

Mobbing

Introduction

This page covers 'bullying at work', or 'mobbing'. The text describes what the concept entails, when it can occur, how it may affect a person or organisation, how it can be recognised, how it can be addressed, and what you can do to help. The goal of this text is to raise awareness for the subject of mobbing.

What is mobbing?

Mobbing can be defined as demeaning, intimidating or hostile behaviour that is systematically directed against one person, who is (no longer) able to defend himself/herself. It may also be referred to as 'bullying' or 'inappropriate behaviour'. Mobbing does *not* refer to teasing, assertive behaviour or (impending) dispute.

Mobbing can occur in various forms, for instance:

1. *Social isolation*, e.g. by placing a person in an office that is located far away from other workspaces, or by neglecting someone in general.
2. *Impeding work*, e.g. deleting files that a colleague needs to access, withholding messages or phone calls, deliberately planning meetings so that one person is unable to join, manipulating results.
3. *Ridiculing* someone's appearance, behaviour, speech, movement or sexual orientation.
4. *Gossiping or spreading rumours* with the purpose of harming someone's reputation.
5. *Threatening*, for instance by claiming that 'things will definitely get worse' for someone, or continually threatening to fire or negatively assess them.
6. *Physical violence*, e.g. locking up someone, or pushing them.
7. *Using intimidating language*, rudely calling someone (crude) names.

What circumstances enable the occurrence of mobbing?

Mobbing occurs in every type of organisations. However, certain organisational characteristics may (unintentionally) foster its occurrence, for instance:

1. when executive staff members do not pay attention to their employees as individuals.
2. in organisations that do not schedule work meetings.
3. if employees are not addressed personally when their behaviour is inappropriate, and if professional behaviour and personal responsibility are not appealed to.
4. when the future plans of an organisation are unclear, so that employees do not develop a sense of loyalty or team spirit.
5. if conflicts are avoided, rather than addressed.
6. if the organisation employs dominant group norms, thereby risking that a person might be denounced for not fitting the group standard.

What are the consequences of mobbing?

Mobbing can have severe health consequences. Victims often worry about their situation and may experience nightmares, stress, depression and anxiety. In addition, colleagues that witness mobbing may also be affected. Research shows that they frequently suffer from stress, due to the working environment, and may develop an aversion to going to work. These employees may experience anxiety, because of fear of becoming a victim themselves, or because they feel guilty about not being able to help the victim. As a result, the numbers of sickness absence may rise, as may the number of mistakes, while the organisation may fall behind in customer service. Furthermore, the organisation may have to employ additional staff to cover for absent employees.

How can you address mobbing?

It is important to distinguish undesirable group behaviour from undesirable 1-on-1 situations. The latter (e.g. verbal or non-verbal intimidation, or impeding one's work) often goes unnoticed. This behavior can occur as a result of an unresolved conflict, but may also surface without any prior conflict situation. Mobbing is hard to solve. One may consider mediation or complaint procedures as an appropriate form of

intervention. Undesirable group behaviour, on the other hand, is visible for each group member, but is somehow tolerated by the group. Interventions should therefore focus on stopping the undesirable behaviour (possibly with the aid of external consultants) and the re-establishment of the institution's desired norms and values. The manager should have a leading role in the intervention.

What can you do?

Mobbing only lasts because it is tolerated. It is important to address the 'mobber'. In addition, the victim should indicate that he/she is bothered by undesirable behaviour. Management and co-workers should intervene when they witness any form of mobbing. This can be done through one of the following options:

- Directly talk to the person in question.
- Suggest a solution without focusing on the person.
- Make an appointment with your manager or employer.
- Make an appointment with an occupational physician or counsellor.
- As an organisation: make clear that mobbing will not be tolerated. Undesirable behaviour can only be controlled when the boundaries are set clearly.
- As an organisation: create a social policy that revolves around respect and dignity in the workspace.

If you are accused of mobbing yourself, you can do the following:

- Listen to the alleged victim.
- Try to assess the situation honestly and objectively.
- Talk to your manager or employer.

By taking (one of) these steps, you show that you intend to (re)build a respectful professional relationship and that you are willing to make a commitment, so that the undesirable behaviour will not resurface. You may also choose to initiate an appointment with both your manager and the victim.