WORKPLACE BULLYING AND ORGANIZATIONAL POLITICS

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0 – Abstract

Despite no general agreement exists regarding a definition of Workplace Bullying (WB), power has always been identified as a core element of the construct (Einarsen, 1996; Leymann, 1996; Salin, 2003b). Brodsky (1976), a pioneer researcher, perceives bullies as manipulating their colleagues in order to achieve power or privilege. As such, at the individual level, there are several instances where it might be individually "rational" to bully a colleague or a subordinate, due to internal competition, a politicized climate and performance related rewards systems (Salin, 2003b; Vartia, 1996). For instance, Salin (2003b) found positive associations between workplace bullying and perceptions of organizational politics. Also, Vartia (1996) found that at bullying workplaces the atmosphere was often experienced as strained and competitive, with everyone pursuing their own interests. Our study has been conducted in the Portuguese banking sector and we collected 64 stories of bullying episodes. Our aims were to find in these stories elements of bullying, power and political behaviours, "in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

0 – Resumo

Embora não exista um consenso generalizado relativamente a uma definição de assédio moral no local de trabalho (WB), o poder foi sempre considerado um elemento fundamental do conceito (Einarsen, 1996; Leymann, 1996; Salin, 2003b). Brodsky (1976), um investigador pioneiro nesta área, vê os agressores como indivíduos manipuladores, no sentido de obter poder ou privilégios. Desta forma, a nível individual, perante determinados contextos pode ser racional assediar um colega de trabalho ou subordinado, devido a um ambiente de elevada concorrência interna, altamente politizado e em que prevalecem sistemas de recompensas indexados à performance (Salin, 2003b; Vartia, 1996). Por exemplo, Salin (2003b) encontrou uma associação positiva entre a ocorrência de assédio moral e a percepção de comportamentos políticos. De igual forma Vartia (1996), verificou que em ambientes de trabalho caracterizados pela ocorrência de assédio moral, o ambiente de trabalho era tenso e competitivo, cada individuo perseguindo apenas os seus próprios interesses. O nosso estudo foi realizado no sector bancário português e foram recolhidas 64 histórias de assédio moral. Um dos objectivos é tentar encontrar nestas histórias elementos de assédio moral, poder e comportamentos políticos "em termos dos significados que lhe são atribuídos" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

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1 – Introduction

Workplace bullying (WB) has been described as a hostile and unethical communication systematically directed by one or more individuals, mainly towards one individual, who is pushed into a helpless and defenceless position by persistent actions (Leymann, 1996). These negative behaviours include verbal aggression, criticism, rumours, humiliations, i.e., in a broad sense, persistent acts that place the victim in a disadvantaged position and are used with the aim of persistently humiliating, intimidating, frightening or punishing the victim (Zapf & Einarsen, 2001). The severe outcomes related to workplace bullying and related aggressive behaviours have led a growing number of researchers to study them in UK (e.g. Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Rayner, 1997:2000), in Germany (Zapf, 1999b; Niedl, 1996), in the Nordic countries (Leymann, 1996; Vartia, 1996:2003; Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2001) and also in other countries and continents (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Baron & Neuman, 1996;1998). Results from a European Survey (Thirion, Macias & Vermeylen, 2007) showed that 5% of workers in Europe report having been subjected to bullying and harassment in the workplace in 2005.

In this study, I will take a political approach to organizations and intend to analyze the role played by political behaviours, power, conflict and internal competition in the occurrence of workplace bullying. Secondly, I want to explore in what extent workplace bullying is perceived as being an instrumental activity prosecuted in order to promote efficiency and reduce organizational costs. This will be accomplished through both a quantitative and qualitative methodology, using a questionnaire as the main research tool. At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to describe events that they perceive as bullying, in order to complement quantitative data and to get additional meanings of bullying. Our aims were to find in these stories elements of bullying, power and political behaviours, "in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). We also intend to analyze more deeply which elements of power (reward, coercive, legitimate, expert and reference) (French & Raven, 1959) are embedded in accounts of bullying behaviours.

2 – Workplace bullying, power and organizational politics

According to some authors (Narayanan and Fahey, 1982; Sunesson, 1985), organizational decisions reflect a process of power struggle among conflicting individuals and groups, attempting to further their own self-serving goals. As such, workplace bullying could be understood as a political behaviour, emerging as a "rational choice" to improve one´s own

position, by sabotaging the performance of others or by getting ride of persons considered threats or burdens. For instance, Salin (2003b) found positive association between workplace bullying and perceptions of organizational politics. Also, Vartia (1996) found that at bullying workplaces the atmosphere was often experienced as strained and competitive, with everyone pursuing their own interests. Lee (2002) explores this issue by demonstrating how workplace bullying may be played out through the experiences of staff appraisal, the denial of promotion and performance related pay awards and, sometimes, by driving workers out of their jobs.

Power has always been regarded as a core element of workplace bullying, being understood in relative terms, as a deficit of power from the victim vis-à-vis the perpetrator. Despite its importance, it has never been analyzed deeply, in terms of the different sources of power, which can be enacted to acquire influence over someone (French & Raven, 1959). In our view, an appropriate approach of workplace bullying has to include a deeper analysis of power and techniques of influence, through which the perpetrator exercises its power in order to restrict the behaviour of the victim, affecting its position and even his integrity.

3 –The study

3.1 – Methods

Our study has been carried in the Portuguese banking sector, through a snow-ball process and we collected 561 valid responses containing 64 stories of bullying episodes. WB was measured through two complementary strategies: a list of 38 bullying behaviours (constructed primarily drawing on the NAQ – R (Hoel, Cooper and Faragher, 2001)) and a definition based on prior research (Einarsen et al., 2003). This definition emphasizes the negative, persistent and long-term nature of the bullying experience. For respondents considering themselves bullied, there were follow-up questions regarding the perpetrator(s), the duration of bullying, mental or physical consequences of being bullied, absenteeism and losses of productivity.

3.2 – Results

The focus of our analysis is the sample of 64 stories of bullying situations. The incidence level is 25% of severe bullying and 50% of occasional bullying. From those, 12,5% left their job as a result and 65,6% have witnessed bullying situations at work. The most frequent bullying behaviours found in this sample were, by decreasing order of frequency, "Having your opinions or views ignored" (69,7%), "Being exposed to an unmanageable workload" (57,6%) and thirdly "Excessive monitoring of your work" (54,5%), for frequent bullied targets.

Regarding the emergence of conflicts at work, 32,8% of respondents referred that "there are quite harsh conflicts and it appears difficult to find a solution" and 32,8% referred that "there are some conflicts, but solutions are usually found", what seems contradictory. However, if we analyze simultaneously the "way to settle differences at work", we find that 29,7% of respondents argue that "Who has authority takes advantage of one´s position" comparing to only 18,8% saying that "People talk over the matter and negotiate", what seems to preclude a strained work environment. This fact is confirmed by 45,3% of respondents who state that the general climate at work is "strained and competitive". As far as political behaviours are concerned, we have 51, 6% of respondents referring that "Some build up themselves by tearing others down", 45,3% referring that "Policy changes help only a few", 37,5% referring that "Favouritism, not merit, gets people ahead" and 34,4% referring that "Don´t speak up for fear of retaliation", which indicates a high frequency of political behaviours in the work environment. Additionally, the results suggest the existence of a positive statistically significant relationship between the perception of political behaviours, work overload and workplace bullying. Regarding internal competition, a positive statistically significant relationship was found for victims of bullying according to the definition presented.

The qualitative data analysis of the written stories collected showed three main themes emerging from the discursive analysis of results: political behaviours perceived as bullying, the perception of bullying behaviours as having a instrumental component and organizational practices (like as performance appraisal and the denying of promotion) framed as bullying by employees.

4 - Conclusions

The data let us conclude that the occurrence of political behaviours, a high workload and internal competition are factors which contribute to the occurrence of workplace bullying, in a strained and competitive work environment. Hence, according to these results it seems that the work environment studied is prone to the emergence of workplace bullying.

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