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## MOBBING: PSYCHOLOGICAL TERROR IN THE WORKPLACE

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**Abstract:** *Mobbing is a less known phenomenon in Romania, but its effects are real and worrisome. It is a form of psychological abuse in the workplace, carried out by either colleagues or superiors through repeated aggressive acts. This kind of psychological pressure frequently leads to affecting the well-being of the victim either by loss of self-esteem, feelings of victimization, depression, psychosomatic disorders, insomnia, self-destructive behavior (alcoholism), a drop in work efficiency, acute stress and post-traumatic stress. In organizations where mobbing takes place, there is an obvious decrease in productivity. In order to prevent this type of behavior, there needs to be an accurate understanding of the act of mobbing in all contexts. (organizational, professional, individual)*

**Keywords:** *psychological harassment, emotional abuse, intimidation, mobbing, psychological pressure*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Heinz Leymann was the first psychologist to put forward the idea of mobbing in specialized literature. He borrowed the term « mobbing » from animal psychology expert Konrad Lorenz, who had observed and studied behaviors of isolation/exclusion among animals, more explicitly the attacks of a group of smaller animals against a bigger one.

The mobbing phenomenon has been studied as early as the 1990s in several European countries such as the Scandinavian countries, Great Britain, France, Italy and Spain. It basically refers to actions of intense psychological abuse carried out against an employee with the purpose of making him resign his job, in the circumstances where firing/relocating him would lead to legal troubles for the employer. The employee can

become a long-term victim of a series of abuses, wrongdoings and humiliation meant to force him to leave his current job. This psychological pressure should not only make him lose his position, but in most cases will also affect his health.

“Mobbing” is a type of systematic psychological harassment in the workplace that happens every time an employee is being harassed and stigmatized by his colleagues or superiors through gossip, intimidation, humiliation, discrediting and isolation, endangering his emotional well being as well as his professional competence.

According to studies conducted by Kenneth Westhues (2007), mobbing takes place predominantly in organizations where job positions are considered more secure. It is more frequently present in the non-profit

sector, education, military and medical industry than in the private sector.

## 2. CONFLICT & MOBBING

The term “mobbing” does not refer to:

- workplace banter;
- isolated instances of unethical conduct;
- isolated conflicts in the workplace.

The EGE 2000 method leaves no room for legal argument. It consists of 7 parameters that need to be taken into account for a conflict to be considered mobbing. All 7 conditions are mandatory when determining a case of this kind. If one of them is not fulfilled then a conflict cannot be classified as mobbing. These parameters are:

- *Conflict has to happen in the workplace.* The conflict that does not take place in the workplace is not considered mobbing, but straining.
- *Duration.* Conflict has to last for at least 6 months. Only then it can be considered a case of persistence in behavior. DSM IV classifies any disease lasting less than 6 months as acute, while anything past 6 months is considered chronic. This means that mobbing is a chronic conflict.
- *Frequency.* Conflict has to happen a few times every month.
- *Existence of certain types of action.*

A conflict may be considered mobbing if it fulfills at least 2 of the 5 categories of negative actions:

- Actions against free speech (person cannot express his/her point of view, he/she is shunned);
- Systematic isolation (person is isolated from his/her colleagues)
- Change of tasks (person is assigned to task above or below his/her professional capacity)
- Attack on reputation (gossip, talk behind one's back, incorrect evaluations)
- Violence or threats of violence.

- *Inequality.* This does not refer to the organizational hierarchy. It means that the victim cannot properly defend himself/herself because of an inferior position.
- *Stages are successive.*
- *Intent of persecution.* The victim is discriminated, treated differently from others with the intent of making him/her resign.

## 3. EVOLUTION OF MOBBING

The act of mobbing does not happen instantly. The gradual evolution of mobbing was devised by Leymann who identified 4 stages, of preparation, of slow or precipitated evolution, maturization and persistent action.

*The first stage* exists in every organization and does not necessarily imply the occurrence of the other steps of evolution. It manifests itself through divergences, differences in opinion or competitiveness, which is a normal phenomenon and sometimes even beneficial for the progress of an organization.

*The second stage* has elements that might trigger the occurrence of mobbing. The psychological balance of the person is somehow threatened, self-confidence is jeopardized, stress and anxiety become a problem.

*The third stage* is when management should get involved. Unfortunately, most of the time this either does not happen at all, or it happens when it is already too late and the victim has already been removed. In this case, conflicts may have legal repercussions.

*The final stage* leads to the stigmatization, social isolation and the removal from the workplace, which could make finding a new job more difficult.

## 4. CAUSES OF MOBBING

Mobbing is preceded by a situation of conflict. The probability of such a situation is increased by the following factors:



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- deficiencies in human resources management;
- workplace instability;
- personality traits of the victim;
- group dynamic in the organization;
- poor relationships between work colleagues;
- high levels of stress caused by the professional activity;
- frequent organizational changes;
- organizational culture which tolerates moral harassment;
- psychosocial factors that influence work psychology: the type of work tasks, socio-organizational environment and work organization;
- organizational stress.

The factors that determine mobbing are:

- *Initiation of tasks.* In larger companies, managers have tried to design tasks as simple as possible and automatize them in such a way that less qualified staff is needed to complete them. Mobbing may appear as a result of lack of activity or boredom. Basically, the perpetrator chooses a victim to pass the time.
- *Task management.* Improper task management can be a trigger because work situations inevitably generate conflicts. If the system is not organized properly, the dispute may lead to mobbing. Improper task management implies: overload of work activities for an individual, both in quantity and in difficulty, absence of clearly defined rules and norms, work interferences.
- *Management of employees.* If done through abuse of power, it may lead to

## 6. WAYS OF COMBATING MOBBING

Mobbing can be underdiagnosed because of a tendency among specialists to diagnose victims with work-related stress, a result of emphasizing the state of disease.

situations where the manager chooses to leverage his authority when settling disputes, instead of identifying the faults in the system.

## 5. EFFECTS OF MOBBING

Effects may manifest in personal, professional and social situations, and they are recognizable by:

- anxiety and panic attacks;
- behavioral disorders: anorexia, alcoholism, bulimia, toxicomania;
- loss of motivation for professional activity;
- early medical retirement;
- underperformance in the workplace;
- incapability of adapting to social and emotional situations.

Prevention is one of the most efficient ways of combating mobbing. Other ways might include training the managers through educational programs or if the act of mobbing has already begun, reconciling the parties with the help of a specialist in mediation. The last form of intervention happens when the act of

mobbing is already in full effect and it deals with the legal rehabilitation of the victim.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Victims of mobbing are generally described as dedicated to their work and eager to succeed. Despite preconceptions, the victim is most of the time job oriented with a rising career. When the first signs of mobbing appear, the victim does not fully comprehend the situation and has difficulties reacting to it. They usually need psychological and legal counseling to deal with the attacks.

The affected go through physical and psychological torment, their work capacity is diminished, self-esteem decreases drastically, their socioemotional balance is altered (anxiety, depression, phobias, panic attacks), as well as their psychophysiological balance (headache, dizziness, gastrointestinal disorders, sleep disorders) and their behavioral stability (change in eating behavior, self-harm and hetero-aggressive outbursts, passivity).

The specialized literature mentions an existential crisis that victims of mobbing have to deal with, in the sense that losing their job might threaten their identity and sense of self-worth.

Mobbing is inefficient for an organization. It affects the professional performance of the victim; it may affect work relationships, lead to improper communication, decrease in productivity, all this culminating in a loss of efficacy for the organization.

In order to prevent this type of behavior, there needs to be an accurate understanding of the act of mobbing in all contexts. (organizational, professional, individual)

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