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Alberta Bullying Research, Resources and Recovery Centre



Day Three: Moral Disengagement and the Bystanders of Workplace Bullying – Reflections By Wendy Creighton-Lacroix

Reading Terry's article – *Workplace Bullying and its Relationship to Moral Disengagement* – I reflected on how moral and ethical engagement and disengagement are applicable to both the bully and the bystanders, the bystanders being coworkers and various human resource personal. Terry listed 8 mechanisms, 5 of which I would like to comment on with the bystanders in mind.

Disregard of Consequences is when the bullying is minimized, ignored, or avoided to save self, without truly understanding how insidious and debilitating bullying is and its impact on the target medically, psychologically, emotionally, socially, and financially. Coworkers minimize what the target is going through, distancing themselves, some saying, "Oh, well. It will never change." "Suck it up." "Time to move on." The issue is ignored and/or avoided because, for example, human resource personal do not want to have to deal with the issue due to time investment, cost, or fear. Disregard of consequences is preservation of self at the expense of the target.

This ties into Dehumanization in that the bystanders do not understand, as mentioned, how the target is negatively impacted, and the suffering that is endured. They do not try to understand or put themselves in the target's shoes.

Displacement of Responsibility is when the bystanders are directed by supervisors, managers, and/or directors to do something. Here I see the bystanders as placing blame on the system, saying that is the way things are: “There is nothing I can do.” Except ‘stay under the radar’. This ties in with disregard of consequences. Or, the bullying is not acknowledged or dealt with: no one takes responsibility. Or, one knows what is happening but does not want to investigate to see what is actually going on and address it. Or, it is addressed through policy, which is quite often “lip service” because “workplace bullying” is not mentioned explicitly. This is the “loop hole” to deflect both acknowledgement and responsibility.

Diffusion of Responsibility is applicable in that bystanders often wait for another bystander to come forward to support the target. Bystanders need to realize and understand they must come together as a group to provide support for both the target and themselves. Themselves, meaning not only with regards to keeping their jobs – a primary reason why they do not come forward – but also because the bullying will continue, if not with the current target, with another target – possibly them.

And finally Attribution of Blame. Blame the target. “They should have kept quiet... not said anything, keep a low profile...not advocate for...not be so adamant about their ethics and standards...”

Bullying puts the bystanders’ moral and ethical standards and engagement to the test. Sole bystanders that want to come forward – though their support and understanding is so greatly appreciated – could be targeted if they come forward alone. The target does not want this traumatizing experience to happen to their supporter. If there is a group of bystanders they might consider dealing with the issue of workplace bullying as a group, empowering themselves and the target. Ignoring workplace bullying empowers the bully, and perpetuates the abuse.

Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.
Martin Luther King, Jr.

www.abrc.ca abullyrc@gmail.com

Dr. Wendy Creighton Lacroix

780-965-74580