

The Difference Between Bullying and Harassment



Acts of harassment usually centre around unwanted, offensive and intrusive behaviour with a sexual, racial or physical component. In the UK, harassment on specific grounds is outlawed by virtue of the Equality Act 2010. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 and the Protection from Harassment Act (1997) have also influenced attitudes towards harassment. Significantly, the Protection from Harassment Act emphasises the target's perception of the conduct in question, rather than the perpetrator's intent.

The Equality Act offers a legal right to not be treated less favourably or harassed for a reason related to personal characteristics identified in the Act, such as race, gender or disability.

These are called "protected characteristics". Other Employment Rights legislation bestows rights on people who have carried out "protected acts" such as reporting malpractice, health and safety related activities and so on. However, there is no direct statutory protection for a UK based worker who finds themselves treated less favourably than others for some reason not related to a protected characteristic and not on the ground that they have performed a protected act. The title "The Protection from Harassment Act" suggests that it would be the most appropriate way to deal with bullying at work, but it was designed to deal with stalkers and not incompetent managers criticising a subordinate in a work environment.

Definitions of harassment and bullying vary and there is much overlap. The essential differences between harassment and workplace bullying are as follows:

Differences between harassment and workplace bullying

Harassment

Has a strong physical component, eg contact and touch in all its forms, intrusion into personal space and possessions, damage to possessions including a person's work, etc.

Tends to be motivated by an outward personal characteristic of the target, such as gender, race, disability etc.

A course of conduct constituting harassment can consist of just two incidents.

The person who is being harassed knows almost straight away they are being harassed.

Everyone can recognise harassment.

Harassment may involve racist, sexist or other discriminatory vocabulary and actions directed at the target.

Workplace Bullying

Almost exclusively psychological or organisational, but may become physical especially if the bully is male.

Tends to be motivated by a hidden personal characteristic of the target, such as competence, popularity or integrity.

Bullying tends to be an accumulation of many small incidents, each of which, when taken in isolation and out of context, seems trivial.

The person being bullied may not realise it for weeks or months, until there's a moment of enlightenment.

Few people recognise bullying.

Workplace bullying tends to consist of unwarranted criticisms and false allegations, often disguised as management and without openly discriminatory terms. Foul language may be used when there are no witnesses.

Harassment

Harassment can be for peer approval, bravado, macho image etc.

Acts of harassment at work are obviously not part of work-related communications (e.g. taunting, stalking, vandalising property etc).

The harasser may be content for their target to know they are being harassed.

Harassment is done for the sake of dominating the target.

It is immediately obvious when there has been an act of harassment.

Workplace Bullying



Tends to be secret behind closed doors with no witnesses.

Acts of bullying are hard to distinguish from work related communications (e.g. making unreasonable demands, making unwarranted criticisms of performance, taking credit for others' work etc).

The bully does not want their target to know they are being bullied.

Bullying is done for the sake of making the bully look more competent than the target.

Bullying can be very subtle, so it will not be immediately obvious that there has been an act of bullying.

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