Changing the Culture

Union Stewards can act to end workplace discrimination, harassment and bullying

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THE COST OF DOING NOTHING
Mounting stress, increased absenteeism, mental illness, serious physical health consequences, rising employee turnover, decreased client satisfaction and plummeting employee engagement – the consequences of workplace discrimination, harassment and bullying can be severe.

And the problems are widespread. The Canadian Safety Council (CSC) reported 37 per cent of Canadian workers have experienced bullying at work, so chances are most of us have seen it happen or experienced it ourselves. The CSC also found 72 per cent of workplace bullies are in positions of authority and 62 per cent of employers advised targets of bullying to ignore the problem.
Clearly, ignoring the problem isn’t working. What might start out as isolated incidents can turn into an ingrained toxic workplace culture, as those who perpetrate discrimination, harassment and bullying interpret the silence of their coworkers as tacit approval for their behaviour.

However, it can be challenging to convince members who are witnesses to, or targets of this kind of behaviour to take action, especially since the majority of workplace bullies hold positions of authority, and the behaviour can become normalized over time.

**DEFINING THE PROBLEM**
When addressing these kinds of problems, it is important for Union Stewards to first understand how bullying, harassment and discrimination are addressed within legislation, the relevant collective agreement and employer policy.

**LEGISLATION**
Alberta’s human rights legislation prohibits any harassment or discrimination based on “protected grounds” such as race, age or gender. Occupational health and safety legislation requires employers to provide a healthy and safe workplace. Although Alberta’s current legislation does not address psychological harm, an employer’s failure to address bullying, harassment or discrimination is a violation of their obligation to provide a safe workplace.

**COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT**
Many AUPE collective agreements contain articles dealing with bullying, harassment and discrimination. For example, in the Government of Alberta Master Agreement, Article 50 – Harassment and Discrimination affirms “discrimination, harassment and bullying will not be tolerated.”

**EMPLOYER POLICY**
Employer policies set out expectations for employees and describe how complaints will be handled. For example, Alberta Health Services’ (AHS) policy defines workplace violence as “any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her workplace,” and includes references to bullying and specific examples.

It is equally important for Union Stewards to be able to understand what definitions of bullying, harassment and discrimination do not include. Members may come to you claiming they have been bullied or harassed, when in fact they are actually unhappy about the legitimate exercise of an employer’s authority, such as assigning work or evaluating performance. Similarly, while Union Stewards may be called on to help resolve conflict between coworkers, such friction should not be considered bullying unless the behaviour is deliberately intended to hurt someone.

**ACTIVE WITNESSING**
Union Stewards can help to change the workplace culture by demonstrating active witnessing when discrimination, harassment or bullying occurs. Instead of turning a blind eye to the problem, active witnesses draw attention to the problem, offer support to the target and name the behaviour as unacceptable.

Dr. Ishu Ishiyama developed a helpful technique for active witnessing called Anti-discrimination Response Training or ART. The ART method gives concrete examples of responses designed to interrupt discriminatory behaviour, point out its hurtful impacts, challenge the offender to change course, approach other witnesses or offer support and encourage the target of the behaviour to take action.

Simple statements such as “Wait a minute,” “I don’t like what I’m hearing,” “Do you realize what you’ve said is hurtful (or biased),” “You don’t deserve to be treated that way,” “Am I the only one who thinks that was an unfair statement?” or “You are not alone. Let’s do something about this,” can go a long way toward preventing isolated incidents from becoming a harmful pattern.

Always remember to document as soon as possible any incidents in the event that these kinds of interventions are not sufficient to correct the problem.

Union Stewards should also exercise caution when intervening to carefully assess and minimize any risk involved. For example, if you believe a potential for physical violence exists, you should notify someone such as security or police, who are trained for such situations.

In the case of particularly abusive managers, you may decide to quietly document incidents and gather more information before addressing the problem directly.

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**Defining Behaviour**

**Bullying:** Behaviour intended to mentally (or physically) hurt or isolate. It most often involves an imbalance of power and a repeated pattern of behaviour intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a person or group of people.

*Source: Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety*

**Discrimination:** An action or decision that treats a person or group negatively for reasons such as their race, age or disability. These reasons are known as grounds of discrimination or protected grounds.

*Source: Canadian Human Rights Commission*

**Harassment:** A form of discrimination that involves unwanted physical or verbal behaviour that offends or humiliates. Harassment is a behaviour that generally persists over time.

*Source: Canadian Human Rights Commission*
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- Enables you to register yourself in AUPE courses through the AUPE website
- Walks you through registering for courses and ensuring appropriate prerequisites
- Counts down the number of spaces left in a course
- Keeps track of your course registrations
- Allows for automatic waitlists
- Notifies you of new courses in your area
- Contains your education history
- Stores copies of all AUPE Education certificates

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- Sign in to the online registration system available at www.aupe.org/training/ using your member number
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- Confirm your attendance and attend the course

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Story suggestions for Steward Notes may be submitted for consideration to Merryn Edwards by e-mail at m.edwards@aupe.org. Please include names and contact information for yourself and potential story sources.