

## Summary handout for the talk, "Mobbing: a Hard Fact of Academic Life" Queen's University Faculty Association, Kingston, 28 November 2012

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### Name the process

Workplace mobbing is an impassioned, collective movement by managers and/or co-workers to exclude, punish, and humiliate a targeted worker. A desperate urge to crush and eliminate the target spreads through the work unit, infecting one person after another like a contagious disease. The target comes to be seen as absolutely abhorrent, outside the circle of respectability, deserving only of contempt. A steadily broader range of hostile words and actions toward the target are to be deployed.

About 5 percent of workers are targets of mobbing sometime during their working lives. Most workers see the process from the other side: as instigator, chief eliminator, collaborator, or bystander, or as the target's guardian or rescuer. The same individual may play different roles in different cases. Mobbing is a drama performed on a real-life stage; workmates make their respective exits and entrances, and play their varied parts.

Mobbing is distinct from penalizing or firing a worker who, on the basis of evidence, does not measure up job requirements. The latter is a reasoned, routine managerial procedure, normally directed with regret at an underachiever. Mobbing is a furious collective attack made with undisguised glee on an overachiever or someone seen as threatening to good and decent employees.

Workplace mobbing is like bullying, in that the object is to rob the target of dignity and self-respect. Here, however, it is not a single swaggering bully that the target is up against, but the juggernaut of collective will. The message to the target is that *everybody* wants you out of here. Bullies often play leading roles in mobbing cases, whether as targets or perpetrators.

### Understand the stages of the process

No two cases are alike, but mobbing typically proceeds from subtle, informal techniques of humiliation and exclusion to overt and formal measures. Five stages are commonly distinguished:

1. Avoidance and ostracization of the target.
2. Petty harassment: making the target's life difficult.
3. A critical incident that triggers formal sanctions: "something has to be done."
4. Aftermath of the incident: hearings, appeals, mediation.
5. Elimination: target quits, retires, is fired, becomes disabled, dies of stress-induced illness, or commits suicide.

### Recognize the signs of ganging up

The first step toward prevention and remedy of workplace mobbing is to recognize the behaviours that constitute it and call the process by its name. Here are signs to look for:

1. By standard criteria of job performance, the target is at least average, probably above average.
2. Rumours and gossip circulate about the target's misdeeds: "Did you hear what she did last week?"
3. The target is not invited to meetings or voted onto committees, is excluded or excludes self.
4. Collective focus on a critical incident that "shows what kind of man he really is."
5. Shared conviction that the target needs some kind of formal punishment, "to be taught a lesson."
6. Unusual timing of the decision to punish, e. g., apart from the annual performance review.
7. Emotion-laden, defamatory rhetoric about the target in oral and written communications.
8. Formal expressions of collective negative sentiment toward the target, e. g. a vote of censure, signatures on a petition, meeting to discuss what to do about the target.
9. High value on secrecy, confidentiality, and collegial solidarity among the mobbers.
10. Loss of diversity of argument, so that it becomes dangerous to "speak up for" or defend the target.
11. The adding up of the target's real or imagined venial sins to make a mortal sin that cries for action
12. The target is seen as personally abhorrent, with no redeeming qualities; stigmatizing, exclusionary labels are applied.
13. Disregard of established procedures, as mobbers take matters into their own hands.
14. Resistance to independent, outside review of sanctions imposed on the target.
15. Outraged response to any appeals for outside help the target may make.
16. Mobbers' fear of violence from target, target's fear of violence from mobbers, or both.

### Question what is going on

What does the evidence show? Has the target really committed an unpardonable sin? Or might this war of all against one be merely a cruel way of trying to avert a war of all against all?

## Educate yourself about humans in mobs

Workplace mobbing springs from elemental impulses common to many mammals. Nobel laureate **Konrad Lorenz** reported the foundational research in *Das Sogennante Böse [On Aggression]* (Wien, 1963). German-Swedish psychologist **Heinz Leymann** applied Lorenz's term *mobbing* to nonviolent ganging up in human workplaces. His basic book is now in English: *Workplace Mobbing as Psychological Terrorism* (Mellen, 2011). **Noa Davenport et al.**, *Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace* (Ames, Iowa, 1999), is the first U.S. book to apply and extend Leymann's work. The latest is Maureen Duffy and Len Sperry, *Mobbing* (Oxford, 2012). In *Eliminating Professors* (1998), *The Envy of Excellence* (2005), and other books from Mellen Press (NY), **Kenneth Westhues** has published his and other's research on mobbing in academe.

Following Leymann's lead, mobbing researchers have seized on the Internet for fast, effective, inexpensive dissemination of research results. Google "Heinz Leymann" or "Kenneth Westhues" or "mobbing" to access dozens of websites offering research summaries and case studies. Most are in European languages, but there are many in English.

There is no quick fix for something so instinctive and primordial. Reducing the incidence of mobbing and healing its effects require not just training but education: critical reflection on the human project, insight into the complexity of life, knowledge of right and wrong, self-knowledge, too.

### Literature

Classic novels like these shed light on mobbing:

- Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of Seven Gables* (1851). The hunt for witches, Hawthorne writes, "should teach us, among its other morals, that the influential classes, and those that take upon themselves to be leaders of the people, are fully liable to all the passionate error that has ever characterized the maddest mob."
- Herman Melville, *Billy Budd, Foretopman* (1924).

### Films

In many movies, ganging up is a basic theme. Six examples:

- *Dead Poets Society* (Peter Weir, dir.; Robin Williams; 1989);
- *The Human Stain* (P. Roth novel; Anthony Hopkins; 2003);
- *Joan of Arc* (Roberto Rossellini, dir.; Ingrid Bergman; 1948);
- *Lord of the Flies* (Wm Golding novel; Harry Hook, 1990);
- *Odd Girl Out* (Tom McLoughlin, dir; Alexa Vega, 2004; book by Rebecca Simmons)

### Plays

Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People* (1882)

Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Visit* (1960);

Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (1953; film version 1996).

## Be at once kind and careful

Lying low, keeping your head down, following the crowd, and kowtowing to the boss are poor defenses against being mobbed. Nobody is safe in workplaces of chronic scapegoating, mobbing, and nastiness. This year's mobber may be next year's target.

Practical suggestions researchers commonly offer for personal conduct include the following:

- **Keep your mind on the job.** Mobs form when people lose sight of the organization's purposes, turn their attention inward, get caught up in power struggles and one-upmanship.
- **Focus on the situation, problem, or behaviour, not the person.** Personalizing disputes makes them worse.
- **Plan carefully before blowing the whistle on managerial misconduct.** Managers tend to go after whistleblowers, and elites close ranks. See Brian Martin, *The Whistleblower's Handbook* (Annandale, NSW: Envirobook, 1999).
- **Get a life away from work.** Cultivate social relations in many different groups – family, school, church, community. The devastation of mobbing is more complete, the fewer alternative sources of social support the target has.
- **Show kindness to the target.** Instead of joining mobbers or bystanders, find ways to affirm the target's humanity. The mob may turn on you, but you may save the target's life.
- Nietzsche said it best: "Distrust all those in whom the impulse to punish is powerful."

## Promote workplace decency

Keeping a workplace free of scapegoating and terror takes more than good intentions on the part of the managers and workers involved. Some organizational structures and procedures work better than others, for getting work done well and for discouraging people from ganging up. Here are possibilities:

- **Spread power around.** Pluralism, countervailing power, checks and balances, bring out the best in people. Concentration of power in a single hierarchy brings out the worst.
- **Minimize adversarial, zero-sum proceedings.** Quasi-judicial tribunals unleash groupthink and the impulse to scapegoat. Productivity, truth, and justice are better served by open administration and straight talk, with cards on the table.
- **Discourage a culture of grievance and legalism.** Given the choice, wasting hours in occasional arguments is less costly and stressful than wasting years in arbitration or in court.
- **Avoid "neutral" mediators.** They usually side with whoever has the upper hand. An effective mediator is committed to truth, fairness, give and take, productivity, quality, efficiency.
- **Provide opportunities for dialogue.** If people have the chance to voice concerns, air differences, listen to one another, and seek common ground, the threat of mobbing is reduced – see Daniel Yankelovich, *The Magic of Dialogue* (New York, 1999).