

VIOLENCE – MOBBING – HOW TO RECOGNIZE AND DEAL WITH IT

Abstract

The term mobbing is of Anglo-Saxon origin and stands for psychological abuse in the workplace, in fact hostile and unethical communication within the working environment, against an individual or a group, which occurs at least once a week for at least six months. Activities of the abusers can be divided into five categories - attacks on the possibility of adequate communication, activities that compromise the ability to maintain social contacts, activities that destroy the reputation of the victim, those discrediting the quality of the performed work and activities that are forcing the person to perform tasks that directly damage his/her health. In relation to the social aspect, typical targets of mobbing are young, ambitious and recently employed workers, older workers close to retirement, persons with disabilities, persons who point to the shortcomings in the work, those seeking more autonomy or a salary increase and eccentrics. The social aspect of abusers is not striking as a specific personality profile. In our social environment, the most common are labelling and activities that discredit the quality of work, and most common victims are women, highly educated persons and persons employed in private companies. The most frequent consequences of mobbing are psychosomatic disorders, stress-related mental disorders, depression, substance abuse disorders and suicide. Activities against mobbing can have two main discourses, prevention and elimination of the consequences. The mechanisms of action are to provide legal and psychological (medical) help. Legislation is determined by the attempt of mediation in the workplace and the implementation of laws on mobbing, while psychological support is implemented through targeted training in communication skills and psychotherapeutic rehabilitation of the already created consequences. Mobbing is a decades-long psycho-social and labour problem in our community, but only in the first decade of this century it was demystified and subjected to critical and research observation.

Key words: MOBBING / HARASSMENT / COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION

The term mobbing is of Anglo-Saxon origin, derived from the verb “to mob”, which means to attack violently. It was first used in the scientific literature by the Swedish psychologist Heinz Leymann. The word “mobbing” Leymann borrowed from the etymology of Konrad Lorenz. Namely, with this term Lorenz marked the behaviour of some species of animals, which come together against one of its members, attack it and expel from the community, leading it sometimes to death. Similar behaviour of people in the workplace Leymann called mobbing. In an attempt to highlight the social aspects of bio-

logical causality, he defines mobbing as psychological harassment in the workplace, in fact hostile and unethical communication within a work group. Time criterion points out that such activities should take place at least once a week for at least six months (Agervold, 2007).

Harassment in the workplace can go in the direction from an individual on a managerial position to a group, and it is referred to as vertical mobbing. Also, it can go from an individual to an individual, within hierarchically equal rights in the implementation of duties, when marked as horizontal and from a group to an individual on a managerial position,

when marked as bossing or strategic mobbing. Regardless of the position in the business hierarchy regarding the division of responsibilities, the victim is defined by the inability to implement and defend his/her legal rights guaranteed by the general and internal legal acts.

TYPES OF MOBBING

The activities for abusing an individual in the workplace can be divided into several categories. In the first there are attacks on the possibility of adequate communication, usually by stopping the victim in the middle of a sentence, or by avoiding non-verbal contact by looking away, or, for example, such person is not noticed when raises his/her hand at the meetings. In the second category, there are activities that compromise the ability to maintain social contacts, and this is done by isolating the victim, no one addresses him/her, others act as if he/she was not there, he/she is moved to a room away from colleagues, he/she is not called to meetings or common informal gatherings. The next category refers to activities that destroy the reputation of the victim. The popular name is "labelling" and is implemented through fictional stories about the victim and his/her private life, gossiping and mocking his/her real or fictional mental and physical disabilities. In the fourth category there are activities that discredit the quality of work performed. Constant criticism, complaints, insults, excessive control, the tendency to punish, low assessment for the work done; the victim is not given the usual assignments, he/she is taken away the means of work without explanation (phone, PC - an "empty table" syndrome) or is given tasks not adapted to the professional qualification, too simple or too complex in order for him/her to make a mistake in the work, he/she is imposed tight deadlines, assignments are constantly being changed and increased (a "full table" syndrome). The last specifying category includes activities that are forcing people to perform tasks that directly damage health, that are without protection; vacations and days off are not allowed, and also possible are threats by physical violence, as well as requiring sexual intercourse as a condition (Koić, Filaković, Muzinic, Mattek, 2003). All these activities that serve for psychological harassment in the workplace may have their obvious form (for example, everyone notices that the victim's presence in the work process is "deliberately ignored") or its lar-

va-like form, unperceivable to the environment (for example, the victim is praised in front of others, but in private he/she is criticized and threatened by penalties and dismissal).

CHARACTERISTICS OF ABUSERS AND VICTIMS

In relation to the social aspect, typical victims of mobbing are young, ambitious and recently employed workers, older workers close to retirement, persons with physical disability, men of honour (those who point to shortcomings in the work), and people asking for more independence or salary increase and eccentrics. The social aspect of abusers is not as striking as a specific personality profile. According to the observations of the British national counselling for mobbing, the most common is narcissistic personality disorder (Strandmark & Hallberg, 2007). The person who abuses, and belongs to the specified category, is characterized by low self-esteem, emotional instability, low tolerance to frustration and a compensation for all that through high potential for manipulation, by which he/she cleverly "chooses" a victim who should play the role of helpless partner in the psychological game of projection of abuser's insufficient personality. Certainly, by following this paradigm, we can conclude that not everyone can be in the role of victim. Usually there is a passive-dependent personality structure in question, with strong demands for subordination and attracting attention without looking at consequences. During time, certain communication patterns develop, quite adequate for this pathological dyad, which, viewed from the side, resemble a bad partnership where, more or less consciously, the whole group is pulled in, to the extent of individually present similar personal deficits. Also, often happens that victims of mobbing are healthy, neurotically structured individuals who become noticeable precisely because they do not participate in this sadomasochistic game. Thus, as seen through the aspect of group psychodynamics, there occurs "moving" of symptoms of psychological abuse, until they become structured in a person who becomes a declared victim, forced to leave the working collective. Accordingly, there is a basic decision that the answer to the question of who can be a victim of mobbing represents the conclusion that it can be any person who actively participates in the work process, with greater or lesser frequency, depending on

the position in the hierarchy of the division of labour and personality structure.

ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF MOBBING

By performing *cost-benefit* analysis of mobbing, a group of authors from the University of Manchester led by Helge Hoel, has found that in Western European countries, the annual loss per person exposed to mobbing is € 25-75,000 and \$ 30-100,000 in the U.S. Also, statistics shows that 50% of workers exposed to mobbing goes on sick leaves for six weeks a year, 31% from 1.5 to 3 months, and 11% remains on sick leave for more than 3 months per year (Hoel, Sparks, Cooper, 2001). In our social environment, the data collected in Belgrade show that between 12 and 70% of respondents have experienced some form of psychological harassment in the workplace. The most frequent categories are labelling and activities that discredit the quality of work. In terms of socio-demographics, these are women, highly educated and employed in private enterprises (Baltezarević, 2007).

CONSEQUENCES OF MOBBING

Faced with little or no ability to resist the subtle psychological harassment, employees in the initial stages show a wide range of reactions from the initial self-accusation through isolation and withdrawal, to the complete loss of confidence and the development of clinical symptoms of depression. In the International Classification of Diseases, there is no nosological category that determines the specific diagnosis of mobbing. Although mobbing is primarily a social phenomenon, a daily practice is imposing such a need, because there is a significant shift in the direction of the differential diagnosis. Generally, psychopathological phenomena observed in victims of mobbing are qualified as states within the category of stress induced disorders, therefore they are qualified as an acute stress reaction, post-traumatic stress disorder, adjustment disorder or permanent personality changes as a result of many years of stress. This last sub-category is particularly interesting, as it sometimes happens that according to such level of psychopathological process of a stressful event, many of the victims, in the changed circumstances of the hierarchical division of responsibilities in the work-

place, become abusers themselves. Often in such circumstances the abuser impersonates a victim, along with his strong insisting on the imperilled rights, and often there comes to physical violence in an attempt to defend the position of the victim. In practical work with the victims, this phenomenon was marked as a reactive or false mobbing (Campayo, Jarret, Diez, Gascon, 2005).

CONFRONTING MOBBING

Activities to confront mobbing can have two main discourses: prevention and elimination of the consequences. In both variants, the mechanisms of action are to provide legal and psychological (medical) help. A significant number of European countries, from recently including the Republic of Serbia, have a satisfactory legal framework in terms of laws on mobbing. From a legal point of view, it is certainly important to note that the law on criminal procedure and laws governing contractual relations substantially cover the possibility of proving and processing the consequences of mobbing, because they represent a serious violation of human rights guaranteed by law. Law on mobbing covers the part that refers to mediation in the case of pressing charges for mobbing, but it certainly has a significant shortcomings in terms of proving these subtle (larva-like) activities that do not involve physical evidence (witnesses, correspondence, visible trauma). Having this in mind, a considerably important preventive action is still a form of psychological help that goes in the direction of giving information about the existence of such problems and improving business communication skills. Knowing what mobbing is is necessary for potential victims, but also for potential abusers. In places where such activities are not targeted (so-called professional mobbing), it often happens that an abuser is not aware that his/her behaviour hurts someone. This is particularly encouraged by the fact that the employees from the close surroundings of abusers will not react because, as a priority, they try to preserve their position. Given that mobbing, besides health and interpersonal relationships, directly weakens the financial power of firms, it was interesting to see, in our social environment as well, how most of the opponents of the law on mobbing were concentrated amongst owners of companies. It directly represents a consequence of insufficient information by the people in charge of management, who will, more

than anyone, potentially see the damage of mobbing in their wallets. However, the heaviest tribute to this social scourge will pay those who find themselves in the role of victims. Considering already discussed specific personality profile, employees in the position of the victims have poor communication skills, which contribute the most to the development of the consequences of mobbing. Most experts agree that mobbing is primarily a consequence of inadequate communication. Therefore, the focus of all preventive activities is the training directed towards the acquisition of assertive communication skills. This specific method is somewhere between the aggressive and defensive response model in human relationships. It is based on applying a few simple techniques, primarily aimed at what the other speaker really pronounces, with maximum avoidance of direct confrontation with what is inadequate in the communication. Prospective studies on the topic of improving business communication skills in the prevention of mobbing

in the future may confirm the previous impressionist thesis of most professionals that it is more important to know how to help oneself, than to have legal and any other assistance “from outside”.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion we can say that mobbing is a decades-long psycho-social and labour problem in our social environment, but only in the first decade of this century it was demystified and subjected to critical research and observation. The most significant result of these observations are the facts that relate to clear criteria for recognizing mobbing, and the ways to, primarily through strengthening individual skills, prevent consequences that are dominantly medical and financial.

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