MOBBING IN THE WORKPLACE – ITS MANIFESTATIONS, CONSEQUENCES AND POSSIBILITIES OF ELIMINATION IN THE ARMED FORCES OF THE SLOVAK REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT
The content of this article is focused on the issues of psychological terror in the workplace – mobbing. Authors of this article analyze the essence, manifestations and consequences of this socially undesirable phenomenon of interpersonal relationships in general, as well as in the specific conditions of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic. Theoretical approaches to mobbing are confronted with the results of two researches in the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic. The conclusion will clarify the possibilities of prevention and solution to the problem of mobbing, bossing and bullying in the workplaces.

KEYWORDS: interpersonal relationships, bullying, mobbing, bossing

1. Introduction
The issue of disturbed interpersonal relationships caused by bullying is very old. In the areas of education, penitentiary and military environment it was common to talk frankly about the bullying. However, the public was rarely informed about inappropriate behavior in interpersonal relationships within the companies, factories and institutions. Changes of conditions in the labor market after the November 1989 have brought the possibilities of free enterprise, as well as changes in labor law. Yet, it is naive to think that these changes brought about the phenomenon of mobbing – the psychological terror in the workplace. In specific forms it was a part of work team members during the era of socialism, but for many reasons it was a taboo topic. In the present, people increasingly complain about the bad interpersonal relationships, failures of communication and overall worsening of social atmosphere in the workplaces. World of labor is connected with the world of money, power, social influence and prestige. As the occurrence of violence increases throughout the whole
society, the violence in the world of labor increases as well. There are also other factors that have negative impact on relationships in the workplaces. Among these are the following: social atmosphere, changes of ownership, foreign organizations, but also personal maturity of managers and employees in the organizations, etc. These and other questions influence an organizational culture created especially by the management. The organizational culture reflects “generally shared and relatively stable opinions, attitudes and values that exist within the organization, whereas the culture determines the processes of decision-making and problem-solving influences the objectives, tools and ways of dealing with problems. It is a source of motivation and disincentive, satisfaction and discontent” [1].

According to numerous researches, a one third of Slovaks have faced bullying or mobbing. It also claims that manifestations of these phenomena can be recognized in every organization. We have to realize that work-related stress, besides heavy physical and psychological effects, has also remarkable economic fallout. Performance and reliability of employees affected by mobbing, bossing or bullying decrease and organizations may lose important personnel or its competitiveness due to fluctuation.

2. Theoretical Background for the Issue of Psychological Terror in the Workplace

The issue of psychological terror in the workplace has an interdisciplinary character. It is studied by professionals in the areas of work psychology, social psychology, management, sociology and ethics. The issue of mobbing, in its most complex form, is theoretically analyzed by social pathology, which is a science that deals with pathological, abnormal, generally undesirable social phenomena. The term was used for the first time by an English philosopher and sociologist H. Spencer. He was searching for connection between human organism and its diseases, and between society and its diseases. In this case it is an undesirable, socio-pathological phenomenon in interpersonal relationships in the workplaces of the organizations. The socio-pathological phenomena have always socio-cultural background and are variable, depending on time or place. To deal with socio-pathological phenomena in a work environment means to focus particularly on norms. Norms are the fundamental elements of human’s social existence – they determine an expected behavior, define what is right and what is wrong, and what we should or should not do. They also tell us what is in accordance with social needs, objectives, interests and values. Boundaries of the norm are fixed, hence any certain type of behavior beyond these lines is considered to be deviant – diverging from the social norm. The norms come hand in hand with a social control. The term social control includes all social mechanisms, whose goal is to secure order and stability in the society, organizations, social groups, work teams, etc. Another part of the social control is sanctions, by which we enforce the norm abidance. Violation of the formal or informal norms can have a form of mobbing, bossing or bullying.

The term “bullying” serves to describe a behavior that frightens or hurts someone smaller or weaker. It is a specific form of long-term tyrannizing of one person by another, where threatening or power abusing is very common. Bullying can be found in every kind of relationship and in every area of a social life.

The typical signs of bullying are that:
– it is an intentional hurting of someone, which results in physical and emotional stress;
– bullying is a power/strength abuse;
– bullying is a long-lasting kind of relationship that evolves over time;
– point of bullying is to use power/strength in interpersonal relationships [2].
The word “mobbing” comes from the root “mob” that means to “assault” or “offend”. This term refers to permanent, systematic and intensive attacks, intrigues and bullying by a group of people or a superior towards either one person or a small group of people. It is a severe failure of communication or relationships between people, a form of undesired aggression in the interpersonal relationships, the most serious deformation of the social relationships, roles and norms. Most experts agree that the triggering moment is a conflict and an inability to solve it.

“Mobbing, or a psychological terror, represents a hostile or unethical communication at work that one or more persons systematically use against an individual. As a result, this individual is becoming defenseless and powerless” [3].

Bossing is a form of mobbing described as bullying of subordinate by a superior/manager. Even though this kind of psychological terror is not that common, it still does exist. To convict a manager of bossing, a new form of humiliation, dictatorship and cult of personality, is not easy. The harm usually cannot be proven, because the most significant damage is usually a hazard with person’s trust, abilities and self-confidence.

Origin, forms and methods of mobbing and bossing

When we want to talk about mobbing, we need to define its origin, forms and methods. A fertile ground for mobbing is a workplace full of dullness and boredom – the offender has enough time for bad thoughts and cunning of his intrigues, as well as their realization; wrong style of management – to a large extent, managers always determine the moral level of organization as well as acceptance of certain form of behavior; competition and fear of unemployment – fear of losing a job of more skilled coworkers, low self-esteem, anger, frustration, thirst for power, ambition to be promoted and gain dominance or a membership in certain group is often transformed into aggression; certain personal predisposition – joy of manipulating with people, need of being in a centre of an attention, pleasure of seeing others suffer, cruelty, aggression, envy, vulgarity and others.

We do not need any special conditions for mobbing to appear, for example the presence of a pathological sadist or an absence of discipline in the workplace are sufficient.

It commonly appears within a normal group of people, where the aggressors may seem to be ordinary persons, often the popular ones. Especially at the beginning it is hard to say whether it is an innocent joke or a mobbing. Relationships of the participants of mobbing have, in contrast to joke, their dynamics and natural development. The levels of the mobbing process are:

1. Birth of mobbing. We can find someone less popular in every group, someone who is more or less rejected and who is an object of ridicule. If the victim does not resist and no one defends him, both tension and aggression gradually increases.

2. Toughening. It starts when the tension escalates because of more difficult tasks and outsiders instinctively serve as a vent for its release. Another possible cause of this phase is, when two or more aggressors meet inside the group that use the violence to fulfill their needs, sometimes even to amuse the whole group.

3. Creation of a core. More people join the main aggressor, until they become a gang of bullies, who systematically affect their victims.

4. Acceptance. The majority accents the norms of aggressors and more people join them.

5. Totality. Mobbing becomes a normal behavior in the workplace.

A good manager should pay attention to the relationships in his workplace to eliminate all possible signs of aggression at its inception. He must try to prevent it and create an effective group, where justice, faith, authority, solidarity and mutual respect dominate.
A remarkable amount of organizations still ignores the phenomenon of mobbing. They do not realize that psychological war is expensive and negatively affects people in the organization. Bossing has a very similar character. Why do managers mob and how does bossing manifest? These questions remain very often unanswered. Bossing, from the position of manager, can have following reasons: discontent with an organization, pressure from superiors, thirst for power, personal reasons, fear of the loss of control, fear of subordinate’s domination, fear of unspoken thoughts, constant feeling of being maligned – these managers are paranoid in certain way.

The manifests of bossing vary as well, for example:
– the victim is assigned with very difficult tasks, even pointless ones;
– low expectations – tasks that are assigned do not require qualification, experience and skills of a victim;
– too high expectations – tasks that are assigned cannot be possibly completed and, inevitably, lead to failure;
– the victim is forced to deal with the most unpleasant tasks;
– the victim is over-controlled – everything he/she does is being watched in detail;
– decisions that concern the victim are being made without his/her presence;
– the victim is banished from all the important conferences, he/she lacks the essential information;
– the victim is isolated from others;
– the victim is forced to do health-damaging work;
– the victim is being convinced of having mental disorders and illnesses.

Victims of bossing usually do not have any other option, to get rid of psychological pressure and worsening of their physical health, than to resign.

Classification of different types of mobbing instigators
They can be divided into three groups:

Instigators
– make up the ways and forms of psychological terror;
– chooses the victims;
– have a depraved feeling of satisfaction when they tyrannize their victim.

Random offenders
– usually occurs when a trivial conflict becomes a long-lasting feud between two rivals, without any attempts to settle it.

Accomplices
– they either actively support the instigator in his behavior or just passively watch and does not intervene to help the victim [4].

In general, we can say that mobbing is possible thanks to accomplices that support the instigator either actively or passively. It sounds like a paradox, but the victims of psychological terror are usually not the lazy or inapt individuals. The opposite is true: mostly hard-working and conscientious people are the victims. They are unfortunate, because they do not go along with the crowd. The impulse can be above-average results, as well as modesty or coyness. Another reason for mobbing is when a person cannot fit in with the team and its habits.

The most frequent victims of mobbing are women between the ages 20 and 30 years that do not have a steady position. Next endangered group is women working in the middle level management, if they try to fit into male collective. Mobbing more often occurs among people of lower level of education. Other types of victims of mobbing are usually the exceptionally active and committed employees. They are kind of a provocation to the others and are an undesired competition. Even aspects, such as different sexual orientation, handicap, beliefs, religion, etc. can be a reason for mobbing.
3. Mobbing and Bossing in the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic

Professional soldiers and the employees of the armed forces spend more than one third of a day at work. It would be short-sighted and naive to think that the work environment of units and formations of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic is immune to mobbing and bossing. Hierarchy of competences and power – so typical for the armed forces – as a potential source of violence evokes the need to pay attention to the problem of violence in workplaces. One of the things that contribute to mobbing in this specific environment is a permanent process of transformation and reformation in the armed forces that mostly deals with the decreasing number of soldiers, employees and with removal or relocation of military bases and formations.

Professional armed forces are without doubt one of those social systems, where we can find ideal conditions for existence of mobbing and bullying:

– regular, long lasting contact of a large number of people;
– possibility to isolate a potential victim;
– strong power of superiors and strict requirements for discipline:
– maintaining of the habitual norms that include a subordination and any form of violence;
– possibility to transfer the mobbing and bullying by social learning – “spreading the virus”;
– group, the victim takes place in, has low cohesion;
– immature atmosphere within the group, etc.

When talking about the armed forces, we must ask a question: “What are the causes of the mentioned socio-pathological phenomena?” We can definitely say that causes of their appearance among soldiers may be similar or identical to causes in civil organizations.

In each case, we are talking about an “interpersonal communication crisis”. It is a situation where circumstances, that were acceptable before, became suddenly unacceptable. In every crisis a serious role is played by circumstances and individuals, which are unique and unrepeatable. The common sign of all crises is the fact that they could be retrospectively envisioned. As the scale and opportunities for mobbing in specific conditions and environment of the armed forces are wide, we will pay our attention only to some of its aspects. We need to say that phenomena mentioned above can be found in every level of management in the armed forces. Objectionable ways of solving the conflicts between individuals and groups usually come hand in hand with aversions of those, who participate in the conflict. A duty of a superior is to fairly and in time eliminate the sources of conflicts in order to keep a positive working atmosphere.

A common phenomenon in the armed forces is lack of experience of commanders on the lower command level (squad, platoon), who, instead of transparent methods of conflict resolution, postpone the resolution indefinitely. Personal bias or informal relationships are the reasons of their unfair attitude towards one of the sides involved.

Professional and commanding incompetency of the superior – mostly occurs when the commander prefers autocratic dictatorship or liberal/passive style of management, especially by manifestation of the negative sides of both styles.

In the first case, where command is absolute and ultimate act in the system of bans, restrictions and negative sanctions, and where the absence of motivation for higher performance is present, the ideal situation for manipulation with the subordinates is created.

In the second case, where the result is less authority and prestige of the commander, formal and passive approach to
fulfilling duties and goals, disregard of individuals and whole military unit, the commander loses the trust of his subordinates, and the lead is often taken by self-appointed leaders, what often leads to violation of relationships between soldiers.

A common sign of these management styles is an uneven burdening of subordinates with tasks, often given because of nontransparent relationships and sympathies or antipathies towards certain individuals. *Superiors do not enable their subordinates to grow professionally* – in spite of legal rules that determine career advancement of professional soldiers, a commander may sometimes, especially by wrong personal work, prevent soldiers from improving their professional qualification. Soldiers have possibility to get higher levels of education not according to their results or the needs of an organization, but according to the better relationships with the superior. This fact is negatively reflected on the relationships of the whole unit.

Mobbing between soldiers may also remain because of a current legal adaptation of relations in the armed forces, which are characteristic by a strict hierarchy, formalization, etc.

Many of soldiers often misunderstand their social position in the military social system and consider themselves to be absolute leaders, often misusing these aspects. There is yet another important factor, which is often forgotten about. Many superiors do not realize that professionalization of the armed forces brings also a different legal awareness, than which the commanders of conscripts were used to.

Forms of mobbing can improve over time and at present they are carried out mostly between two people, which mean that the only way to remove this deformation is by the collective and coordinated effort of victims and their coworkers.

4. Research of Mobbing and Bossing in the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic

Despite the fact that mobbing as well as bossing occurs in all working spheres, its occurrence is more frequent within the large organizations, state or public institutions and institutions typical for their strict hierarchy. What is the situation in the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic? In 2007, the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic´s Bureau of Human Resources in Bratislava made a sociological research on a sample of 597 respondents – armed forces personnel – where they found out that almost 16.5 % of them is working in an environment with high risk of mobbing and approximately 37 % in an environment with a medium risk of mobbing. Certain time has passed since the research was realized and that is why sociologists from the Section of psychological and sociological activities of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic’s Bureau of Human Resources made a final report on sociological research project “Identity of professional soldiers, mobbing” in January 2014. 413 professional soldiers of the Slovak Armed Forces have participated in the research. The main goal of one of the researched areas was to discover, to what extent the soldiers do admit the existence of mobbing in their work environment.

The soldiers were given following questions:

Question no. 1 – *Have you ever encountered a situation, when your superior responded inappropriately due to his higher position?*

It is startling that 28 % of respondents have had such experience. 21 % of respondents stated that they have heard of such situations from their colleagues, 19% have heard that such situations do exist, 27 % of respondents have never experienced mobbing and have never heard of it, and 8 % of respondents refused to answer.
Question no. 2 – Have you ever encountered a situation, when you could say it was mobbing?

The results have showed that 25 % of the respondents have personally experienced such situation, 19 % have heard of it from their colleagues, 16 % of the respondents have heard that such situations do exist, 34 % have never experienced or heard of mobbing and 6 % refused to answer.

Question no. 3 – In what way has mobbing affected the person, while performing his/her job? (The respondents could choose from multiple options.)

This question was given to the respondents, who answered positively to the question no. 2. In this case, the respondents have usually mentioned lower performance, inability to focus on work and its avoidance (vacation, absence due to illness, etc.). This emerges from numerous answers to options given to 413 respondents:
- others (15);
- the need to take stress relieving medication (15);
- feeling of distress, depression (51);
- insomnia (36);
- digestive problems (35);
- headaches (32);
- work avoidance (87);
- social exclusion (32);
- social avoidance (60);
- lower performance (161);
- inability to focus on work (117).

This sociological survey has offered valuable information about mobbing in the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic. The Section of psychological and sociological activities of the Bureau of Human Resources is planning to process more detailed research in the future [5].

5. Conclusion

Anyone of us can become a victim of mobbing, bossing or bullying. No organization is immune to these phenomena. Last of all let us pose some questions, which are not easily to answer due to complexity and extent of this issue:

1. What is a victim able to do against mobbing? The recommendations are following:
- it is necessary to analyze the situation and clarify the facts, perhaps to discuss the situation with someone out of victim’s workplace;
- to document the facts that are connected to these phenomena, such as gathering witnesses, discussion with a lawyer, etc.;
- to lodge a complaint with a request about resolving this situation and its analysis, to take appropriate precautionary steps, to apply the laws, which forbid any kind of discrimination;
- to demand your rights through the courts [6].

2. What can a superior do against mobbing? Except the regular improvement of the work atmosphere, we must consider especially these measures:
- to ensure that every new employee is successfully integrated into a team;
- to observe work atmosphere, so that he can recognize mobbing activities in time,
- to never play down complaints of the superiors;
- to talk about mobbing as a negative phenomenon that needs to be eliminated;
- to participate in “socially bearable” resolution of the conflict;
- to supply the victim of mobbing with the necessary information [7].

3. What can an organization do against mobbing?

Every organization should take bullying, mobbing and bossing seriously and responsibly examine each situation. The organizations should not stand idly by, neither because of moral nor economic aspects. It has to show by every measure it makes, that it will not tolerate these phenomena. An employer cannot overlook that, according to the labor law, he is
obliged to protect the personality of his employees and take care of them. The most important is to name the problems of this nature and openly discuss them. Any form of mobbing is generally very difficult to prove and even more difficult is to convince the victims of mobbing not to give up and solve the situation. After all, it is not a solution to leave the organization, but to learn how to defend ourselves. Our legislative and its creators should remarkably help this process by adopting the amendment of the labor code – the anti-discrimination law and new anti-mobbing laws.

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