

Are You a Mob Boss? The Influence of Leadership in Workplace Mobbing

Michelle Newlands

Abstract

Workplace mobbing, a form of collective and sustained psychological harassment, has been recognized as a significant organizational issue with detrimental effects on employee well-being and productivity. While mobbing is often associated with peer-to-peer conflict, this paper explores the phenomenon of downward mobbing, where leaders or individuals in positions of authority either initiate or perpetuate mobbing against subordinates. Organizational and interpersonal conditions that give rise to mobbing such as power imbalances, toxic leadership styles, and envy, are examined. The paper offers evidence-informed strategies for mitigating leader-driven mobbing, promoting ethical leadership, embedding equity-informed supervision practices, and enhancing accountability through policy and training. The paper highlights the critical role of leadership in the perpetuation of workplace mobbing, but also in its prevention, and calls for a systemic shift in how organizations train, monitor, and support their leaders.

Keywords: *workplace mobbing, workplace bullying, downward mobbing, abusive supervision, leadership, envy, toxic workplace, destructive leadership.*

Introduction

The 2011 film *Horrible Bosses* depicts a common problem most people wish they knew nothing about: how to cope with a bad boss. Workers usually describe a bad boss as terrible, toxic, authoritarian, or a bully. Workers who have had a bad boss may have experienced such boss behaviors as uncontrolled outbursts, inappropriate blaming, and public ridicule (Tepper et al., 2017). The term "toxic leadership" was introduced by Dr. Marcia Lynn Whicker (1996) as one of the three types of leadership she identified: trustworthy, transformational, and toxic. Toxic leadership is all too familiar to most people who have either witnessed or experienced it (Burke, 2017). Toxic leaders engage in harmful behaviors that impede the skills and abilities of their

subordinates (Zaman et al., 2023). These leaders can have a significant adverse effect on the success of organizations including educational institutions (Dahlan et al., 2024). Over the last 20 years, researchers have become increasingly interested in the causes and consequences of abusive leadership behaviors (Tepper et al., 2017).

In a 1990 study, Hogan et al., as cited by Burke (2017), reported that between 60% and 75% of workers identified their managers or supervisors as the worst aspects of their jobs. In the intervening years since that study, has there been an improvement in how employees experience and perceive their bosses and supervisors? Research from Perceptyx, a consulting firm, suggests that perceptions of management have remained relatively unchanged. In several studies involving over 1,500 employees, 24% of employees reported that they believed they were working for the worst manager they had ever had (Cuadra, 2023). Although there has been found to be more good bosses than bad (Cuadra, 2023), toxic leaders engage in behaviors that significantly harm employee well-being and undermine the overall health of an organization (Gupta & Chawla, 2024). Employees who have worked with a toxic leader remember the adverse effects, even when the experience was short-lived and in the distant past. Bad experiences are in many ways felt more strongly than good. Adverse events tend to have a greater impact on individuals than positive events of the same type (Fors Brandebo et al., 2016). In other words, the memory of a bad boss is like a persistent weed in a garden—difficult to remove and quick to resurface. Attempts to erase or suppress those memories often prove futile. Unfortunately, beyond being difficult to forget, a bad boss can significantly damage staff morale, hinder productivity, and undermine overall organizational effectiveness (Dahlan et al., 2024; Gupta & Chawla, 2024). An abusive boss can create the conditions that make a work environment untenable. Most people will agree that a horrible boss is destructive in the workplace, them being oblivious to their impact on the company and its employees, and using the power of their position to satisfy personal desires, even when doing so is unethical (Lu et al., 2012).

Mobbing vs. Bullying

When a superior engages in bossing behavior, making a deliberate attempt to intimidate the employee (Birknerová et al., 2021), this type of behavior can be perceived as bullying. Andrea Adams coined the term "workplace bullying" in the 1990s, and this term is used in Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the United States (Namie & Namie, 2009). Workplace bullying is defined as repeated and persistent acts that occur over a prolonged period, perpetrated against a target by one or more individuals (Namie & Namie, 2009). Workplace bullying, which harms the individual being bullied, differs from other types of mistreatments, such as incivility (Day et al., 2024). Bullying is considered a subset of aggression (Matthiesen & Einarsen et al., 2007), and workplace bullying is not limited to bosses and leaders. According to researchers Sara Branch, Sheryl Ramsay, and Michelle Barker (2013), bullying in the workplace can occur at all levels of an organization, involving managers with their subordinates (downward bullying), colleagues with colleagues (horizontal bullying), and, at times, subordinates with their supervisor (upward bullying). Unlike the literature on abusive supervision, a commonly held definition for

workplace bullying has been elusive. One definition that seems to be accepted by many researchers defines workplace bullying as a situation in which one or more persons systematically and over a long period of time perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative treatment on the part of one or more persons, in a situation in which the person(s) exposed to the treatment has difficulty defending themselves (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2007). Significant elements of this definition include the extended period, suggesting that the bad treatment must not be an isolated incident but rather a situation that occurs over a sustained period.

The term 'negative treatment,' although not defined, can be understood to mean any number of behaviors that impact negatively on the victim. These negative behaviors are first experienced and then interpreted by the victim as bullying behaviors (Nielsen et al., 2015). Because bullying behavior shares similar characteristics with mobbing in terms of both general characteristics and harmful behaviors, some researchers consider the terms equivalent (Duffy, 2009; Ronha, & Rodrigues, 2025). Mobbing, a term coined by the Swedish physician and psychologist Heinz Leymann in the 1990s, describes the collective behavior of abusive ganging up on a target (Duffy, 2009). In ethology, mobbing refers to a type of animal behavior that aims to drive a target animal out of the group (Duffy, 2009). In this context, mobbing behavior involves a group of animals ganging up on a target (Namie & Namie, 2009). Among humans in the workplace, this behavior may involve hostile and unethical communication towards an individual who is incapable of defending themselves (Namie & Namie, 2009). Thus, mobbing inherently involves an imbalance of power which is a core component of the definition (Ertureten et al., 2013). Mobbing can start with two individuals matched in power, formal or informal, but eventually the victim will be pushed into an inferior position and will be unable to defend themselves (Einarsen et al., 2020; Ertureten et al., 2013; Sloan et al., 2010).

Mobbing behaviors include hostile and unethical communication systematically directed towards one targeted individual. While some researchers use the terms "mobbing" and "bullying" as synonymous and interchangeable (Namie & Namie, 2009; Qureshi et al., 2015), there are important distinctions to be made in the origins and usage of these terms. Mobbing is a form of psychological aggression that can be differentiated from bullying because it involves a group of "mobbers" rather than a single person (Zapf, 1999). Furthermore, as already mentioned, in ethology, mobbing is a term used to describe animal behavior aimed at driving a target animal out of the group (Duffy, 2009). Thus, mobbing reflects an inward-oriented process where employees concentrate efforts to throw out an individual who has been marked as the target for removal (Westhues, 2025). The individual selected as a target may be the result of an imbalance of power within the organization, as seen in the supervisor-employee relationship, or in the individual's status. In some instances, the hierarchical nature of certain industries results in people at the lowest levels of the job hierarchy experiencing more mobbing (Çoban, 2017). In some workplace environments this might be as much as one in ten workers experiencing mobbing behaviors (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020).

The most common form of workplace mobbing involves spreading malicious gossip aimed at

ridiculing and bullying the victim. (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020). Ironically, the employee who is mobbed is often someone whose performance is exemplary and who is perceived as intelligent, competitive, creative, and highly dedicated to the organization (Rata & Onitiu, 2025). The gossip spread by mobbers often has nothing to do with the target's professional skills and competencies (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020). Kenneth Westhues, the most prominent North American researcher of workplace mobbing, notes that, to determine your likelihood of being mobbed, count the ways in which "you show your workmates up..." (Westhues 2005, p.163). Almost any characteristic that makes you stand out from the others, whether it is work excellence, intelligence, ethics, ethnicity, creativity, competence, fame, family status, or finances, can cause you to become a target (Rata & Onitiu, 2025; Sloan et al., 2010; Westhues 2005). Equity-seeking groups, for example, may be easier targets and at greater risk (Sloan et al., 2010) because of differences in language fluency, race, religion, gender expression, or sexual orientation. Being a member of a minority sex or gender group can increase an individual's vulnerability to mobbing in the workplace (Westhues, 2020). Women working in male-dominated environments may experience mobbing at a higher rate due to their underrepresentation and perceived outsider status (Çoban, 2017; Rata & Onitiu, 2025).

The positional power a leader holds can create a dynamic in which team members will mirror the leader's behavior, whether productive or destructive. When a leader models harmful, unethical, or intimidating conduct, followers may reproduce those same patterns, believing them to be acceptable (Bonner et al., 2016) or even necessary for success. Leaders, of course, as heads of an organization, are in positions to exert a strong influence on followers (Bonner et al., 2016). As a result of holding positions of power it may be all too easy for a leader to move into unethical behaviors. After all, who is supervising the supervisor? Leaders set the ethical tone of their workplace; their actions shape norms, influence moral decision-making, and ultimately determine whether a culture becomes constructive or toxic. In many cases it is the leader who signals the target to be eliminated and thus launches the destructive pattern of behavior known as mobbing.

Westhues (2025) convincingly argues that workplace bullying and mobbing be treated as distinct phenomena. He argues that using the term "bully" oversimplifies mobbing behavior, which can be complex and nuanced in professional environments such as universities and hospitals. Using the term "bully" to describe the aggressor can oversimplify a complex issue, potentially implying that punishment is an adequate solution (Duffy, 2009). Bullying includes behaviors such as verbal abuse, offensive conduct, and work sabotage (Einarsen et al., 2020), aimed at humiliating or undermining an individual. Mobbing behaviors which can be considered an extreme form of bullying, (Sloan et al., 2010), often manifest through work-related actions, such as being assigned tasks with impossible deadlines or having one's opinions and contributions consistently ignored (Çoban, 2017). Bullying is often easy to witness by others while mobbing can occur silently through criticism, intimidation, and professional undermining (Rata & Onitiu, 2025).

In some parts of the world, the term mobbing may be used to describe the same set of harassing behaviors commonly referred to as bullying in English-speaking countries. A review of the research reveals that mobbing is more frequently used in German-speaking contexts, while bullying is more

widely used in English-speaking regions (Duffy, 2009). Treated as separate phenomena, both mobbing and bullying are nevertheless harmful and interconnected (Meng, 2025). Workplace mobbing is a more extreme form of bullying usually occurring in competitive atmospheres (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020). Mobbing is also highly prevalent in universities and hospitals (Rata & Onitiu, 2025) where the goal might be to discredit, demoralize, devalue and degrade the professional reputation of the target (Meng, 2025). Mobbing is a process of social elimination, characterized by a series of escalating bullying actions that unfold sequentially, each reinforcing the others to isolate and discredit the target (Meng, 2025). Using lay terms, mobbing is “bullying on steroids” (Mujtaba & Senathip, 2020).

In this paper, the term mobbing will be used to refer to negative workplace behaviors as described above as well as behaviors intended to harm a co-worker or subordinate that persist over time. Additionally, this paper adopts part of the definition of mobbing provided by Ilieva et al. (2024, p.55) to understand mobbing as: “Actions aimed at distressing the employee, leading to behavior that deviates from their job description, creating a hostile work environment, or prompting the employee to resign. Mobbing entails a deliberate negative impact on an employee's mental well-being.” Mobbing behaviors contribute to a toxic work environment marked by sustained negativity, interpersonal hostility, and organizational dysfunction. The cumulative impact of this pattern of behavior is substantial, frequently resulting in diminished employee well-being, increased turnover, and reduced productivity (Ahmed et al., 2024). Mobbing is thus not only harmful to employees; it can also undermine the organization itself. In workplaces where success is measured through service quality and productivity, diminished worker productivity can hit the corporate bottom line. Mobbing erodes efficiency, weakens team cohesion, and ultimately compromises the organization's capacity to achieve its goals. Leaders, as the organizational heads, play a pivotal role in shaping the workplace climate; they can either permit this destructive behavior to take hold or take preventative measures to try to disrupt all forms of mobbing.

The Role of Leadership

Leaders are entrusted with ensuring that an organization's vision and objectives are achieved in alignment with core values. In achieving goals, leaders utilize their influence to advance the organization's objectives. It is assumed that leaders will be guided by a moral compass and ethics that uphold both professional standards, benefiting the organization, and actions that support workers. Unfortunately, this is not always the case and leaders frequently engage in unethical conduct (Bonner et al., 2014). Leadership has been identified as a key predictor of negative behaviors, such as mobbing, as perpetrated in the workplace (Ertureten et al., 2013; Yağcı & Uluöz, 2018). In the literature there are several terms used to connote negative acts perpetrated by a boss to subordinates; “mobbing” (Leymann, 1990), “petty tyranny” (Ashforth, 1995), “toxic leadership” (Whicker, 1996), “abusive supervision” (Tepper, 2000), and “destructive leadership” (Le., 2007) While these terms describe negative leadership behaviors as though they were distinct entities, the reality for workers is far less compartmentalized. In practice, these behaviors tend to appear as part of the repertoire of a bad boss or more precisely, a destructive leader. Destructive

leadership behavior can be considered an umbrella term that encompasses behaviors such as petty tyranny, bullying, toxic leadership, mobbing and abusive supervision (Rata & Onitiu, 2025), reflecting a constellation of harmful behaviors rather than isolated phenomena.

Because leaders set the tone, climate, and cultural norms of an organization, it is both natural and appropriate that attention turns to them when dysfunction emerges in the workplace. Leadership shapes expectations, models behaviors, and signals what is promoted, tolerated, or ignored. Ultimately, when things go wrong, responsibility rests with the leader. In some cases, when a leader abuses their position of power, the leader is not merely part of the problem, they are the problem. Given the substantial and well-documented impact of destructive leadership on workers and workplace functioning, this paper narrows its scope to two specific forms: abusive supervision and mobbing. These behaviors, while distinct in their dynamics, both represent recurring patterns of harm that significantly undermine employee well-being, organizational climate, and overall performance.

Tepper (2000) defines abusive supervision as subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which supervisors engage in the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact. A boss who engages in these types of bullying behaviors can create a toxic work environment. Well-known organizations, including Miramax, Fox News, Cable News Network, Amazon, Google, Meta, and Uber, have been criticized for fostering toxic work environments in their daily practices and procedures (Priesemuth & Schminke, 2024). Organizations with toxic work environments often have leaders who engage in abusive supervision. The study of abusive supervision is often referred to as the 'dark side of leadership' (Dahlan et al., 2024; Fehn & Schütz, 2022), and interest in the topic extends far beyond Hollywood portrayals of bad bosses. This is because abusive supervision can impact both the health of workers and the organization's overall effectiveness, as victims of nonphysical managerial hostility often report diminished well-being, which can result in absenteeism, increased healthcare costs, and reduced productivity (Tepper et al., 2007).

The presence of three key factors characterize abusive supervision. First, the abuse is limited to language and does not include physical acts of aggression. Yelling, which is a common practice for frustrated managerial staff, would be considered abusive supervision, while pushing, pinching, punching, or slapping qualify as assault. Second, the hostility would be sustained and not limited to just one bad day when the supervisor takes out their frustration on the employees (Tepper et al., 2007). Finally, abusive behavior occurs for a purpose and, as such, is within the supervisor's control. Abusive behaviors include; socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks (Garthus-Niegel et al., 2016); commands such as: "Do it all!; Work faster!; This will be hard work!; Keep your problems to yourself!; Give me 100%!" (Arnejčič, 2016); Verbal abuse, humiliation, unfair treatment, or intimidation (Dahlan et al., 2024); and bureaucratic mistreatment that fosters the process of mobbing (Meng, 2025).

Abusive supervision, like mobbing, is intended to achieve a particular aim. Both are forms of

destructive leadership that operate through coercive tactics designed to control, silence, or remove the target employee from the workplace. In this sense, abusive supervision is not merely an expression of poor interpersonal skills; it is a behavior with organizational consequences. Persistent criticism, belittling, and undermining behaviors serve to erode the target's confidence, reputation, and competence. When the intent of the harassing behaviors is to force the target out of the organization, abusive supervision escalates into mobbing.

Mobbing was first defined by Leymann (1990, p.120) as "... hostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual". Leymann (1996) later revised the definition to encompass several defining characteristics: (1) the frequency (repeated/persistent) and duration (long-term/enduring) of the acts, (2) subjective perception of the victims of how they view these behaviors and their effects, (3) negativity of the acts that characterize the mobbing situation, and (4) imbalance of power between mobbers and the victim (Ertureten et al., 2013). The most common manifestation of the imbalance of power occurs between a boss and their employees. In such cases, the leader's positional authority amplifies the harm, and can influence followers to engage in behaviors that isolate, and discredit the targeted individual (Bonner et al., 2016). Because leaders occupy formal authority within the organizational hierarchy, their actions, whether explicit criticism or subtle disapproval, carry disproportionate weight in the work environment.

By virtue of the positional power a boss holds, they can signal to others to withdraw support, mirror hostile behaviors, or participate in exclusionary actions. Participants may not fully understand the consequences of their actions as they join with the leader and others to isolate and denigrate the target (Sloan et al., 2010). In this way, the leader's positional power becomes the catalyst that transforms individual supervisory abuse into a coordinated mobbing process aimed at isolating and ultimately expelling the targeted individual from the workplace either through termination or resignation. When the boss targets an individual by signaling disapproval and modelling exclusionary behavior, the leader legitimizes mistreatment and encourages coworkers to participate, transforming individual abuse into a collective and premeditated effort to remove the target from the workplace (Meng, 2025). The safest choice of action for an employee is to do as the boss does, even when that means becoming morally disengaged (Bonner et al., 2016).

Moral Disengagement Theory, developed by Albert Bandura in the 1980s (Bonner et al., 2016), states that people are able to carry out harmful or cruel acts by psychologically disengaging from the moral standards that would normally regulate their behavior. This may involve justifying their behaviour, minimizing its impact, diffusing responsibility, or dehumanizing the target. Through these processes, individuals distance themselves from the negative consequences of their actions (Bandura, 1999). Moral disengagement allows the individual to engage in unethical acts without guilt. Leaders who are morally disengaged may influence followers to engage in counterproductive, harmful, or unethical actions (Bonner et al., 2016) which creates an organizational climate where ethical standards are weakened, and misconduct becomes normalized. In such an environment, mobbing is likely to occur in various manifestations.

Like workplace bullying, mobbing can occur in peer-to-peer interactions, a behavior known as horizontal mobbing (Arnejčič, 2016). Members of minority groups may be particularly vulnerable targets due to differences in language fluency, race, religion, gender expression, marital status, or sexual orientation (Sloan et al., 2010; Westhues, 2020). Mobbing can also occur vertically (Arnejčič, 2016; Rata & Onitiu, 2025) in two distinct ways. When subordinates target a supervisor, this is known as upward mobbing. When leaders target subordinates, this is referred to as downward mobbing. While all forms of mobbing can be harmful, downward mobbing is the most common (Vandekerckhove & Commers, 2003), and it may be the most damaging because it involves an abuse of power by those in authority. In such cases, the aggressors are the leaders themselves. The hierarchical abuse of power (Meyerhuber, 2020) can signal to others that such behavior is acceptable in the workplace.

Certain leadership styles are reliable predictors of mobbing behavior (Yağcı & Uluöz, 2018). For example, Ertureten et al. (2013) found that transformational and transactional leadership decreased the likelihood of mobbing, whereas authoritarian leadership increased it. Additionally, leaders who exemplify ethical conduct and cultivate a culture of respect and collaboration significantly reduce the likelihood of disruptive behavior (Ahmed et al., 2024). Furthermore, ethical leadership shows a strong negative association with workplace aggression (Cao et al., 2023). Mobbing, along with other forms of psychological violence, is on the rise across workplaces (Arnejčič, 2016; Rata & Onitiu, 2025; Ronha, & Rodrigues, 2025; Yaşar, & Ünal, 2025), with particularly high prevalence reported in health and educational settings (Sloan et al., 2010). This trend highlights a pressing need for research that can uncover the organizational and interpersonal conditions that lead a boss to engage in mobbing, and that can clearly distinguish mobbing from more general workplace incivility. In other words, how can individuals recognize when they have truly been mobbed?

Measuring Mobbing

Researchers have developed various scales to measure mobbing behavior, many of which have been based on Leymann's seminal work (1996). The Leymann Inventory of Psychological Terror (LIPT) has 45 items, in five categories: (1) effects on self-expression and communication; (2) effects on social contact; (3) effects on personal reputation; (4) effects on occupational situation and quality of life; and (5) effects on physical health (Na-Nan et al., 2023). Currently, one of the most widely used measures for mobbing comes from the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ, version I), which includes a single item to measure mobbing: "How often do you feel unjustly criticized, bullied or shown up in front of others by your colleagues and your superior?" (Garthus-Niegel et al., 2016). Measured on a Likert scale the response options are: never, seldom, often, always (Cao et al., 2023). Criticisms of such a single-item measure has led researchers to develop a multi-item short scale as part of the Gutenberg Health Study (GHS). This scale includes five items measured on a six-point Likert scale: (1) "Do you get intentionally interrupted during oral contributions?" (2) "Does it happen that you receive no response/reaction, when you want to speak to someone?" (3) "Do you get blamed for others' mistakes or general operational problems?" (4) "Were important influential or working areas taken away from you?" (5) "Did you receive

unpleasant sexual offers or did you get sexually harassed?” (Garthus-Niegel et al., 2016). The options are: daily/almost daily, at least once a week, at least once a month, less than once a month, and never.

According to Leymann (1996), abusive behavior qualifies as mobbing only if it meets two strict criteria: frequency and duration. The behavior must occur at least once per week and persist for a minimum of six months. This threshold sets mobbing apart from isolated incidents or workplace incivility by emphasizing repetition and sustained aggression over time. The five-item scale can be further subdivided into three areas of mobbing misconduct: emotional abuse (Items 1, 2, and 5), professional discredit (Item 3) and denigration and devaluation of the role in the workplace (Item 4). Both scales are psychometrically appropriate (Garthus-Niegel et al., 2016), however, the ease of use of a simplified measurement might contribute to the more frequent use of the single-item scale among researchers.

Antecedents to Downward Mobbing

Anyone who has experienced the impact of a bad boss has likely wondered what made their leader abusive. Was it nature or nurture? Are leaders inherently good or inherently bad? Do personality traits drive abusive behavior, or is it the pressure of the job itself that turns leadership toxic? However, mobbing behavior is rarely the result of a single factor (Quershi et al., 2015). Instead, mobbing typically arises from a complex interplay of factors, including the organizational environment (Garthus-Niegel et al., 2016), the supervisor’s leadership style (Rata & Onitiu, 2025), interpersonal relationships, individual characteristics of both the victim and the perpetrator (Yaşar, & Ünal, 2025), and external stressors such as job demands placed on the leader. Certain environments may be more susceptible to creating a culture where mobbing thrives (Vandekerckhove & Commers, 2003). For example, organizations with few controls and problems such as role ambiguity, unclear responsibilities, and escalating conflicts are likely to experience high levels of mobbing (Zapf, 1999).

Research from Turkey suggests that mobbing is prevalent in higher education settings, as well as in health and medicine (Çoban, 2017; Minibas-Poussard et al., 2018). This may be due to the hierarchical nature of these industries. Although there is not enough research on the causes of mobbing to provide conclusive statements, (Quershi et al., 2015), there is nevertheless consistent global evidence of a significant relationship between structural hierarchy and mobbing, although mobbing can also occur between peers (Quershi et al., 2015). The power distance that exists between employees and supervisors is perhaps the most obvious reason for downward mobbing. The social inequality that exists between a boss and the worker attributes greater authority to the boss (Quershi et al., 2015). This imbalance in power can be abused when conflicts arise. The structure of power that supervisors have over subordinates makes abuse of supervision an easy step in the wrong direction.

Supervisors and managers who exhibit particular leadership styles, such as transformational and transactional leadership, engage in positive behaviors that are negatively correlated with mobbing

behavior (Arnejčič, 2016; Ertureten et al., 2013). Leadership actions, including problem-solving, effective communication, and clear directions (Quershi et al., 2015), serve to diminish the likelihood of mobbing behavior occurring. Authoritative leadership, however, has been shown to have a positive correlation with mobbing behavior (Ertureten et al., 2013). In addition to leadership styles, the quality of relationships between employees and their supervisors has been shown to play a significant role in the development of mobbing behavior. Envy among peers and supervisors has been identified as a key psychological trigger for mobbing behavior (Quershi et al., 2015; Westhues, 2005). In highly competitive environments such as academic and medical institutions, individuals who attain notable success, visibility, or recognition may inadvertently provoke feelings of resentment or inferiority among colleagues or superiors.

Westhues (2005), as quoted by Carnero et al. (2012), notes that mobbing can occur when high-achieving professors trigger envy in their colleagues and workmates. Westhues refers to this as “the envy of excellence”. When effective, skilled employees are the target of mobbing, this can impact their sense of well-being and safety in the work environment. This might impact their attendance and ultimately, many may choose to leave for more fertile, safe, and inclusive environments. Higher educational attainment can provoke envy among colleagues and may increase the likelihood of an individual becoming a target of workplace mobbing (Carnero et al., 2012). Additionally, characteristics of the victim may make them more susceptible to bullying or mobbing. Frequently, victims have low self-esteem, are not well-connected, are passive and isolated in their work, and can be submissive (Gumbus & Lyons, 2011). Workers who are perceived as different from the dominant group may be more vulnerable to mobbing. Factors such as job performance issues, limited assertiveness, poor social skills, or fewer qualifications can make an employee an easy target, (Zapf, 1999) especially in workplaces where incivility has been normalized. In such environments, subtle or overt exclusionary behaviors can escalate, leaving marginalized individuals particularly vulnerable to mobbing. Superiors can use victimization as a means to target those who are perceived as different (Arnejčič, 2016). This is particularly true when the organizational culture permits or overlooks incivility, sending a message that disrespectful behavior is acceptable or inconsequential.

The culture of an organization determines the values, norms, and acceptable behaviors for employees (Quershi et al., 2015). The culture of the organization can foster and condone repeated and consistent harmful acts among workers and between workers and their supervisors. The work environment can act as a fertile ground for mobbing behaviors to take root and thrive. The culture of the work environment provides both explicit and implicit cues about acceptable behavior and how individuals are expected to treat one another. Organizational cultures that tolerate incivility, lack clear policies on respectful conduct, or fail to hold individuals accountable for harmful actions can unintentionally encourage mobbing behaviors (Duffy, 2009). The leader is entrusted with setting the tone for the workplace, modeling behavior that employees usually mirror. When leaders engage in harmful actions themselves, they may implicitly permit toxic behaviors to persist and even escalate unchecked. Organizational structures may inadvertently enable toxic behaviors when such actions are perceived to yield benefits. For instance, a bullying boss may be tolerated, or even

protected by upper management or ownership because of a perceived positive impact on productivity. However, over time, these behaviors can significantly harm employee well-being and cause lasting damage to the organization's culture and reputation.

Another prominent trigger of abusive supervision is the cascading effect of leader and executive behaviors. When higher-level leaders engage in abusive or toxic conduct, those behaviors often trickle down to mid-level supervisors and, eventually, to frontline employees (Aryee et al., 2007). Supervisors who experience mistreatment from their own leaders may internalize and replicate those behaviors, thereby perpetuating a cycle of abuse and becoming abusive bosses themselves. Increasingly, researchers are working to understand the complex dimensions of bad leadership and its effects on workplace dynamics. There is growing interest in examining how destructive leadership behaviors influence key organizational outcomes, including staff absenteeism, retention, promotion opportunities, morale, productivity, and overall workplace culture. Mobbing behavior—often at the root of these issues—can be especially costly for organizations, contributing not only to reduced performance but also to long-term reputational damage (Gumbus & Lyons, 2011).

Impact of Mobbing on Employees

Mobbing has been shown to negatively affect an individual's mental health and well-being (Ilieva et al., 2024) contributing to heightened stress, anxiety, depression, and long-term psychological harm. Studies examining the mental and physical health of workers have found that those who experience mobbing exhibit poorer mental and physical health compared to workers who do not experience mobbing (Carnero et al., 2012). This is because mobbing is an extreme type of social stressor in the workplace (Quershi et al., 2015). Stressors generally harm both the organization and the employees. Employees who experience mobbing have diminished motivation and reduced task commitment which impacts performance and results in decreased efficiency and effectiveness for the organization (Yağcı & Uluöz, 2018). For employees working under a mob boss, the severity and nature of the consequences of mobbing depend on the intensity and duration of the negative behavior, as well as the individual characteristics of the victims (Ilieva et al., 2024). The impact of mobbing can be placed in two broad categories. First, organizational consequences include reputational risk, high turnover rates, and diminished productivity (Gupta & Chawla, 2024). A second impact of mobbing is on personal consequences (Ilieva et al., 2024), which can be subdivided into three key areas: health, job satisfaction, and job performance. Being a mobbing victim increases the probability of suffering health concerns (Carnero et al., 2012). Health concerns can manifest as increased anxiety, depression, sleep issues, burnout, decreased motivation, absenteeism, reduced job satisfaction, silence, and a decline in the quality or consistency of work (Çoban, 2017; Ilieva et al., 2024; Nielsen et al., 2015).

In some cases, the health problems exhibited by employees who have experienced mobbing resemble the symptomatology that characterizes posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). As a result, workplace bullying and mobbing are seen to be contributing factors to PTSD. (Nielsen et al.,

2015). In a review of the literature, Nielsen et al. (2015) found a positive relationship between bullying and the diagnosis of PTSD. Specifically, 57% of victims of bullying report symptom scores for PTSD above cut-off thresholds. In comparison, the estimated lifetime prevalence of PTSD among the general adult American population is 7.8% (Nielsen et al., 2015). Destructive leaders create an impression among their employees that they are a threat, which makes the employees more cautious in their work. A response to such an environment is to remain silent as a form of self-protection (Song et al., 2017). Employee silence refers to the intentional withholding of ideas, information, or opinions about potential improvements within the organization (Song et al., 2017). When employees remain silent, the organization misses out on their ideas, talent, creativity, and valuable contributions. Employee silence can come at a high cost, as organizations forfeit the benefits of diverse ideas, innovation, and the full range of productivity and revenues their workforce has to offer (Song et al., 2017).

Mitigation and Prevention of Downward Mobbing

Mobbing behaviors are not simply a reflection of leadership style; they represent a critical failure in leadership that disrupts team cohesion, erodes trust, and damages employee well-being. Many workplaces allow mobbing to occur unchecked because of the leader, the culture of the organization, and most significantly the lack of legislation to protect against mobbing (Arnejčič, 2016). Victims of mobbing suffer greatly from this form of psychological violence which can lead to depression, PTSD, anxiety, suicide attempts (Arnejčič, 2016), and suicide (Leymann, 1996). To understand why mobbing occurs and the factors that contribute to certain individuals being targeted, researchers have explored the complex interpersonal dynamics behind mobbing, including the potential role that individual vulnerabilities or perceived deviance in victims may play in attracting mobbing behavior (Zapf, 1999).

Fehn and Schütz (2022), in their literature review on the co-production of abusive supervision, found that specific follower characteristics, such as low self-esteem and low self-evaluation, were associated with a greater likelihood of perceiving leadership behavior as abusive. These traits may make some employees appear more vulnerable to mobbing or supervisory mistreatment. However, these individual characteristics do not tell the whole story. Fehn and Schütz (2022) studied various characteristics of victims, including dominant, submissive, and constructive traits, hypothesizing that specific characteristics displayed by the victim would induce mobbing behaviors in leaders. These characteristics might include a lack of confidence as well as a lack of competence, (Qureshi et al., 2015). Ironically, dominant behaviors exhibited by the subordinate might also elicit mobbing behaviors in the leader. Fehn and Schütz (2022) demonstrated that followers' behavior, no matter whether submissive, constructive, or dominant, does not prevent leaders from engaging in abusive behavior. Leaders who mob engage in humiliation, intimidation and sabotage driven by their passion to dominate (Arnejčič, 2016).

There are some studies which suggest that mobbing is a response to stress rather than a desire to dominate. Stress in the work environment intensifies conflicts and interpersonal relationships can

suffer Arnejčič, 2016). A review of the literature provides insight for leaders, with empirical evidence suggesting that mobbing can occur as a stress response. By supporting leaders in three key areas: response, skill, and control, mobbing behaviors might be mitigated. Additionally, training and accountability in leadership may be crucial to preventing workplace mobbing. Rather than attributing the cause of mobbing to the victim by implicitly blaming them for triggering mobbing behavior, emerging research emphasizes the importance of proactive leadership development, structural accountability, and system-wide support mechanisms.

Workplace aggression, including mobbing, can often be prevented by ensuring that leaders are carefully selected, well-trained in ethical and relational leadership, and regularly evaluated through mechanisms that include feedback from staff and assessments of organizational culture (Cao et al., 2023; Meyerhuber, 2020). Bosses perfect their leadership skills through on-the-job experiences, training, mentoring, and coaching. Likely, training can also help managers avoid destructive behaviors, such as mobbing. An organization benefits from having leaders who are trained to recognize early warning signs and reflect on their own role in improving things. By investing in training leaders, organizations can cultivate a positive work culture (Cuadra, 2023). Organizations should invest in leadership development programs and establish mechanisms for identifying and addressing toxic leadership behaviors when they occur (Dahlan et al., 2024). Professional development efforts should focus on prevention, empathy, and inclusive practices to ensure that no employee becomes isolated or targeted under the guise of managerial discretion.

One effective way to monitor leadership behaviors is through anonymous staff surveys. Traditional performance evaluations often miss a critical dimension—how managers affect their team’s well-being and retention. While revenues, project outcomes, and cost efficiencies are used as performance indicators, behaviors like mobbing often go unreported unless employees are directly asked. The impact of bosses on staff should be a consideration, as a bad boss can lead to high turnover rates, absenteeism, poor productivity (Qureshi et al., 2015) and lawsuits. Most organizations today still overemphasize revenue-based metrics or narrowly focus on performance indicators such as profitability, cost control, and productivity. Having employees complete surveys about their bosses helps higher-level leaders know exactly how managers are impacting staff. Performance evaluations should include feedback from subordinates to measure mobbing behaviors.

A survey item might include a statement measured on a Likert scale examining frequency of occurrence, such as: My manager takes credit for my work. This might be presented alongside quantitative results, such as turnover rates. An excellent source of survey items can be found in validated instruments, such as the Toxic Leadership Scale (Schmidt, 2008), the Abusive Supervision Scale (Tepper, 2000), and the Negative Acts Questionnaire (Çoban, 2017) for bullying. To complement subjective ratings, quantitative measures such as turnover rates, absenteeism rates, HR complaints, and reduced productivity can be used to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the leader’s impact on employee turnover, performance, and well-being. Survey data provides the organization with a comprehensive picture of leadership behavior, helps organizations identify

leaders who appear effective on paper but are detrimental in practice, and highlights areas for development (e.g., emotional intelligence, communication, empathy). But of course, surveys can only improve leader-follower trust if actual actions are taken, with employees seeing the evidence that their voices matter and are valued.

Another strategy that can be used to reinforce healthy leadership and prevent mobbing and incivility in the workplace is to implement structured rewards for positive behavior and clear consequences for harmful conduct. Organizations should explicitly sanction destructive leadership and endorse positive, supportive and respectful leadership, thereby conveying the idea that to advance within the organization, leaders must cultivate positive relationships with subordinates (Fehn & Schütz, 2022). Furthermore, leadership should not only be about hitting targets. Leaders must also be held accountable for their treatment of people. Positive leadership practices can foster a supportive work environment where employees feel included, have a sense of belonging, and feel valued. A leader's behavior is likely to impact four key areas: Employee loyalty, performance levels, job satisfaction, and well-being (Ahmed et al., 2024). When employees feel mobbed, their loyalty and job satisfaction diminish, both of which may contribute to turnover intention and ultimately, the employee may leave the organization (Qureshi et al., 2015).

Staff well-being can also be severely harmed by mobbing behavior (Garthus-Niegel et al., 2016). When leaders engage in destructive leadership practices, including mobbing, they create a toxic environment that results in employees feeling alienated, isolated, and diminished. Workers in such environments may require formal support systems, such as counseling services (Vandekerckhove & Commers, 2003) and avenues for reporting the toxic behaviors they experience from their supervisors. Counselling services and avenues for reporting toxic behaviours can help employees cope with the stress and challenges posed by toxic leaders. Research investigating counselling support for mobbing victims suggests that working through a series of questions may help empower victims. Questions for the victim might include: What should I do so that I feel OK? How do I develop an appropriate strategy to deal with this? What changes in my personal state may affect my work situation at the company? (Arnejčič, 2016).

Ultimately, legislation and policy development should be put in place to prevent and address workplace mobbing (Duffy, 2009). A lack of legislation leaves workers vulnerable and often powerless, as they can fall prey to mobbing (Arnejcic, 2016). Without firm policies in place, subordinates are not empowered to challenge their superiors. Additionally, anti-mobbing policies should be integrated into a comprehensive workplace program that offers ongoing professional development and training (Duffy, 2009). When developing a policy to address mobbing behavior, it is essential to clearly define the behaviors in the policy (Duffy, 2009) and outline firm consequences. The policy should not be used as surveillance nor as a witch hunt (Duffy, 2009), but rather to ensure the organization is aware of the detrimental impact of mobbing and is committed to ameliorating it. A key component of the policy should be a reporting system that is fully confidential, accessible through multiple channels, and specifically designed to allow victims to file reports without fear of reprisal. Organizations and institutions should prioritize leadership

training and accountability measures to ensure effective governance. By proactively addressing toxic leadership, institutions can enhance employee engagement, job satisfaction, and loyalty. The responsibility for preventing mobbing rests squarely with the organization and its leaders.

Conclusion

Effective leadership is crucial for fostering a healthy and productive work environment (Dahlan et al., 2024). When institutions proactively address toxic leadership behaviors such as mobbing and abusive supervision they can significantly improve employee engagement, job satisfaction, and loyalty. Mobbing is a serious psychosocial risk factor that has been shown to negatively impact employee mental and physical health (Carnero et al., 2012; Garthus-Niegel et al., 2016; Leymann, 1996; Westhues, 2005). The consequences of mobbing can include negative impacts on the health and well-being of employees, as well as organizational issues such as loss of productivity, absenteeism, turnover, legal costs, and negative publicity (Duffy, 2009). Unfortunately, many organizations take little to no action to eliminate or even acknowledge toxic behavior among leaders. As Gumbus and Lyons (2011) note, policies aimed at addressing workplace bullying are not widespread, and Human Resource departments often fail to intervene effectively when such issues arise. This institutional silence allows harmful behaviors to persist unchecked. By addressing destructive leadership proactively, institutions can enhance employee engagement, job satisfaction, and loyalty, ultimately leading to improved organizational performance. While destructive leadership may yield short-term gains, it leaves deep organizational wounds that undermine long-term success. Addressing it proactively is not only an ethical imperative but also a strategic one.

Author

Michelle Newlands serves as the Waterloo Region District School Board, Kitchener-Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. She holds a Ph.D. in Leadership and Policy from Niagara University, Niagara Falls, New York, USA. email: Michelle_Newlands@wrdsb.ca

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