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OCTOBER 2, 2014

## Should workplace bullying be outlawed?

 September 14, 2014 by [stevenyoder](#)  [Leave a Comment](#)

Catherine Mattice might seem an unlikely target of workplace intimidation as a former human resources department leader. In 2002 in her early twenties, she was hired into an assistant human resources director job at a San Diego nonprofit. But she quickly became a focus for the ire of another long-time director in the same department.

Five years of petty control and put-downs took their toll—he'd never greet her in the morning though he did others, would point out minor mistakes to the agency president even though he didn't supervise her, and once yelled at her for entering his office when he'd stepped away to get pizza that the department had ordered.

When Mattice told the organization's president that she intended to resign because of how poisonous her co-worker had made the work environment, he didn't offer to intervene. He fired her on the spot.

Victims of workplace bullying have few options for stopping their antagonists. As in Mattice's case, it usually ends when the target leaves or is fired, say some experts.

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That lack of recourse for employees is why many activists are seeking new state workplace bullying laws. Bills that would make such behavior the grounds for civil lawsuits were introduced this year in at least 15 states, though none have yet passed. But critics say such laws could make it impossible for managers to do their jobs.

Bullying on the job means verbal abuse, offensive behavior that threatens or humiliates, or sabotage that keeps work from getting done, according to the Workplace Bullying Institute, an education, training, and advocacy organization. Bullying is considered different from incivility in that it involves a pattern of behavior rather than a single episode.

Some surveys indicate that workplace abuse is widespread. In a 2008 survey by two academic researchers, 32 percent of staff at one university reported being victimized. More than a quarter of human resource professionals reported being bullied in a 2011 survey of 400 of them by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). A 2009 study in the *Journal of Professional Nursing* reported that about 1 in 5 nurses working in medical-surgical and critical care were targeted, most often by other nurses.

The impacts are serious, according to the Workplace Bullying Institute. In response to a spring 2012 poll by the institute of more than 500 bullying targets, more than half reported having panic attacks as a result of the experience, 30 percent said they'd been diagnosed with PTSD, and about 60 percent had heart palpitations or hypertension.

Depending on a person's job, the impact could extend beyond workers themselves. In the health care field, for example, it can put lives at risk, say advocates. Kathleen Bartholomew, a nurse and author of the book *Ending Nurse-to-Nurse Hostility*, [says](#) she has seen nurses make mistakes when they were upset by bullying.

Advocates say that bullying will be stopped only by new laws. For example, employers didn't reduce sexual harassment and racial discrimination on their own, they argue—government forced them to do so. Workplace bullying laws already exist in Ireland, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Denmark, four provinces in Canada, and two states in

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Australia.

A bill on bullying introduced this year in New York would prohibit an employer or one of its employees from subjecting employees to an “abusive work environment.” As an article in the American Bar Association [notes](#), under the proposed law a reasonable person would have to find specific actions abusive based on the severity, nature, and frequency of the conduct, and a single act wouldn’t normally be enough to clear the threshold for abusive conduct.

But opponents say that in practice it can be difficult to determine whether the actions of a supervisor represent actual bullying or just a boss’s abrasive personality or a particularly thin-skinned employee. School psychologist Izzy Kalman, founder of the website Bullies2Buddies.com, which trains people on handling bullying at work, adamantly opposes such legislation– he thinks it will create a mountain of frivolous lawsuits and prevent supervisors from doing their jobs.

And Jonathan Segal, SHRM’s Pennsylvania legislative director, worries about the “reasonableness” metric: “If a manager raises their voice multiple times, do you end up having litigation over that?” he asks.

Indeed, by that standard, Bobby Knight wouldn’t have lasted a week as coach at the University of Indiana, much less set a coaching record for college basketball wins. Steve Jobs, known for making employees cry and firing staff arbitrarily, might have brought on so many lawsuits at Apple that he’d have been gone years before the iPhone.

One thing both proponents and opponents of bullying legislation agree on is that companies need training on keeping their work environments free of abuse and that victims need skills to confront bullies.

Mattice turned her experience to her advantage, doing graduate work on workplace bullying and then launching Civility Partners, a company that trains workers and supervisors on building a positive workplace environment. Kalman travels across the



## Commentary: US strategy toward the Islamic State - An (urgent) opportunity for Congress to do its job

September 27, 2014 By [Patrick R. Romain](#)

The execution of U.S. foreign policy that has relied on the use of force and support provided to selected factions, whether in the volatile Middle East or in other hot spots, has been an abject failure. An astronomical cost has been paid with American and foreign lives and currency. The war against the Islamic State [...]



country doing workshops for victims on how to stop bullying by changing their own reactions—staying calm rather than getting upset, which he says just encourages antagonists.

Until one of the many state bullying bills introduced to date gets enacted, private solutions like those will be all that victims have.

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September 23, 2014 By [Liz Fields](#)

Australia's anti-terror campaign and new laws designed to quash the perceived rise of homegrown extremism and menace from the Islamic State terror group abroad is undeniably threatening the country's values of liberty and democracy, rather than securing them. The government's recent heightened security measures, including raising its terror threat level to "high" and conducting mass raids on [...]



### Commentary: The irony of Turkey hosting a UN-sponsored Internet forum

September 3, 2014

By [Liz Fields](#)

The decision to host a major UN-backed

Internet forum in Turkey this week, despite the country's displays of spiraling contempt toward web and social media freedoms, seems to be rewarding Turkish government for its draconian censorship laws, rather than

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denouncing them. The Internet Governance Forum (IGF), being held between 2-5 Sept. in Istanbul, is a gathering [...]



## Commentary: Polarization – the single biggest threat to the United States

September 1, 2014 By [Patrick R. Romain](#)

The standing of the United States will likely weaken over the next several years, setting the country on a path to become an also-ran middle tier power by 2035. By most measures and indicators that bear on future performance and strength, America's advantage over other countries is disappearing – fast. Meanwhile, the country's political leadership [...]

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by Liaquat Ahamed

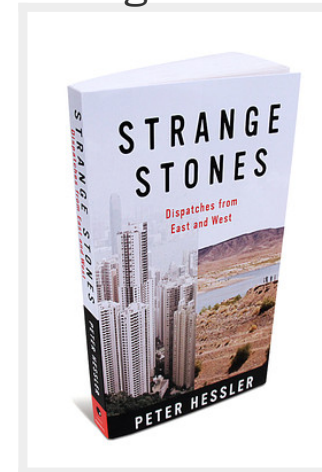
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