

Workplace Mobbing in Policing *When Facts Don't Matter*

Have you ever worked in a police department, detachment or unit where rumors and gossip were so rampant that they poisoned an entire workplace? If these focused on a single person, you might have just had yourself a front row seat to a good ol' corporate mobbing. But if you were the target, your work reputation, career and health were likely all hit - hard. In view of the ongoing dialogue about bullying, harassment, and abuse of authority within various police forces, it is important to understand the phenomenon of "workplace mobbing". This is a relevant workplace issue to consider as police organizations move forward on these other very important topics.

What is mobbing anyways

Mobbing has been defined by some as excessive, unjustified criticism directed at a single person by a group. Others however, have simply referred to it as *employer facilitated harassment* because it cannot survive without the active support or willful blindness of management. Some suggest it may even sometimes be used as a deliberate management strategy to remove an employee. Once it begins however, this socialized feeding frenzy gains momentum as bystanders jump on the bandwagon - often just to avoid being run over by it. Mobbing targets can expect to be stripped of responsibilities, isolated, shunned, humiliated, discredited, have work histories rewritten and more. This behavior can be triggered by many factors including: envy, change, office tension, transitional leadership, positional uncertainty, increased accountability, whistle-blowing or just somehow being different. Being seen as different by the way, might be as simple as just not taking extended coffee breaks, being overly conscientious, having different opinions or violating other so-called "cultural norms". These can become especially problematic if they happen to involve those with undue social influence with senior management. And that point is worth understanding. Interestingly, mobbing targets are often described as average to above average performers and they can be anyone in the corporate hierarchy.

Mobbing has been described by some as *bullying on steroids*. Dr. Heinz Leymann, a pioneer in this field, once conducted a study of Swedish nurses who had either completed or attempted suicide. He found that 12% of that study group had recently been mobbing targets. There are potential consequences for non-targets as well. In a review of factors leading to the Virginia Tech massacre, Dr. Kenneth Westhues believed that this might also have played a role. He suggested that a deeper review of such events might help us better understand what "triggers" individuals who are involved in similar mass shootings. Additionally, Dr. Eli Sopow's book about corporate personality disorder seems to support this very possibility. He referenced U.S. Bureau of Labour statistics which noted that up to 1000 workers are murdered each year on the job in that country. Stress and poor relationships with supervisors were leading reasons why. Mobbing has linkages to both factors and is the very reason why every organization who has an interest in their employees and ensuring healthy workplaces must be aware of this phenomenon.

From gossip to gospel

Signs that the mob is cooking something up often begin innocently. This disastrous recipe can start over simple coffee break gossip before escalating into a full fledged character assassination. It is usually sparked by an alleged incident of some sort. This in turn can catalyze a firestorm of negative opinions and outrage in even the most reasonable co-worker. Widespread rumors soon become common knowledge and “where there’s smoke there must be fire” as the saying goes. However, that fire may actually be arson committed by someone deliberately torching an employee’s work reputation and creating a moral panic. The damage from such rumors can become compounded by half-truths that distort anything the target says until facts become fiction and fiction becomes facts. Worse yet, none of the rumors need to actually be true - management just has to *believe* they’re true. Secrecy is always essential to such fraudulent communications. And this is just one way that communications networks and healthy relationships are sabotaged in the workplace. This is also exactly where poor HR decisions can be prevented through open and honest communication regarding any perceived issues. However, in a mobbing situation, the target will be the last to know there are any concerns at all.

Once signaled for elimination, targeted employees will eventually be driven out of the workplace. That signal may be either discrete or humiliatingly public but either way, the stigmatization of a target as an undesirable will be the same. Because once the fear of behavioral accountability is removed, the group’s behavior is guaranteed to worsen with implied protection from managerial reprisal. Should rumors about alleged misdeeds lead to widespread beliefs - then the search for supporting facts will begin in earnest. And that’s where it really gets nasty. An investigation will be launched and false mental health and/or conduct allegations can usually be expected to follow.

Influence, repetition, and credibility

Now unless there’s a serial bully or worse in the mix (and there usually is), such group behavior can be triggered either intentionally or unintentionally. Either way, research has clearly proven the surprisingly predictable behavioral pattern of a group when targeting by those in authority occurs. This happens in part because our beliefs are influenced by message repetition and messenger credibility. Marketers, cult leaders, and many others figured that out long ago. In other words, if someone is effectively “labeled” and then repeatedly vilified by those with influence - they’re in trouble. People who know little about an employee or their work will suddenly become experts on both. They’ll be readily believed too because the employee no longer is. This is a definite sign that the undermining is complete. Hopefully, managers are diligent enough to ensure their powder is dry and are making such HR decisions on the basis of facts and not just repeated fiction. But don’t count on it. If the facts later indicate that management has been mistaken in their analysis, *their* future will be jeopardized - and that isn’t going to go well for the targeted employee either.

Employee “protection” processes

But surely such mobbing behavior can't happen in an environment filled with objective, fair minded investigators can it ? You bet it can. And for those signaled for elimination, successes will be ignored, mistakes will be magnified, and their very character will be questioned. Now don't get me wrong. I firmly believe that most police officers are an impressive lot that I am proud to be a part of. But the literature is clear. Workplace mobbing isn't common but it *does* occur - even in policing. Interestingly, organizations with respectful workplace strategies are often most at risk. Why? Well, some suggest that the power of “labeling” and becoming entangled in an organization's own conduct/harassment processes are just two of the reasons. Because if someone becomes stereotyped as a micromanager or worse, the very workplace mechanisms designed to protect employees from such unfair targeting and harassment - may actually be used as a weapon against them. And once a complaint is made, an investigation will be launched that may take years to resolve. This will compromise any career because the mere stain of such an accusation will have done its job. I mean surely if a senior officer or other such corporate champion supports such an investigation, there *must* be something to it. Right ?

Awareness and survival

Workplace mobbing undermines individuals and jeopardizes organizations. It can result in the removal of individuals who are good at their jobs, who promote accountability, and who catalyze positive organizational change. Removing employees like this can result in lost productivity, health issues, lawsuits and has been linked to both suicides and workplace violence.

But what's an organization to do? Well, organizations should begin by increasing mobbing awareness through their mental health, leadership, and respectful workplace strategies. Management must educate themselves and their workforce about the damaging behaviors associated to serial bullies, gossip, and labeling in order to expose them in the workplace. And finally if you even *think* you might be a target, you need to educate yourself on this topic now.

The policing profession is filled with outstanding men and women who work on the principles of honesty, trust, and fairness on a daily basis. Unfortunately this devastating phenomenon is not about facts or fairness - it's about power and emotion. Mobbing is fueled by half-truths and succeeds in secrecy. Learn to recognize the signs and behaviors so you can protect your organization, your employees and most importantly...yourself.

Ron Russell - May 26, 2018

About the Author - Ron Russell retired from the Royal Canadian Mounted Police as a commissioned officer after nearly 28 years of service. During his career he gained extensive experience with operational policing, crowd control, and also worked as a regional leadership trainer promoting the principles of performance management. He has been formally recognized a number of times for his contributions to policing, public order and performance management. He has also personally survived this phenomenon. He can be reached at rdruss55@gmail.com.

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