

- **Modifications psychiques:** le harcèlement moral peut provoquer une destruction de l'identité et changer de façon durable le caractère d'une personne, avec l'apparition de troubles psychosomatiques. Un proverbe chinois dit «on peut guérir d'un coup d'épée mais pas d'un coup de langue».
- **La dévitalisation:** la personne harcelée peut s'installer dans une névrose traumatique où elle ne cesse de penser de façon obsessionnelle à ce qu'elle a subi.
- **La rigidification:** les personnes harcelées peuvent évoluer vers une rigidification de leur personnalité avec l'apparition de traits paranoïaques.

- **La défense par la psychose:** le harcèlement moral comme tout traumatisme violent ou comme toute humiliation répétée, peut produire une effraction dans le psychisme et amener une personne à délirer de façon plus ou moins transitoire.
- **La mort:** les recherches montrent que le harcèlement moral est une forme de violence au travail d'une telle destructivité qu'il peut en, lui-même, mener au suicide.

Pour l'organisation:

Le harcèlement entraîne une démotivation du personnel, une baisse de productivité avec un taux d'absentéisme en recrudescence. Il

est de rigueur de bien prévenir le harcèlement pour éviter tout dysfonctionnement tant au niveau personnel que dans son environnement professionnel. Il vaut mieux prévenir que guérir et bien se protéger pour éviter toutes formes de harcèlement.

Si vous vous croyez témoin de harcèlement, ou harceleur/harceuse malgré vous, ou victime de harcèlement, veuillez consulter le ST/SGB/2008/5. ■

*A lire aussi sur [www.unspecial.org](http://www.unspecial.org)  
l'article: «Commission paritaire de prévention du harcèlement»*

# VIOLENCE IN THE WORKPLACE

PHILIPPE COTTER

(Translation Helen Mistry)

Version française sur [www.unspecial.org](http://www.unspecial.org)

Mobbing, which does not involve direct physical contact between aggressor and victim, occurs in places where there is close but not intimate social interaction, typically in the workplace. Mobbing plays a subtle, compulsive game of cat-and-mouse with the accepted norms. It is not so much its intensity, far below that of extreme violence, that is pernicious, but rather its frequency. Repeated acts of emotional abuse are designed to sap the victim's confidence. Ill-protected by the legal system, the victim finds little understanding in his/her environment because there is a general tendency to play down the impact of such behaviour.

Robert Sutton has analysed the cunning strategies of aggressors who justify their violence

as being for the company's sake. "People who loudly insult and belittle their underlings and rivals are easy to catch and discipline. Two-faced backstabbers, those who have enough skill and emotional control to save their dirty work for moments when they can't get caught, are tougher to stop – even though they may do as much damage as a raging maniac".

Mobbing develops primarily in workplaces in crisis, where individuals can rationalise their abuse in the name of expediency. "A company that is disorganised, poorly-structured and where morale is low offers fertile ground for them," according to Marie-France Hirigoyen. "The method is always the same, the victim's weaknesses are exploited and he/she

experiences loss of confidence. The screw is turned in a very subtle manner until the victim thinks he/she is to blame."

The aggressor will always be looking for provocation, with an ulterior motive, namely trying to hide the personal difficulties which prevent him from functioning efficiently in his professional environment. He projects his inadequacies onto his victims, blaming them for his own dysfunctional behaviour. However, mobbing does call for subtle calibration. To go beyond certain limits would risk damaging the aggressor's career. He is therefore forced to tone down his violence in order to keep it concealed, whilst repeating it frequently to benefit from the internal sti-

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mulation he seeks. Criminologist Robert Koppel stresses that workplace aggressions, although extremely painful for those on the receiving end, have to operate within certain boundaries that allow the perpetrator to compensate for his inadequacies without crossing the borderline into criminality.

The cyclic nature of emotional abuse makes it particularly difficult to live with, especially if the victim is isolated. Avoidance becomes impossible, conciliation as well as hatred are not just pointless but actually counterproductive. Marie-France Hirigoyen goes on to say that “trying to be nice to the bully only shows him how superior you are and will naturally exacerbate his violent behaviour. If you show him you hate him, he will love it in

his own perverted way because he will feel justified: ‘It’s not me who hates him/her, it’s him/her who hates me’.”

What can we do to reduce emotional abuse in the workplace? FBI agent John Douglas promotes institutional communication because it allows employees to vent their humiliations. “One of the most effective things a company can do, particularly a large company, is to have the resources available where people can go and seek help. They should know it’s there for them and that it will not be held against them if they take advantage of the service. Many issues can be resolved before they reach the critical level if the employee feels there’s someone letting him know he’s getting some kind of support and understanding.”

Institutional communication gives employers the means to defuse potential conflicts and it gives employees a neutral arena where they can talk about their personal problems. It offers humiliation-ridden individuals the tools

to avoid negative alternatives such as depression, resentment, or violence against company representatives. ■

Version française: [www.unspecial.org](http://www.unspecial.org)

#### Further Reading:

Hirigoyen Marie-France, *Stalking the Soul. Emotional Abuse and the Erosion of Identity*, New York, Helen Marx, 2000.

Sutton Robert, *The No Asshole Rule. Building a Civilised Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t*, London, Sphere, 2007.

Cotter Philippe and Holleufer Gilbert, *La vengeance des humiliés. Les révoltes du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Geneva, Eclectica, 2008 (translation in progress).

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