

# Workplace Violence

## Why Is verbal abuse considered workplace violence in some jurisdictions?

It's counter-intuitive for some people that verbal abuse, which to them is a rather minor and common place thing, to be included along with assaults and much more "serious" incidents of workplace violence. Including verbal abuse and considering it as workplace violence is a relatively recent occurrence, both in laws, and in company policies.

## Recognition That Words Can Hurt, and Harm Seriously

The evolution of what's included as workplace violence is such that it's now recognized that verbal abuse isn't something that should be accepted in the workplace, and that it's reasonable to address it in both laws and employer policies. We have a better understanding that words CAN hurt, and that ongoing abuse can cause significant psychological harm that is not the fault of the unfortunate victim.

## Having An Impact On What's Considered "OK" Behavior

By formally declaring verbal abuse as a form of workplace violence, a number of benefits accrue:

- Policies and laws form our opinions of what's acceptable behavior. By including verbal abuse under workplace violence, employers and law makers are making a social statement about what's appropriate in the workplace. It's a symbolic action (and sometimes more than symbolic), that sets a tone for a more civil workplace.
- Laws and policies that reference verbal abuse offer some remedies and recourse to employees who are being victimized verbally, as opposed to physical violence. At least theoretically. Getting access to those remedies and recourses is another matter, so whether a victim can obtain action is a different issue.
- Laws, that address employee rights to be free of verbal abuse may come with employer obligations to provide a work environment that is safe, and safe from verbal abuse in addition to physical abuse.

## Caveats

- At the moment there is no universal standard, or even Federal laws that apply everywhere, and address this issue, so much depends on where you are located as to whether there are any benefits at all.
- There is also a potential of clouding issues, when we use a phrase (workplace violence) for broader and broader behaviors. Clearly verbal abuse is not the same as being shot on the job, but in some places BOTH are considered workplace violence. We need to send a message that bullying and harrasing verbal behavior is not acceptable, while keeping in mind that physical safety and psychological safety can sometimes involve different things.
- Finally, there will always be an issue as to where lines get drawn around what constitutes verbal abuse at work. Is it swearing, yelling, insulting? Does it have to be constant and ongoing? Can one unpleasant interchange be considered workplace violence? It's not always easy to make the distinctions.

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