

# THE CATCH-22 OF SYSTEMIC WORKPLACE ABUSE

How  
Institutions  
Guarantee  
Persistence



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# *Introduction*

## **The Anniversary No One is Celebrating**

In 1976, psychiatrist and anthropologist Dr. Carroll Brodsky published *The Harassed Worker*, the first book to discuss what we understand today as workplace abuse (aka workplace bullying).

It's been a full half-century since Brodsky first threw light onto the problem. Despite myriad interventions, prevalence remains as high as ever.

Why?

As with every other problem, one must first **view the problem correctly** if they ever hope to resolve it.



**The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.**

*Albert Camus*

# Executive Summary

Among all of the problems to occur at work, nothing devastates individuals and institutions like workplace abuse, 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.<sup>1</sup>*

The most common forms of workplace abuse include:

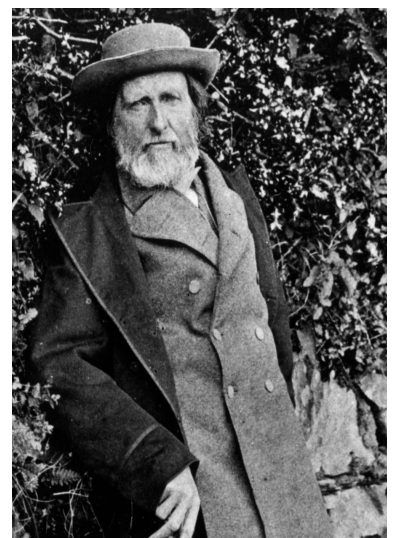
- isolation and deliberate exclusion
- false accusations
- sabotage
- intimidation and aggressive behavior
- verbal abuse and belittling comments

- 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 a) simply the cost of doing business, or b) simply the result of environmental factors, but rather it is the result of **five systemic drivers** rarely discussed by organizational psychologists and psychological safety experts today. The resulting nexus not only protects perpetrators from accountability, but it guarantees that the problem continues to persist, at great cost to employees and employers worldwide.



**The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something and tell what it saw in a plain way.**



*John Ruskin*

# *Workplace Research Gone Askew*

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 behind their behavior is, practically speaking, taboo.

## **So how did we get here?**

In the late 90s, when academic trends began to stress systems over individuals, workplace researchers shifted their focus away from considering individual pathology and personal responsibility.

Since then, employers have invested countless millions in half-measures that focus entirely upon environmental factors. This focal shift is most visible – and most telling – in the work of the world’s leading researcher (and successful 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...<sup>2</sup>*

He cites role ambiguity as the stressor to most commonly precipitate workplace abuse, as if emotionally stable, psychologically healthy employees who feel unclear about their job duties are suddenly motivated to abuse their peers.

Similarly, many workplace trainers believe workplace abuse to be the natural result of “the bottom line,” even though its prevalence is consistent across capitalist and non-capitalist nations that do not yet have strong anti-bullying legislation.

Understanding workplace abuse requires tremendous courage to confront uncomfortable truths which most have learned to professionally dismiss.



**The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them.**

*Ida B. Wells*

# *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 three categories:

A. Employees with undiagnosed and untreated **Narcissistic Personality Disorder** make up between 1-6% of the general population;<sup>3</sup>

B. Employees with **dark tetrad traits** (narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy, 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;<sup>4</sup> and

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

Whether done consciously or not, the pattern is nevertheless consistent: most perpetrators arrive at work intent on causing harm, and their targets never see it coming.

## **2. The Dilemma of Employer Liability**

It was nearly five years ago while mentoring under Dr. Gary Namie of the Workplace Bullying Institute when I had my first Eureka! moment related to this work:

*If I was an employer, and I directed HR to validate the abusive experience of the 14% of targeted employees on my payroll, I would be providing them with the very evidence they need to seek damages for the abuse they experienced while working for me.*

**No employer could survive the financial wrath to come if it began validating the experience of every targeted employee.**

## **3. The Scapegoat Mechanism**

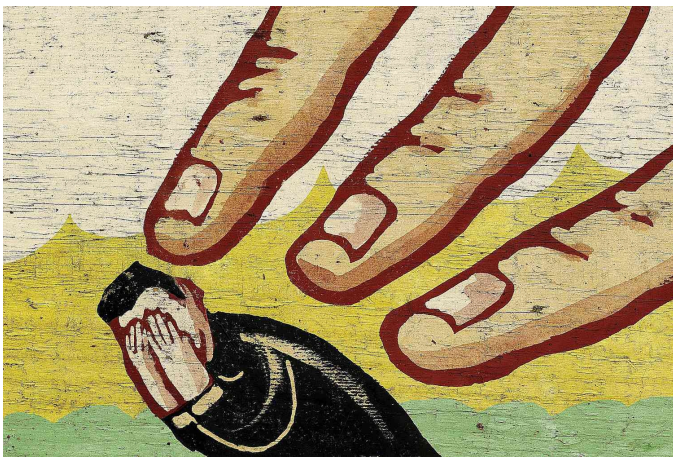
In the 1980s, the late French social theorist René Girard identified a terrible but undeniable pattern: every group has a need for a scapegoat, someone upon which to place the cumulative guilt and shame for the moral transgressions of the entire group, someone to sacrifice on behalf of the group.<sup>5</sup>

Talk to survivors of workplace abuse, and they'll tell you: the Scapegoat Mechanism, as Girard coined it, is alive and well in today's workplace. At work, a targeted employee is "othered" as soon as the abuse begins. Witnesses, even those with a desire to support the target, will start to distance themselves, for no other reason than their survival instinct taking over.

In the eyes of HR and supervisors, the target becomes the very “emotional release valve” Girard wrote about. 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 itself of any and all responsibility for the abuse the target suffered while at work.

According to a survey I ran last year, 95% of targets of workplace abuse experience secondary abuse – in the form of gaslighting and scapegoating – at by HR and/or their supervisor.<sup>6</sup> For most, this is more traumatic to experience than the primary abuse, to which I can personally attest:

*When my employer scapegoated me for following directions and covering up the toxic behaviors of a colleague, it felt as though God and the Universe itself were against me.*



#### **4. Sham and Biased Internal Investigations**

The common practice for employees experiencing interpersonal conflict that cannot be resolved is to bring the matter to HR. But if you ask most survivors of workplace abuse, they’ll tell you: once HR got involved, their situation worsened dramatically.

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

What about those HR departments that truly strive for fairness and justice? you ask. Tragically, no fewer than thirty unseen biases influence internal investigations of workplace abuse, short-circuiting even the best-intentioned HR personnel:

- Organizational biases – protect the institution and the status quo
- Investigator-specific biases – skews 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 comes to completion, with the full existential and psychological weight of the abusive experience crashing down on the targeted employee. (You’ll find the list of all 30 biases in Appendix B.)

Any honest effort to neutralize systemic workplace abuse must face this difficult truth:

**Despite good intentions, Human Resources is a big part of the problem.**

## 5. Executive Disconnect

That executives are insulated from the problems experienced by the average employee is self-evident. But workplace abuse is selective, and its selective nature makes it **invisible** to Leadership.

The C-Suite relies on their Chief HR Officer for information related to problems of employee mistreatment and retention. But essential data about workplace abuse and its cost to organizations and their employees never breaks through to the top floor. Here's why:

According to Girard, **whenever a group scapegoats an individual, the individuals doing the scapegoating are completely unconscious of the violence they are committing.**

This explains perfectly how ethical HR personnel can commit terrible violence against targets of workplace abuse and still sleep well at night. It also explains why no one in Leadership ever considered running a cost-benefit analysis to understand whether or not current practices succeed in protecting the organization's best talent from the dangers of workplace abuse.



## *The Catch-22*

Here's how the Catch-22 of systemic workplace abuse works:

- 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.

- Sham and biased internal investigations ensure that the target is satisfactorily scapegoated, absolving both the perpetrator and the employer.

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

- Witnesses learn that it's not safe to bring problems of this sort to the attention of HR and their supervisor.

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

Because executives remain uninformed of these drivers and their cascading effects, no one connects the organization's failure to retain its best people, ensuring that the cycle of emotional abuse and psychological violence persists.

# *How Best Practices Reinforce the Problem*

Ironically, efforts to curtail workplace abuse fall short because they ignore these core drivers altogether. Psychological Safety experts focus on culture, but overlook the obvious: workplace abuse is driven primarily by individual pathology. And employers can't educate their employees about secondary workplace abuse without also equipping targets with the language and the leverage they need to seek damages.

In recent months, researchers, advocates, and developers have begun to emphasize

the "moral injury" experienced by targeted employees, hoping that appealing to the empathy of the C-Suite might lead to change. But no amount of moralizing will move leaders to act on a problem they don't fully understand.

In the case of workplace abuse, executives don't require further moralizing. They need clarity. Once they understand its true cost, they'll be fully motivated to explore real solutions to the problem.

# *The High Cost of Not Seeing the Problem Clearly*

## **The Cost to Individuals:**

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, 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.<sup>7</sup>

Workplace abuse typically leads to depression, anxiety, lowered self-esteem, lowered productivity, anger, PTSD symptoms, not to mention the impact to one's physical health and financial well-being. 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 employees. Nothing could be further from the truth. Forty years of research agrees: the employees most likely to experience workplace abuse are ethically grounded, high-contributing employees who play well with others.

And every year, employers lose on average **9% of their workforce**, most of whom are the 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 **a far greater challenge than the C-Suite understands it to be.**

# *Projected Organizational Impact: Hypothetical Case Study*

## **Ford Motor Company**

Total Employees: **171,000** (2024)

Average Employee Salary (Estimated): **\$101,341**

Using data from national prevalence studies and cost estimates from leading researchers, we can project the staggering toll that workplace abuse is likely taking on the company. To calculate the annual cost of workplace abuse, we use the following factors:

- A: number of employees
- B: average salary
- 13.78% of employees experience workplace abuse each year<sup>7</sup>
- 61.67% of targeted employees will exit, be terminated, or transfer as a result<sup>7</sup>
- 50% of their salary – average cost of hiring and training replacement talent<sup>8</sup>
- 5.38% of their salary – additional per-case cost tied directly to what they earned (absenteeism and presenteeism losses)
- \$14,633 – fixed cost for each case regardless of salary: health care, compensatory culture spending, legal exposure, and management time

Note: costs for reputational damage, morale contagion, lost innovation, workers' compensation have been omitted since they vary greatly from case to case.

$$(A * B * 0.1378 * 0.6167 * 0.5) + (A * 0.1378 * ((B * 0.0538) + 14,633)) =$$

**\$1,209,615,700**

**In 2024 alone, Ford Motor Company lost north of \$1.2 billion to workplace abuse, over 20% of its yearly net income.**

# Recommendations

With there being no close second, workplace abuse is the single greatest threat to employees and employers. It persists not because of ignorance or indifference, but because the institutional response – which is wholly incapable of resolving the problem – perpetuating it, at tremendous cost to every single stakeholder. The nexus that results from not understanding the predatory nature of some employees, the dilemma of employer liability, the Scapegoat Mechanism, sham and biased investigations, and executive disconnect explains perfectly why half-measures are doomed to fail.

The Catch-22 of systemic workplace abuse will not be abated through legislation, training programs, or culture change alone. A systemic problem of this magnitude requires a systemic intervention, one that neutralizes each driver at every step of the workplace abuse life-cycle.

## To Targets

- You'll want to document everything, both contemporaneously and in writing.
- Unless your organization has exceptionally strong anti-bullying policy, do not rely on internal complaint mechanisms as your sole or primary pathway.
- As early as possible, seek outside counsel, preferably before the internal process concludes.
- Your health comes first, with the case taking second place.

- If you are gaslighted and scapegoated in addition to the primary abuse you experienced, take heart: you're not alone. The institutional response you received was predetermined and is not a reflection on your value or your truth.

## To Survivors

- Seek trauma-informed therapy, the foundation of personal recovery.
- Release whatever shame you carry. It's not yours any more. It belongs to the perpetrator(s) and the organization that enabled them.
- When you're ready, your voice has immense value in terms of healing and growing awareness of the problem.
- Reconnect with meaningful work, on your terms and in your timing.

## To Organizations

- Do you have a zero tolerance policy with teeth to ensure accountability?
- Does your HR department internally investigate cases of alleged workplace abuse?
- Do you know your organization's annual cost of workplace abuse?

If the answer to any of these is no, then the Catch-22 is alive and well in your organization right now, whether you see it or not.

# *A Solution Exists*

Current interventions fail because they misunderstand the invisible loop that reinforces the very systems harming targeted employees. A real solution has to do more than just manage the problem. Such a system must:

- Require all supervisors to report suspected workplace abuse;
- Recognize and respond to individual predation;
- Disrupt scapegoating before it escalates;
- Support the emotional health and safety of targeted employees;
- Ensure neutral, third-party investigations; and

- Incentivize adoption through measurable cost-savings.

Imagine a system built on external objectivity rather than one fueled by internal politics. This system would create a path for employers to protect employees targeted for workplace abuse without the risk of employer liability.

**Such a system exists. Its blueprint is fully conceptualized, costing on average 55 cents for every dollar it saves.**

It stands ready for testing, refinement, and deployment. What it needs is **a partner with the influence, resources, and courage to deliver a lasting win for employees and employers alike.**



**Real change,  
enduring change,  
happens one step  
at a time.**



*Ruth Bader Ginsburg*

# Appendix

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## B. The 30 Biases of Internal Investigations

### Organizational Biases

**Institutional Self-Preservation Bias:** Tendency to protect the organization from liability, reputational damage, and financial loss, often at the expense of a fair investigation.

**Status Quo Bias:** Preference for maintaining existing power structures and organizational dynamics rather than disrupting them, even when warranted.

Financial Incentive Bias: Pressure to minimize findings that could lead to costly settlements, legal action, or remediation programs.

Management Protection Bias: Tendency to shield managers and executives from accusations, as they're often viewed as more valuable to the organization than lower-level employees.

Documentation Aversion Bias: Reluctance to create thorough documentation that could be discoverable in legal proceedings, leading to intentionally vague findings.

### Investigator-Specific Biases

Conflict of Interest Bias: When investigators report to or have relationships with accused parties or have a stake in the outcome.

Confirmation Bias: Tendency to look for evidence that confirms pre-existing beliefs about the situation or people involved.

Authority Bias: Giving more credibility to those higher in the organizational hierarchy regardless of the merit of their statements.

Halo/Horn Effect: Allowing one positive or negative trait of a person to influence overall assessment of their credibility or claims.

Prior Relationship Bias: When investigators' previous experiences with involved parties influence their assessment of current situations.

Recency Bias: Giving greater weight to recent events rather than considering patterns of behavior over time.

Outcome Bias: Evaluating the investigation based on preferred outcomes rather than the fairness of the process.

Expedience Bias: Preference for quick resolution over thorough investigation, especially when the organization is experiencing pressure.

### Cognitive and Social Biases

Implicit Bias: Unconscious attitudes or stereotypes about certain groups (gender, race, age) affecting investigation.

Coherence Bias: Preference for narratives that fit neatly together, even if they oversimplify complex dynamics.

Fundamental Attribution Error: Tendency to attribute behavior to personality rather than situational factors for the accused (especially targets) while doing the reverse for favored parties.

**Anchoring Bias:** Relying too heavily on the first piece of information received (often the initial complaint or management's perspective).

**Loss Aversion:** Greater motivation to avoid organizational losses than to secure justice for targets.

**Bandwagon Effect:** Aligning investigations with organizational majority opinion rather than objective assessment.

**Groupthink:** Pressure for consensus influencing investigative outcomes, especially when results could challenge organizational norms.

### Structural and Procedural Biases

**Power Asymmetry Bias:** Failure to account for differences in power between parties, particularly relevant in workplace abuse situations.

**Reporting Structure Bias:** When HR or investigators report to leaders who have a stake in minimizing findings.

**Legal Framing Bias:** Focusing narrowly on legal liability rather than ethical conduct or workplace culture.

**Documentation Gap Bias:** Giving disproportionate weight to documented events while dismissing verbal interactions where abuse often occurs.

**Historical Precedent Bias:** Making decisions influenced by how similar cases were handled in the past, perpetuating systemic issues.

**Limited Scope Bias:** Artificially narrowing the investigation to exclude relevant patterns or contextual information.

**Burden of Proof Bias:** Applying unreasonably high standards of evidence to targets' claims while accepting minimal evidence from the accused.

**Victim Credibility Bias:** Scrutinizing the target's behavior, past, and emotional responses more critically than the accused's.

**Retaliation Blindness:** Failing to recognize subtle forms of retaliation during or after investigations.

**Solution Aversion:** Resistance to findings that would necessitate significant organizational changes.