role in harassment is workplace, which may have a low level of ethics, atmosphere of mistrust, envy, gossip that leads to frustration and depression. An important trigger to psychological terror in the workplace is also boredom and monotony, where the attacker tries to distract and relax and thus provokes its behavior to changing conditions. Additional factors of harassment are excessively demand on employees, strong competition, stress overload and fear of losing their job. [4]

The work atmosphere is closely linked with management. Decisive management style is also associated with poor work organization and fragmented communications and cooperation with subordinate supervisors, which is a live ground for harassment. While bad atmosphere will start the

harassment, manager can unintentionally and unknowingly support the harassment by his management style. Too strict of a management style creates aggression, irritability and dissatisfaction in the workplace. Liberal style of management provides freedom and confusion at workplace, thus giving free course on harassment. [4]

### 3.5 Signs and objectives of harassment

First, it is necessary to make sure that this is really about harassment and not only various conflicts that naturally and commonly found in the workplace. While some conflicts are beneficial for the company and lead to competitiveness and better outcome, harassment is negative for any company, and it is best to avoid or eliminate it as soon as possible. [4]

Harassment can manifest verbally and physically in behavior, words or gestures, or even texts. It is mainly used for smaller attacks, but most of all for degrading access, labor and human humiliation and ridicule. This kind of violence can be committed directly or indirectly. One of the main characteristics of harassment is aggressive manipulation. According to Professor Leymann, following are the harassments' characteristics that feature:

- Long-term and continuous attacks aimed at particular individuals
- The regularity and repeatability
- Attacks are systematic and targeted
- The hostile and unethical form of communication
- Threats are indirect and hidden, it is difficult to recognize that something is happening
- Sophistication and viciousness
- Active and continuous pressure
- No sympathy, cruelty, inhumanity
- Persistent signs of hostility and aggression [4]

The objectives of harassment are unique and all have a common denominator, which is a psychological and even physical destruction of an individual. The goal of harasser is to damage and disparage victims and then destroy their work as

well as private life, and making them doubt itself. Through various attack techniques, harasser is forcing the victim to behave abnormally and unknowingly. This gives him the opportunity and helping hand to create a negative image of a victim with others. Harasser will use this to their advantage by making victim feel suppressed and excluded from the team, so he can remain "better". [4]

### 3.6 Phases of harassment

Harassment does not happen overnight. It has its triggers and development phases, which increase its strength. We distinguish four phases of harassment: 1. conflict, 2. systematic psychological terror, 3. disclosure of the case and the intervention of superiors, and 4. exclusion. These phases vary depending on the victim's personality, strength of attacks, harassment techniques and so forth. Not always the victim has to go through all the phases. Sometimes the victim is so strong that harasser can pause, ever giving up before going further to the next stage. [4]

In the first phase, random conflict, which is considered insignificant or petty matter. Such conflict is not resolved and therefore does not attach great importance. However, it can escalate, by harasser gradually continuing to attack with small and annoying comments, where there is no time or opportunity to reasonably explain the original conflict. This phase, compared to others, is much shorter. [4]

Stalking is the second phase of the development process of harassment, that occurs if there is no solving of the resulting conflict, but on the contrary, it keeps escalating. The victim in this stage becomes a target already, which attacks are not as frequent or severe, but that is harasser's way of figuring out how far to push. First comes deliberate gossiping, where victim is increasingly vulnerable, which reflects in health deterioration. Together with the loss of self-esteem, reduces job performance, anxiety. After all of that comes the first symptoms of psychosomatic disease (a disease of the body due to mental illness). [4]

In the third phase, attacks are frequent and are repeated many times, as well as harasser goes for harsher practices, thereby attacks are becoming more cruel. The aim is to destroy the victim and

banish her from employment. The victim is now under a lot of stress, doing more and more errors, has low motivation and gets ultimatum. Unwillingness to lead in the search for the real causes, the victim was in such a situation forced, actually makes leading the participants in the mobbing. [4]

The last phase is characterized by the fact that victim has been formally excluded from collective (the unofficial occurred earlier). The victim is constantly controlled, has limited competences, gets additional unrelated jobs, and lastly is moved from department to department. Everything leads to the fact that the victim should leave the working environment. If it doesn't happen voluntarily, there will always be ways that will force victim to do so. If the victim is weaker nature, and unaware of legal rights, just a little mistake, will provide the leadership the opportunity to let the victim go. [4]

### 3.7 Harassment techniques and weapons

Stalking manifests in different variants and at the beginning of each it is difficult to say whether this is a coincidence, or if it is one of the targeted systematic attacks, which harasser is trying his victim unnerve, disturb confidence, and push out. Harasser looks for vulnerable point of his victim, which subsequently exploited to their attacks, whether it comes to physical appearance, health, privacy of sensitive personal information, and other. According to Professor Leymann, there are 45 forms of behavior that are typical for harasser. He divided them into five categories, depending on the target of attack:

- The attacks that target at limiting or disabling communication
- Attacks on privacy and health
- Attacks on professional skills or qualifications and sabotage work
- Attacks on reputation, respect and esteem
- Attacks on social relations and spread slander [4]

Since harasser knows no bounds, these attacks can have a much wider range. Individual strategies are intertwined with the procedure of harassment that develop into various methods and tactics. [4]

Among the most significant harassment techniques include verbal abuse; including gossiping, lies, false accusations, intrigue, and

others. Harasser's verbal behavior is full of sarcasm and ironic remarks, which result in insult or ridicule the victim. [4]

Among the non-verbal attacks are attacks in the form of facial expressions, glances, shrugging shoulders, ironic sighs and gestures. Part of it is ignoring the victim, not saying hi, not listening what victim is saying, and rudly interrupting when talking. Frequent nonverbal attacks is also the abrupt end of the conversation, when the victim enters the room. Then victim can analyze, overthink, and speculate about the conversation, even thought it wasn't about them. But that's is what attacker is looking for. [4]

The other types of techniques include simulated victims of harassment, excessive control, isolation, sabotage at work, physical and sexual harassment and other.

### 3.8 Consequences of harassment

Harassment affects the health of the victim. To what extent it dependent on particular resistance of victims, as well as how to cope with such stressful situations. Circumstances in which the harassment occurs are important roles. The victim is experiencing indescribable pain and suffering, but mainly its traces remain registered for a long time after harassment is completed. Unfortunately this often ends in serious health harm (including self-harm), in extreme cases, suicide. [4]

The most common consequences include psychological problems such as restlessness, nervousness, anxiety, difficulty concentrating, and can go even further as disorders associating with self-assessment, self-doubt and self-esteem. Permanent stress and uncertainty lead to a loss of energy and fatigue. Due to decreasing self-esteem and lack of motivation, the performance of the victims significantly decreases. The victim is emotionally exhausted, hypersensitive, undermines its ability to communicate, appears to aggressive, and irritable. Long-term problems can even result in the diagnosis of depression and hopeless situation that can lead to suicide. [4]

Constant stress and tension causes short of breath, headache, neck, the back and even chronic digestive problems. Continuously increased level of stress hormones in the blood results in increased blood pressure, which increases rapidly risk of

cardiovascular disease. Low immune system can cause tumors. Stress also can result in eating disorders, sleep disturbances as well as skin diseases. [4]

Harassment also affects not only working environment but as well as all relationships outside work. The victim lives in constant social stress and uncertainty, losing a sense of humor, ability to have fun and unable to enjoy life. Similarly, there is communication problem therefore unable to communicate with family and friends. Isolation of an individual is very hard, as communication and contact with humans is one of the key psychological needs. [4]

Executives do not always realize the price the company pays for harassment, is particularly significant and unnecessary. Harassment at workplace can be result of less creativity, lower productivity, poor attendance and employee turnover. [4]

Harassment brings not only economic losses due to the low performance of the victims, but also affects other members of the team as well as the harassers itself. At the same time it changing the atmosphere in the workplace to more of a negative. Bullying creates a hostile work environment. All this tends to reduce the efficiency, quality and decline in morale throughout the company, which sooner or later may effects the profits. Workers may lose confidence in the company and management. [4]

Consequences for society are also negligible factor. Given that harassment often leads to a complete mental and physical exhaustion that causes increase in poor health of a workers - thereby increases health insurance. Workers leaving on early retirement, loss of skilled people, loosing competition in the market, this is all only part of the consequences of the problem called harassment. [4]

## 4 HARASSMENT ANALYSIS

This chapter contains an analysis of psychological terror in particular company, which was conducted through a questionnaire, interviews with staff in leadership positions.

To find out about the bullying, questionnaire was developed on the basis of a study on

psychological terror in the workplace and its implications. The questionnaire contained 14 questions, two of which were focused on age and gender of participants.

#### **4.1 Public harassment analysis**

The above-mentioned questionnaire was completed by over 100 participants in which 69% were women and 31% men. More than half the respondents were in the ages 18-29 years, 28% were 30-39 years, 13% were 40-49 years, and only 6% were over 50 years old.

The survey showed that two-thirds of respondents have experienced some kind of psychological terror in the workplace. Most of them had to deal with bossing or harasser, which led to excessive workload, gossiping, and ridiculing work performances. The biggest problem was reported with poor management, bad workplace atmosphere, excessive stress and lack of communication. Up to 38% of them didn't complain about the problem as it showed lack of trust and confidence with supervisors. The effects were psychological, which later might have been results of a poor health or financial burden. More than 40% of the victims lost their jobs.

The above assessment shows that the biggest problem is lack of awareness and communication about the importance and seriousness of the problem in employees, as well as in management.

For objective assessment of harassment in the workplace were made additional 5 Questions directed solely for leadership positions where they could express their views and their own experiences with this problem. Their responses revealed that not all of them had experience with the occurrence of psychological terror in the workplace. Those who had, talked about exceptional cases which were individually resolved. The most common cases, were loss of confidence in leadership, that reflected in work performance. In some cases there were financial losses for the company, and systematic measures had to be taken. Change of personnel, loss of good reputation, and addition finances, time and energy had to be spent on the restructuring of the company.

#### **4.2 Analysis of harassment in a particular company**

The same questionnaire was administered to SEE in the state enterprise ZSR in Kosice. The questionnaire was answered by 17 employees, 8 males and 9 females. The largest age group consisted of aged 40-49 years, 29% of them were ages 30-39, 18% of them were 18- 29, and 18% more than 50 years old.

Up to 75% of respondents said they had already met with some sort of psychological terror at work, but majority of them were observers only.

The most commonly form of psychological terror that they observed was harassment and bossing. Among the most common methods of psychological terror was slander and ridicule in front of others, ridiculing work performances and capabilities of individual, and excessive workload.

The company's management responses showed interest but specifically about bullying at work, which confirmed the results of the questionnaire. They are trying to make such negative phenomena prevent, or limit to the lowest possible level. The goal is to understand the importance and seriousness of the situation and its impact on workers, their perception of the problem and then brought performance. The company has taken no specific action and the resulting situation is addressed individually and intermittently.

### **5 SUGGESTIONS AND MEASURES TO ADDRESS STALKING IN THE WORKPLACE**

Staff is constantly changing due to retirement of older workers, hiring new workers, or changing organizational structure of staff in the workplace. Because people have different personality and different characteristics, to eliminate such a situation at work is impossible. To take appropriate measures against this is to limit or try to find early solution to the problem. This will prevent problem to grow, and thus it will prevent serious consequences that could jeopardize not only the victim - a staff, but also the company.

## 5.1 Prevention

One of the measures to prevent the occurrence of psychological terror in the workplace is prevention. The prevention is adoption or implementation of actions and habits that would help prevent the occurrence of events leading to psychological terror. For example, the training focused on the mental health of all employees of the company.

This training should be primarily informational in nature, which would inform about possible forms of psychological abuse, its characters, which would help to detect the problem early, and of course the consequences to which this problem may result. This training would receive not only executives, who would then correspond well for such a problem in the workplace, but also other employees who after such training would put much more emphasis on the situation and not ignore the problem. Information thus obtained could serve as a potential self-reflection for the striker, who has not gotten into the role of harasser intentionally, but due to stress, excessive workload and other circumstances, thus crossing the boundaries with their behavior, without being aware of the seriousness of their actions.

In addition to training, it is important to introduce outside work activities, such as team building, sports events and other, where they can get to know the staff personal level. This can result in the friendlier relations and enjoyable atmosphere at workplace.

## 5.2 Introduction of the internal rules of the company

Each company, after training has rights to establish their own internal rules, which will meet the function of a "guide" to prevent the occurrence of harassment in the workplace. These rules should shape the moral culture of the company and should apply for all employees equally. Based on these rules, the victim can defend himself, and be more confident in its defense. It would help to prevent other employees, who would participate as observers, when it comes to the real problem and inform about the resulting situation. This would also serve as a guide for executives as to solve of the present situation because they could solve the

problem more quickly and eliminate unwanted factors in the workplace.

## 5.3 Legislation

In Slovakia, we have taken no legislative actions that would accurately define and characterize these negative phenomena in the workplace, which may lead to protect the victims from serious medical consequences. In this case, it would help to engage the agencies, who specialize in the exploration of psychological terror at workplaces, after which Slovakia has also absence. This would help assess the situation, which occurs at the current workplace and their results could help by adapting legislative measures, which would help the situation significantly. These surveys would be repeated at regular intervals, in order to continually monitor and assess the situation.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Stalking in the workplace can lead to serious health and social problem. It is not possible to completely prevent the occurrence of such an affliction. But sufficient attention to this issue and appropriate actions can minimize this effect and prevent bad health and financial difficulties caused by such situations.

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