

Why Systemic Workplace Abuse Persists

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**A shift in perspective
opens a completely new set
of unlimited possibilities.**

*Satsuki Shibuya,
Artist*



Executive Summary

Among all of the problems that plague us, few devastate both individuals and organizations like **workplace abuse** (aka workplace bullying or mobbing), best defined as:

...intentional and unwitting behaviors (words, gestures, images, actions, and failure to act) which, over time, humiliate, demoralize, or terrorize an employee or group of employees, undermine their targets' credibility and effectiveness, and contribute to a disrespectful or hostile work environment.¹

The most common forms of workplace abuse include:

- isolation and deliberate exclusion
- false accusations
- sabotage
- intimidation and aggressive behavior
- verbal abuse and belittling comments
- blocking advancement opportunities
- unfair evaluation
- undermining work

- spreading gossip / rumors
- withholding information
- overly critical feedback
- micromanaging
- overloading with work
- wrongful removal of responsibilities

This paper argues that workplace abuse is not merely “the cost of doing business” as many believe, but rather it is the result of **five systemic drivers** rarely discussed by organizational psychologists and psychological safety experts.

The interactivity of these drivers not only protects perpetrators of abuse from accountability, but it guarantees that the problem continues to persist, at great cost to employers and employees worldwide. To understand systemic workplace abuse, one must first dive **beneath the surface** to uncover why today's failed interventions ensure its persistence.



The Cost of Doing Nothing

Workplace abuse persists in part because few stakeholders have considered its full cost.

The Cost to Individuals:

According to a recent national survey, **nearly 14% of U.S. employees are targeted for workplace abuse each year, with over 60% of them either quitting, getting fired, transferring, or quitting after things go from bad to worse.**²

For targets, workplace abuse often results in depression, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, inability to work, trouble making decisions, lowered productivity, anger, emotional disconnect, PTSD symptoms, trust issues, self-doubt, shame, chronic pain, fatigue, and unemployment, not to mention the impact to one's physical health and financial well-being. Some don't survive. In a word, the human cost of workplace abuse is **incalculable**.



The Cost to Organizations:

A myth about workplace abuse lingers from workplace to workplace, suggesting that poor performers make up the lion's share of abused employers. **Nothing could be further from the truth.** Forty years of research agrees: the employees most likely to experience workplace abuse are ethical, high-contributing employees who play well with others.

Every year, **employers lose on average 9% of their workforce**, most of whom are the very model employees that employers strive to retain. The cumulative costs of rehiring employees, decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, increased health care, and litigation make workplace abuse the greatest challenge to retaining top talent that no one's talking about.

[Click here](#) to learn the annual cost of workplace abuse to employers.

The Cost to Workplace Culture:

Unmitigated workplace abuse has deeply corroded workplace culture. We work today in a world in which the phrase, toxic workplace, signals the resulting widespread unease shared by many employees.

But aren't organizational psychologists and psychological safety experts working hard to resolve the problem? you ask.

Not exactly.

Why Today's Half-Measures Fail

Thirty years ago, workplace abuse research focused squarely on patterns of predatory behavior. Today, any discussion of the predatory nature of certain employees or the patterns that account for their behavior is practically taboo.

So how did we get here?

In the late 90s, because academic trends placed the value of **systems** above that of individuals, workplace researchers shifted their focus away from considering individual pathology and personal responsibility.

Since then, employers have invested countless millions in “solutions” that focus entirely upon environmental factors. This focal shift is most visible – and most telling – in the work of the highly influential Norwegian researcher and workplace consultant **Ståle Einarsen**.

In March 2024, Einarsen publicly declared, *After 30 years of research, we are coming to the conclusion that workplace bullying is mainly the results [sic] of role stressors that over time creates a hostile working environment...*³

In a related paper, he cited **role ambiguity** as the stressor to most commonly precipitate workplace abuse, as if emotionally healthy employees who feel unclear about their responsibilities are suddenly triggered to abuse others.

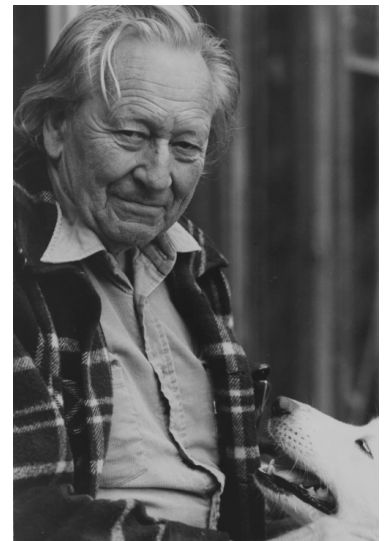
How do Einarsen and his colleagues land on such an indefensible position? As Maslow wrote (and I paraphrase): **if all you have is a hammer, you're going to treat every problem like a nail.**

Where research goes, corporate training programs follow, programs with zero capability of protecting model employees from those with a predation to do harm.

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A system cannot understand its own problems.

Gregory Bateson



The 5 Drivers of Systemic Workplace Abuse

While environmental factors exist, their impact pales in comparison to that of the five foundational drivers of systemic workplace abuse.

1. Misunderstood Motives of Perpetrators

Workplace abuse isn't random. In fact, it rarely happens without premeditation. Perpetrators typically fall into one of four categories:

A. Employees with undiagnosed and untreated **Narcissistic Personality Disorder** who, according to the NIH, make up 6.2% of the general population;⁴

B. Employees with **dark tetrad** traits (narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and/or sadism presented by those who, if tested, wouldn't receive a diagnosis for a mental illness), the prevalence for which is ~7% of the general populace;⁵

C. Employees who harbor anger or resentment toward another employee over some past, unresolved interpersonal conflict; and

D. Employees with deep insecurities about themselves and/or their work performance.

Add these figures together and you'll see why 14% of American employees experience abuse at work each year.

Add in the other invisible drivers, and you'll soon understand how workplace abuse mushrooms into a problem that can only be described as **systemic**.

2. The Dilemma of Employer Liability

Four years ago, while mentoring under Dr. Gary Namie of the Workplace Bullying Institute, I had a Eureka! moment.

I was striving to understand why, two years prior, I had been so thoroughly gaslighted and scapegoated by HR and my supervisor, why such secondary abuse was so common among to the experience of survivors, and what possible purpose it could serve. Then it hit me:

If I was an employer and I directed HR to validate the abusive experience of the targeted employees on my payroll, I would be providing them with the very evidence they could use in order to seek damages for the abuse they experienced while working for me.

Deductive reasoning strongly suggests that, in most cases, systemic workplace abuse is not the result of malice, as some make out. It's basic math: **no employer could survive the financial wrath to come if it validated the experience of every targeted employee.**

While workplace abuse is not against the law in the U.S., targeted employees here do have at least two pathways for seeking legal recourse and personal justice: NIED (Negligent Infliction of Emotional Distress) and IIED (Intentional Infliction of Emotional Distress).

IIED cases are especially hard to win, but law firms see potential with NIED prosecutions:

Although Kentucky courts have yet to decide a case involving NIED claims related to workplace bullying, such a claim is likely viable. In theory, if an employer negligently allows an employee to suffer severe emotional distress through the actions of co-workers or managers, that employee should be able to recover damages for the emotional injury suffered.⁶

From the employer's POV, liability must be mitigated at all costs for the organization to survive. *If only there was a way to neutralize this threat cheaply and invisibly...*

3. The Scapegoat Mechanism

The Scapegoat Mechanism was first coined by the late social theorist René Girard a half-century ago, making its understanding limited to the naturally curious and the unfortunate minority who have experienced the phenomenon firsthand.

Looking closely at myriad examples from History and the Arts, Girard identified a terrible pattern:

Every group needs a scapegoat, someone upon which to place the cumulative guilt for the group's moral transgressions, someone to sacrifice on behalf of the group.

At work, the targeted employee is "othered" as soon as the abuse begins. Witnesses, even those with a desire to support the target, start to distance themselves instinctively.

In the eyes of HR and supervisors, the target becomes the "emotional release valve" that Girard wrote about. Triggered by the Scapegoat Mechanism, HR frames the target to be the problem itself, twisting facts about the target's job performance and ability to work with others in order to absolve the organization of all culpability for the abuse the target suffered while at work.

According to one survey, **95%** of targets of workplace abuse experienced secondary abuse at the hand of their employer,⁷ which is for most catastrophic. To this, I can personally attest:

When my employer scapegoated me for following protocols, despite the fact that I was performing well, it felt as though God and the Universe were against me.



4. Inherently-Biased Internal Investigations

If you ask most survivors of workplace abuse, they'll tell you: once HR got involved, their situation worsened drastically.

The reason is obvious: **HR is a function of Management.** And to mitigate the dilemma of employer liability, internal investigations are designed, not to search for the truth regardless of what it may lead, but to mitigate risk.

But aren't HR personnel trained to investigate in a way that's fair and objective? you ask. In reality, no fewer than **thirty** unseen and rarely discussed biases influence internal investigations:

- organizational biases protect the institution and the status quo
- investigator-specific biases skew outcomes against the target
- cognitive and social biases shaped by unconscious attitudes and stereotypes
- structural and procedural biases reinforce denial and limit accountability

These biases ensure that the Scapegoat Mechanism progresses to completion, with the full psychological and moral weight of the abusive experience crashing down upon the target.

To neutralize systemic workplace abuse, we must accept this difficult truth:

In order to successfully mitigate employer liability, **HR must inflict profound emotional and psychological violence upon targeted employees**, causing tremendous injury over and beyond that caused by the primary abuse.

Yet somehow, decision-makers remain completely oblivious of the secondary violence their organization commits against its abused employees.

5. Executive Disconnect

Employers rely on HR to understand the challenges its workforce experiences. Tragically, essential data about workplace abuse and its cost to the organization and its employees rarely breaks through to the top floor.

Why?

According to Girard, it has everything to do with the phenomenological nature of scapegoating:

Whenever a group scapegoats an individual, the people doing the scapegoating are completely unconscious of the violence they are committing.

This explains how ethical HR personnel can commit terrible violence against targets of workplace abuse and still sleep well at night.

It also explains why so few in Leadership ever thought to run a cost-benefit analysis to learn if current practices succeed in protecting their top talent from the dangers of workplace abuse.

The Catch-22

The Catch-22 of systemic workplace abuse works as follows:

- Targets report abusive behavior to HR or their supervisor, in accordance with company policy.
- To shield itself from liability, the employer must deny the abusive experience of the target.
- Inherently-biased internal investigations ensure that the target is satisfactorily scapegoated, thus absolving the employer.

- Targets suffer catastrophic abuse, with trauma that affects many for the rest of their lives.

- Because scapegoating is unconscious, the violence done to targets by their employer never gets discussed.

- Because executives remain uninformed of these drivers and their cascading effects, the cycle of emotional abuse and psychological violence persists.

So long as we “trust the experts” and refrain from having an adult conversation about this problem, this vicious wheel will keep on turning.



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Leadership is not about being in charge. **It's about taking responsibility for the people in your care.**

Betty Sue Flowers

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