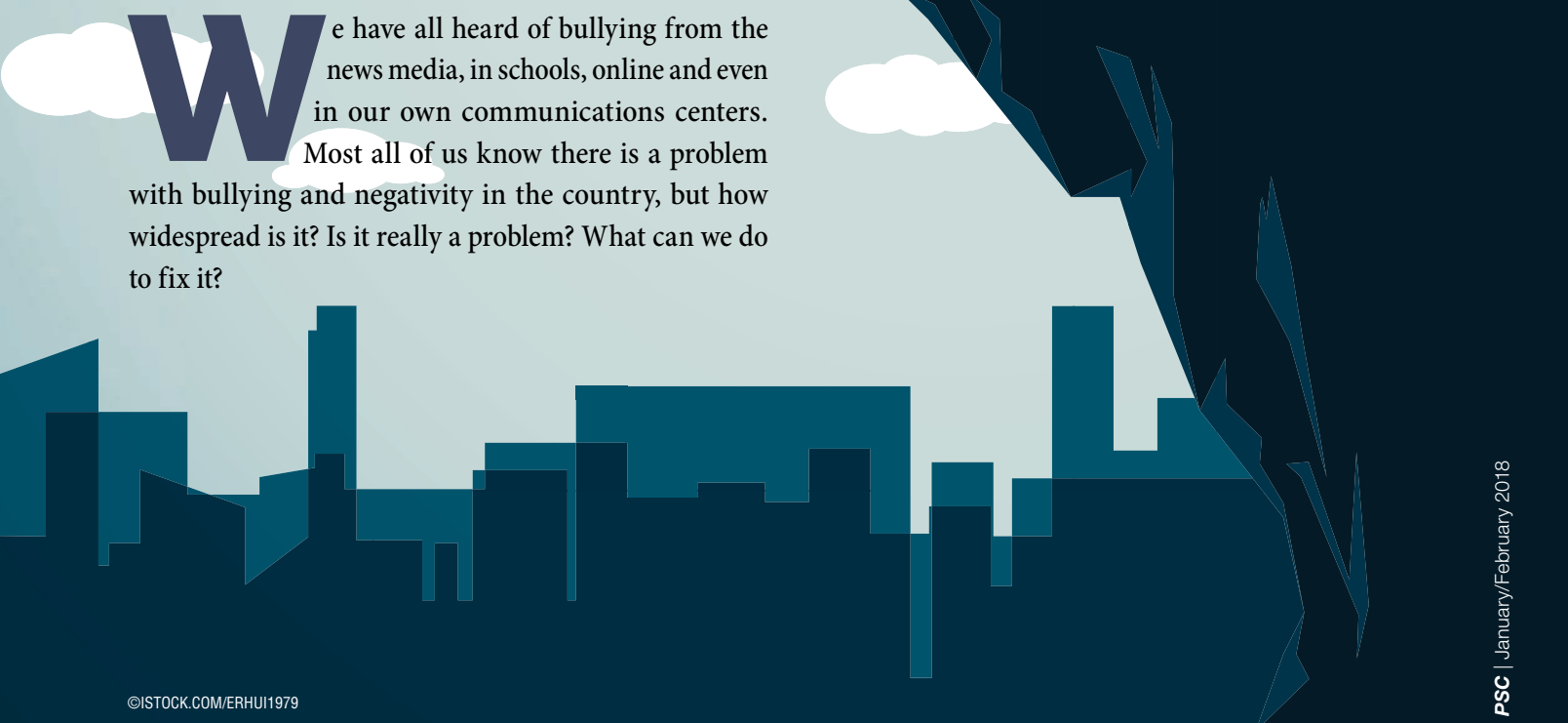
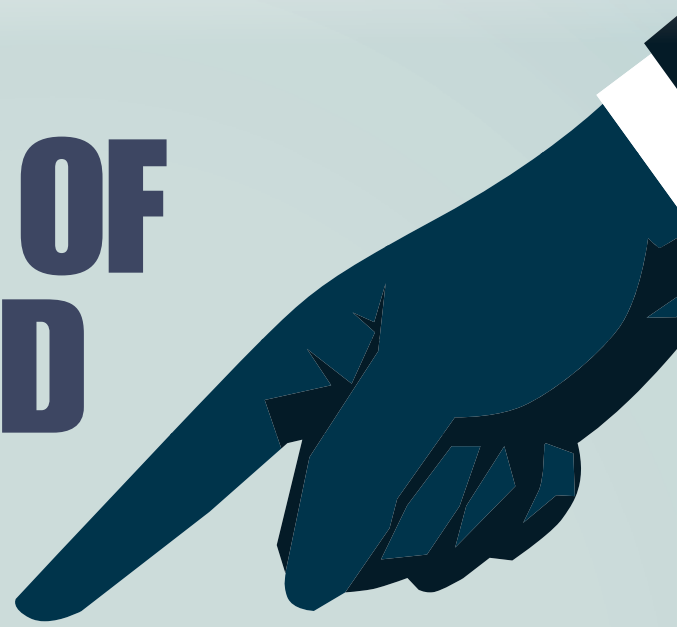


THE EFFECTS OF BULLYING AND NEGATIVITY

IN THE COMMUNICATIONS CENTER

By Charles Vitale, RPL, CPE

We have all heard of bullying from the news media, in schools, online and even in our own communications centers. Most all of us know there is a problem with bullying and negativity in the country, but how widespread is it? Is it really a problem? What can we do to fix it?



If you take a look at any of the telecommunicator Facebook groups or ask anyone in a communications center, you will see and hear a common theme that we, as an industry, are overworked, understaffed and must deal with sometimes tragic situations the general public will never have to face in their lifetimes. Can these dynamics be a cause of bullying, negativity and low morale in the center? The big question is what are we doing to fix it?

APCO'S BULLYING AND NEGATIVITY CLASS

In 2015 the APCO Institute rolled out its Bullying and Negativity in the Communications Center course. Interest in the course skyrocketed and has been taught many times at agencies in many states across the United States. There was a distinct need for a class of this type to be held in centers. Some agencies decide to host it to help stop the problem before it starts. Some host it in response to problems with this negative behavior at their agencies and to help victims of bullying learn how to address it. Some agencies that recognize an existing problem at their PSAP host the class to try and reform the bullies themselves.

During the course, students anonymously create a "six-word story," writing six words in a sentence to describe their thoughts on bullying. The results of these have been extremely powerful. Two of the six-word combinations that have stuck with me are "evil, low-down, abusive, intimidates, violent, overbearing" and "an accepted practice everywhere but needed nowhere."

THE STATISTICS ARE ALARMING

Statistics used in the curriculum come from the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI). Some of the statistics are shocking. The WBI's 2014 survey showed that 68 percent of executives thought bullying was a serious problem in corporate America, while 62 percent did not have a policy on bullying. In all, 20 percent of employees had been bullied, while 7 percent were currently

being bullied¹. Twenty-one percent of employees witnessed bullying and 23 percent were aware it was happening². Seventy-two percent of the American public is aware of workplace bullying³. Seventy-two percent of employers either deny, discount, encourage, rationalize or defend bullying⁴. These statistics are just unbelievable to read. Keep in mind this was in corporate America. Picture a communications center taking these polls.

We do not work in a traditional workplace environment. The ongoing stressors I mention above that affect our place of work are unlike those that most people will ever experience. But that does not excuse bullying or harassment.

BULLYING DEFINED

To truly understand the problem, we have to define what it is. APCO uses the definition of "repeated and unwanted actions by an individual or group intending to intimidate, harass, degrade or offend"⁵. This in itself is a pretty broad definition that can cover quite a few situations. The key words in the definition are "repeated and unwanted".

A single action, isolated and alone, may not constitute bullying. Even repeated actions may not qualify depending on the intent at the time.

Who can be the bully in the communication center? It can be anyone! From the frontline telecommunicator or communications training officer up to and including the director/manager/chief⁶. Bullying can occur from the bottom of the chain to the top and from the top down.

BULLIES IN ACTION

People can bully others in a variety of ways. It can be something as simple as spreading gossip and rumors about someone else. Even mocking someone can rise to the level of bullying depending on intent and the relationship of those involved.

Bullying behavior also includes physically hitting someone, shoving someone intentionally or tripping someone as they walk past. These examples conjure up the

images of high school bullies pushing someone into the locker.

Another type of bullying that occurs involves electronics, such as computer-aided dispatch systems (CAD) and mobile data computer/terminals (MDC/MDT). Some examples in the electronic world include sending an email or CAD message to all but a few people inviting them out after work for a drink. Although the invitation is for a social activity, if you use agency equipment to invite others, it is viewed as a work function and is subject to workplace policy and laws.

Almost every CAD system records every single message that is sent from CAD to CAD, and CAD to MDC. While these systems generally are not subject to the Freedom of Information Act, they can be subpoenaed. The same also holds true for electronic mail.

Bullying via social media is a growing problem. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and a whole host of other social media sites unwittingly contribute to the issue. Many agencies have a hard time regulating employees' conduct on social media. The sites make it fairly easy to both be a bully and to be bullied. Unfortunately, it is relatively easy to make a fake account on any of these platforms to bully and harass others online.

Social media bullying can include the bully tagging the victim in an unwanted post or sending direct messages to the victim. Facebook has a secret conversation feature on their mobile messenger application that includes disappearing messages.

THE ISSUE OF NEGATIVITY

Let us switch gears to negativity for a moment. APCO defines negativity as "an attitude of mind marked by skepticism especially about nearly everything affirmed by others"⁷. Everyone knows the "negative Nellie." You could give the person a \$10 bill, and they would complain that it was not a twenty. You could say how beautiful it is out, and they would complain about that it will not last forever.

Everyone has had periods of negativity in their lives and careers; it is completely normal. It is when the negativity takes over, and you filter everything through a negative perspective that it becomes harmful.

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For example, when a new agency procedure comes out, the first thing that might come to mind for this person is that it will never work. They tell everyone that it will not work and perhaps make a few comments about the person that came up with the procedure.

This can affect how others now view that procedure, even if there was nothing wrong with it to begin with. The negative employee has influenced others and clouded their judgment without even knowing it. Everyone has bad days and likes to vent to others. In fact, venting to a co-worker can be healthy. But when venting turns into complaining day after day with no resolution, it becomes harmful.

Bullying and negativity feed off of each other. It is almost the chicken and the egg scenario. Did negativity cause the bullying to start? Or is every one negative because of the bullying?

When bullying and negativity go on unchecked in your center, there can be many ways it can affect the staff, morale and the quality of work that is produced. With bullying, you may have senior people that have tried to move up in the agency but end up demoting themselves to a previous position just to escape the bullying. You may even have a newly hired employee be bullied into resigning. Who would want to go to work day after day with a pit in their stomach wondering what is going to happen to them today? The sad reality is that happens in almost every center in the country.

No one should fear coming into work each day. Fear can cause us to be so worried about looking over our shoulder that we miss a critical update on a job. We may miss a radio transmission due to someone behind us yelling or taunting someone. In extreme cases, equipment may be sabotaged so that it cannot even be used to input any commands. These types of acts could possibly end in termination. See the correlation with an increase of sick time. After all, why would anyone want to come to work and be treated this way? Eventually, the employee may leave for another job or just quit altogether. That leads to increased mandatory shifts due to losing another employee as well as a decrease in the ability for remaining employees to take time off. All of this contributes to a loss of morale.

Bullying can be something as simple as spreading gossip and rumors about someone else. Even mocking someone can rise to the level of bullying depending on intent and the relationship of those involved.

FIXING THE PROBLEM

What can we do about bullying and negative behavior in the PSAP? The first step in combating it is admitting there is a problem. The second is to have a procedure against bullying (which should be reflected as well in your social media policy)! Then, make sure that your staff are thoroughly trained on the policy.

Enforce the policy! It will be a culture change for most departments and won't happen overnight. It will take time and support from everyone in the center to make it happen. The difference, though, will be worth it. While we all know it's not possible to make everyone happy all of the time, we can make a department where most everyone is happy to be there.

And, lastly, you have enough staff to spread the workload and maybe even get a day or two off!

The APCO Institute's Bullying and Negativity in the Communications Center course includes detailed information on addressing and preventing these damaging behaviors in the PSAP. The eight-hour class is offered online and live at agencies

interested in co-hosting the course. For more information, visit apcointl.org/ schedule or contact the APCO Institute at institute@apcointl.org. ●

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1. Bullying is defined as:
 - a. Repeated behavior that is tolerated
 - b. Unwanted behavior that is usually OK
 - c. Repeated and unwanted behavior
 - d. A person with a consistently negative attitude
2. Negativity is defined in the article as:
 - a. A person who is having an off day
 - b. A state of mind that is skeptical about things usually affirmed by others
 - c. A state of mind that is positive
 - d. A generally unhappy person
3. Sixty-eight percent of executives say they do not have a bullying procedure in place.
 - a. True
 - b. False
4. Who of the following can be bullies in the communication center?
 - a. Telecommunicators
 - b. Communication Training Officers
 - c. Supervisors
 - d. Directors/Chief/Managers
 - e. All of the Above
 - f. None of the Above
5. Which of the following are not results of bullying in an agency?
 - a. Improved morale
 - b. Resignations
 - c. Terminations
 - d. Self-Demotions
6. An agency's bullying policy should be reflected in its social media policy.
 - a. True
 - b. False
7. What is the first step in combating the bullying and negativity problem?
 - a. Holding an informational session
 - b. Writing a procedure
 - c. Acknowledging there is a problem
 - d. Ignoring it
8. Bullying and negativity are not a problem across the country.
 - a. True
 - b. False
9. Electronic (cyber) bullying does not include which of the following?
 - a. Mobile data computers/terminals
 - b. Electronic mail
 - c. Facebook
 - d. Water-cooler talk
10. What percentage of employers deny or rationalize bullying?
 - a. 34%
 - b. 63%
 - c. 72%
 - d. 95%

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