Academic mobbing, or how to become campus tormentors

By EVE SEGUIN | SEP 19 2016

For Professor Caroline Patsias at Université du Québec à Montréal, once a professor at Université de Sherbrooke.

If you're a university professor, chances are fairly good that you have initiated or participated in mobbing. Why? First, because mobbers are not sadists or sociopaths, but ordinary people; second, because universities are a type of organization that encourages mobbing; and third, as a result, mobbing is endemic at universities.

Unlike bullying, an *individual* form of harassment in which a typical scenario consists of a boss victimizing an assistant, mobbing is a serious *organizational* deficiency. Its many consequences are so severe that it is considered a major public health issue. The term itself, *mobbing,* describes its four essential characteristics: it is a collective, violent and deliberate process in which the individual psychologies of the aggressors and their victim provide no keys to understanding the phenomenon.

Workplace mobbing is a *concerted process to get rid of an employee*, who is better referred to as a "target" than a "victim" to emphasize the strategic nature of the process. The dynamic is reminiscent of Stalin's Moscow Trials: the targets are first convicted and evidence is later fabricated to justify the conviction. As sociologist of science Brian Martin put it, everything they say, are, write and do will be systematically used against them.

Successful mobbing leads to any of a number of outcomes: the targets commit suicide, are dismissed (or often at universities, being denied tenure), resign, retire early, take permanent or recurring sick leave (the last three being the most common cases for university professors), or have all their responsibilities withdrawn (as in the case of sidelined senior public servants).

The process begins when a small group of instigators decides to cast someone out on the pretext that he or she is threatening their interests. This concept covers a variety of cases; perhaps the target is not behaving the way they would like, does not share their view of the organization, earns more than they do or challenges questionable practices. Mobbers use negative communication as their powerful weapon of elimination.

At first unbeknownst to the target, negative communication consists of rumours, complaints (often anonymous), conniving looks, mocking, gossip, misrepresenting facts, insinuations, hearsay, defamation, lies, secret meetings to discuss "the case," disparaging comments, police-like surveillance of the target's work and private life to gather "evidence" that justifies the aggression, and so on.

The other side of negative communication is directed at the target and includes unjustified accusations, manipulating or withholding information, sending menacing or hateful messages, calling purportedly friendly or disciplinary meetings, psychologically destabilizing the targets by incessantly accusing them of making mistakes, intimidation, tampering with their workstation, offering to "help" with so-called adaptation problems, and public humiliation.

This campaign of negative communication ends up poisoning the entire workplace or faculty. All members of the group are exposed, and the well-known psycho-sociological phenomenon of peer pressure empowers the instigators to recruit a large majority. These recruits either become active mobbers, if they apply these tactics aggressively, or they become passive mobbers, if they look the other way and pretend the violence doesn't exist.

Negative communication *frames the target as someone who is impossible to work with and who threatens the organization*. The following characteristics are invariably attributed to the target, made out to be someone who:

- is a troublemaker,
- doesn't listen to advice,

- is detrimental to the organization,
- isn't a team player,
- is mentally ill,
- asks too many questions,
- doesn't share the group's culture,
- has a difficult personality,
- resists injustice,
- isn't social, or
- is a bully.

This final allegation is especially strategic because it transforms aggression into mock justice, making it possible to involve individuals in the campaign who would otherwise stay on the sidelines. At universities, this can easily be used against mobbed professors. All it takes is to make a faint allusion to, and if necessary, produce alleged student victims. The (self)-infantilization of students that plagues universities nowadays has only made this simpler.

In addition to negative communication techniques that attack the targets on a *personal* level, mobbing includes a range of oppressive tactics that impact their *work*: creating obstacles to completing normal tasks, depriving them of the right to have a voice, excluding them from committees and positions of responsibility, systematically downplaying their accomplishments, assigning tasks that are impossible or that far exceed their abilities, withholding invitations to meetings, exaggerating their mistakes, denying promotions, fabricating evidence of illegal or immoral activity, not responding to emails and issuing disciplinary sanctions, and the list goes on.

As these methodical and aggressive activities unfold over months and years, the targets end up becoming completely ostracized. Their reputation, credibility, authority, influence and contribution to the organization are nullified. As in a totalitarian situation, any attempts to defend themselves are perceived as additional proof of their "deviance." As in the case of rape, the target is deemed responsible for the violence that ensues against him or her. As we have seen in stories of genocide, the target becomes a non-person. If, against all odds, the final stage of mobbing fails and the target is not physically expelled from the organization, he or she will remain excluded for life. *Mobbing is social murder* and, by definition, people cannot survive their own murder. In other words, mobbing results in an indelible social stigma.

The severity of academic mobbing

Many people think that universities are completely different from private companies or government agencies. They believe that they are unique places of freedom that stimulate intelligence, foster independence, value originality, promote collegiality, encourage pluralism and treat their members with respect, starting with the faculty. Unfortunately, the severity of mobbing in academic settings destroys that fantasy. In truth, universities are breeding grounds for mobbing, where all the aggressive tactics described above are used *regularly*. In many faculties, mobbing has gained popularity as a work method.

The severity of academic mobbing is due not only to its prevalence, but also its inherent morbidity. The consequences for targets are more damaging in universities than in other work environments. One explanatory factor is that academic institutions are toxic, yet claim to foster employee well-being. Mobbed professors expect their employers to protect and defend them, and experience cognitive dissonance when they are hit with the realization that no such help is forthcoming. In fact, university administrations and human resources departments are involved in most mobbing campaigns, either actively or passively, by failing to take corrective action. An estimated 12 percent of mobbed professors end up committing suicide. An infamous Canadian case is that of Justine Sergent, a McGill University neurologist who committed suicide with her husband in 1994 after a two-year mobbing campaign in which she was accused of violating ethical research procedures.

Although universities now have "psychological harassment" policies, their ability to curb mobbing is dubious:

1. These policies are designed to address inter-individual harassment. For example, one Canadian university's HR policy states that "taking appropriate action […] should include […] telling *the person*

who is misbehaving to cease the behaviour" (our italics). Unfortunately, such a recommendation is irrelevant when it comes to mobbing.

2. The "psychological harassment" prevention procedures and authorities outlined in these policies are not immune to events within the organization, and mobbing campaigns often use them against the targets they are intended to protect. Such is notably the case when mediation procedures are applied between the target and the aggressors.
3. When they exist, faculty unions are primarily concerned with job retention and tend to fall back on stated prevention procedures, i.e. those set out by the employer.
4. The organizational culture of universities prohibits anyone from admitting, or even thinking, that an employee could be targeted by a group of other employees. The academic community, including the human resources department, reduces mobbing to a personality clash between professors and believes that both parties share equal responsibility. They also overwhelming tend to blame the target's personality for allegedly provoking or exacerbating the conflict.

Resistance

As academics, we are due to witness a new mobbing campaign being instigated sooner or later, provided we aren't the target. A sure sign is when a negative and apparently universal opinion of a colleague takes hold. As an elimination strategy starts to form and initial attempts are made to recruit us, we must ask ourselves: "Did I really choose this career in order to become an academic tormentor?"

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