

# What is Mobbing?

## Budget Cuts Are Not the Only Way Workers Are Forced from Jobs: Workplace Abuse

“The mobbing syndrome is a malicious attempt to force a person out of the workplace through unjustified accusations, humiliation, general harassment, emotional abuse, and/or terror.

“It is a ‘ganging up’ by the leader(s) - organization, superior, co-worker, or subordinate - who rallies others into systematic and frequent ‘mob-like’ behavior.

“Because the organization ignores, condones, or even instigates the behavior, it can be said that the victim, seemingly helpless against the powerful and many, is indeed ‘mobbed.’ The result is always injury - physical or mental distress or illness and social misery and, most often, expulsion from the workplace.”

-Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace, by Davenport, Schwartz, and Elliott, 1999.

When a budget crisis hits a large institution, certain workers often seem to be treated as though they are “expendable,” and are often the first forced out. But this is not the only manner in which workers are driven out of the workplace. Mobbing has been recognized for many years in Europe, and it is also beginning to be identified as a serious workplace problem in the United States. The authors above go on to say, “Mobbing is an emotional assault. Through innuendo, rumors, and public discrediting, a hostile environment is created in which one individual gathers others to willingly, or unwillingly participate in continuous malevolent actions to force a person out of the workplace.”

“These actions escalate into abusive and terrorizing behavior. The victim feels increasingly helpless when the organization does not put a stop to the behavior or may even plan or condone it... Frequently productivity is affected... Resignation, termination, or early retirement, the negotiated voluntary or involuntary expulsion from the workplace, follows. For the victim, death - through illness or suicide - may be the final chapter in the mobbing story.” -ibid

Much of the original research on mobbing was done by Swedish researcher Heinz Leymann in the 1980’s. His findings have been slow in making it to the United States. However a number of local statutes have been enacted, and publications, conferences, and resources have surfaced recently in the U.S. For example, Peralta Community College District in Oakland recently established a regulation outlawing such behavior.

Often mobbing activities are directed at whistleblowers. Brian Martin, in *Whistleblowing and Nonviolencen* (Peace and Change, Vol. 24, No. 3, January 1999) describes attacks on whistleblowers this way:

Whistleblowing, in casual usage, means speaking out from within an organization to expose a social problem or, more generally, dissenting from dominant views or practices... The most common experience of whistleblowers is that they are attacked. Instead of their messages being evaluated, the full power of the organization is turned against the whistleblower. This is commonly called the shoot-the-messenger syndrome,... The means of suppression are impressive, nonetheless. They include ostracism by colleagues, petty harassment (including snide remarks, assignment to trivial tasks and invoking of regulations not normally enforced), spreading of rumors, formal reprimands, transfer to positions with no work (or too much work), demotion, referral to psychiatrists, dismissal, and blacklisting.

Whistleblowers often discover that formal channels for complaint or remedy are ineffective or easily blocked. As Martin explains, “Appeal bodies are part of the wider system of power and usually seek or reach accommodation with other powerful groups. Hence such bodies are highly unlikely to support a single individual against elites from a major organization, who usually have links with elites elsewhere.”

Whistleblowers have other resources, according to Martin: “One strategy is based on ‘mobilization,’ namely winning supporters by circulating relevant documents, holding meetings and obtaining media coverage.” However, such attempts at mobilization are often met by more severe mobbing and harassment.

Kenneth Westhues, has identified academic institutions as a primary location for mobbing attacks:

“Ordinarily, colleagues in positions of local power explain the situation in terms of failings of the targeted professor:

bad teaching, too few publications or the wrong kind, ethical misconduct, shirking of duties, failure to live up to legitimate expectations of the job... Sometimes, however, the target's failings have little to do with why he or she is in trouble. The evidence may point to a sharply contrasting explanation: that colleagues and/or administrators have ganged up on the targeted professor for no good reason, to the point that collectively shunning, shaming, and tormenting the target bolsters the group's solidarity, its *esprit de corps*." - *Workplace Mobbing in Academe* (2004)

Westhues also tracks the trajectory of mobbing, and its consequences for victims and perpetrators. Here are more of his comments:

"Mobbing ... is an impassioned, collective campaign by co-workers to exclude, punish, and humiliate a targeted worker. Initiated most often by a person in a position of power or influence, mobbing is a desperate urge to crush and eliminate the target. The urge travels through the workplace like a virus, infecting one person after another. The target comes to be viewed as absolutely abhorrent, with no redeeming qualities, outside the circle of acceptance and respectability, deserving only of contempt. As the campaign proceeds, a steadily larger range of hostile ploys and communications comes to be seen as legitimate."

"Not infrequently, mobbing spelled the end of the target's career, marriage, health, and livelihood. From a study of circumstances surrounding suicides in Sweden, Leymann estimated that about twelve percent of people who take their own lives have recently been mobbed at work.... By Leymann's and others' estimates, between two and five percent of adults are mobbed sometime during their working lives. The other 95 percent, involved in the process only as observers, bystanders, or perpetrators (though occasionally also as rescuers or guardians of the target), mostly deny, gloss over, and forget the mobbing cases in which they took part. That is one reason it has taken so long for the phenomenon to be identified and researched.

"Workplace mobbing is normally carried out politely, without any violence, and with ample written documentation. Yet even without the blood, the bloodlust is essentially the same: contagion and mimicking of unfriendly, hostile acts toward the target; relentless undermining of the target's self-confidence; group solidarity against one whom all agree does not belong; and the euphoria of collective attack.

"The worker most vulnerable to being mobbed is an average or high achiever who is personally invested in a formally secure job, but who nonetheless somehow threatens or puts to shame co-workers and/or managers.

"Ironically, it is in workplaces where workers' rights are formally protected that the complex and devious incursions on human dignity that constitute mobbing most commonly occur. Union shops are one example... University faculties are another, on account of the special protections of tenure and academic freedom professors have... Mobbing appears to be more common in the professional service sector, where work is complex, goals ambiguous, best practices debatable, and market discipline far away. Scapegoating is an effective if temporary means of achieving group solidarity, when it cannot be achieved in a more constructive way. It is a turning inward, a diversion of energy away from serving nebulous external purposes toward the deliciously clear, specific goal of ruining a disliked co-worker's life.

Less time, skill, and energy are required to write off a persistent critic as a "difficult professor" than to rebut the critic's arguments. Chalking up dissent to the dissenter's real or imagined flaws of character relieves overworked administrators of uncertainty and ambiguity. It lets them feel good about themselves.

Westhues (and others) point out that the best way to deal with mobbing is to nip it in the bud. Organizations not able to do this are at least as much at fault as the perpetrators of the attacks. To stop it requires an open atmosphere at the very beginning:

"The basic priority for constructive resolution of workplace conflict, namely to keep the conversation going, to let competing positions be expressed and the evidence for them reviewed, to listen to what opponents say, to respond honestly and respectfully, to try not to silence anyone."

Westhues lists three points for a strong academic institution which has vaccinated itself against mobbing: (1) Protect freedom of speech. (2) Keep academic organization loose. A tight ship cannot be a university. It has to be full of contradiction and brimming with debate in order to fulfill its public purposes. (3) Focus attention on these purposes, like educating youth, producing useful knowledge, and above all seeking truth.

*These quotes on mobbing were collected and prepared by Karl Schaffer ([schafferkarl@fhda.edu](mailto:schafferkarl@fhda.edu), x8214), as a public service to the De Anza College community. In addition to the sources cited above, google "mobbing" or "workplace abuse" for more info.*