Bullies in the office?
They could be more common than you might think
By Leonor Vivanco
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Kids can be cruel, but so can adults.

Bullying – certainly the buzzword of the moment—happens not only to students at school but to adults at work.

In fact, bullying in all its forms has become a flashpoint in the national conversation. There are now human resource managers conducting seminars on the issue across the country. The "It Gets Better" video project to prevent gay bullying has resulted in more than 3.3 million page views since its 2010 launch. Meanwhile, the documentary film "Bully," due out Friday, garnered national media attention as producers fought to get its R rating changed to PG-13 so it could be shown in schools. The movie, which was slightly edited, now will open in theaters with a PG-13 rating.

A CareerBuilder survey last year showed 29 percent of American workers ages 24 or younger said they were bullied at work. CareerBuilder is partly owned by the Tribune Company, which publishes RedEye. Another survey, which was commissioned by the Workplace Bullying Institute in 2010, put the number even higher among adults, with 35 percent saying they have been bullied on the job.

"We are where we were with sexual harassment 10 to 15 years ago," said Judy Skorek, associate professor of counselor education and director of clinical training at Concordia University Chicago. "We know it's wrong. We know we need to address it, and it's been out there for a long time.

But bullying at work isn't illegal. There's no federal or state law against it.

While there's no universal definition of workplace bullying, experts say it generally involves repeated abusive treatment by one or more employees against a co-worker. The behavior is intended to harm that person and results in a hostile work environment. The harm can be done economically, psychologically or physically. Methods can include behaviors such as excluding a target from meetings, yelling at the person, sabotaging his or her work or threatening him or her.

"It breaks people and for some people, it destroys their careers," Skorek said.

For those bullied, the tormenting, teasing and taunting can feel like torture. They can suffer health problems such as high blood pressure and depression, experts said. Bullying also can lead to workplace violence, loss of income and even suicide, they said. It can cross lines of gender, age, seniority or profession.

The problem doesn't seem to be getting better given the challenging economy, said Suzy Fox, a professor at Loyola University Chicago's Institute of Human Resources and Employment Relations.

"Companies are less likely to put in resources that are healthy workplace employee benefit-type policies because no one has any money and people are really stressed and fearful for their job," she said. "This kind of environment is really fertile for bullying behavior."
Without a law banning it, those being bullied have little recourse. Illinois lawmakers have proposed a healthy workplace bill, but it has been stuck in a House committee for a year. The bill would provide legal relief to an employee subjected to an abusive work environment and incentive for employers to prevent and respond to such hostile work behavior. It also would hold the employer and employee as defendants liable for damages.

"In absence of a law, employers don't have to do anything and they prefer not to," said Gary Namie, founder of the Workplace Bullying Institute in Washington state and director of the Healthy Workplace Campaign. "It's a form of harassment invisible in the eyes of the law."

Without legislation, it's up to each company to come up with an anti-bullying policy or unions to include anti-bullying language in their contracts, Fox said. Some companies think bullying, though the term isn't explicitly used, is covered generally in codes of conduct and employee ethics codes under harassment, she said.

"But the problem is when it's not specifically called bullying, the actual protection in many cases don't take place," Fox said.

Kristen Prinz, a business and employment law attorney, said her Chicago firm gets calls from various people about workplace bullying, sometimes including reports that people are feeling pressured to quit their jobs.

"In this market, [the employees who call] just want to protect their jobs," she said. She suggests employees document the occurrences, just as an employer would record a worker's bad behavior.

Those targeted may have a legal claim if they believe they have been bullied because of race, gender or any other legally protected class. Claims may also be warranted if the bullying is done in retaliation for reporting violations of company policies, she said.

The workplace itself can foster the bullying culture. If the bully is productive and meets goals, the bully may even be rewarded with a promotion or impunity, Namie said. As such, sending the bully to a program like anger management is only a Band-Aid approach because the work environment has to change, he said.

Workplace experts say employers need to issue corporate statements against bullying, define it as unacceptable, and create a policy for reporting it and a system to prevent it.

There is no easy way to deal with an office bully, experts said. Retaliation is not a good idea because it could make the situation worse. Generally, targets of bullying have the options of reporting it, ignoring it or seeking counseling outside the office or leaving the job.

In the meantime, they can make a "strictly business-based fiscal argument" to a superior that the bully is costing the company money, Namie said. Tolerating a bully can cost a company money in the way of turnover, absenteeism, legal action and other factors.

The bottom line on workplace bullying, Namie said, is "it's inexcusable."