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## A Proactive Response to the Mobbing Problem: A Guide for HR Managers

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**Abstract:** This paper introduces the concept of workplace mobbing as a destructive organizational behaviour of psychological assaults perpetrated against the target causing them harm and loss of employment. The discussion is drawn from a three year Australian study of 212 self identified targets of workplace mobbing behaviours. The behaviours are typically covert with informal networks and friendship loyalties providing effective mechanisms for emotional abuse, including those arising from human resource management practices. This paper discusses the manipulation of informal sources of power, with the use of gossip, rumour, hearsay, and innuendo to discredit and demonise those targeted. The study explores some of the systemic reasons for these behaviours and identifies some of the contributing risk factors and suggests management practices that can minimise the harm caused.

**Keywords:** mobbing, bullying, harassment, employment, discrimination, and reasonable management action.

### THE MOBBING PROBLEM

This paper reports on some of the findings from an Australian study of 212 public sector employees, who exited their employment as a result of workplace mobbing behaviours. The study identifies that the risk to workers is high in those organizational cultures where gossip and rumour are valued as credible sources of information. The findings also suggest that seniority of position offers little protection and that sometimes, perpetrators can manipulate human resource management practitioners to join in with them against the targets (Davenport, Distler-Schwartz, & Pursell-Elliott, 1999; Shallcross, Sheehan, & Ramsay, 2009; Westhues, 2002).

Some researchers identify that mobbing often results in long term psychological damage, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), loss of employment, suicide, and homicide. The tendency toward homicide is recognised in the phrase of “going postal”, a term coined to describe the situation where angry and outraged employees, in a series of incidents in the US postal service, shot and killed their fellow workers (Westhues, 2006). This is consistent with the analogy of the workplace as a psychological “battlefield” where people could kill one another without ever “running the risk” of having to account for their behaviour (Leymann, 1996, pp. 172-173). In addition, other studies highlight the detrimental impact on family members and bystanders who witness the abusive behaviour and/or those who provide emotional support to those targeted (Hockley, 2002; Vickers, 2006; Meglich-Sespico, Faley & Erdos-Knapp, 2007).

### Definition

The International Labour Organisation (ILO), in identifying workplace violence as a labour issue of increasing worldwide concern, has extended its definition of violence to include psychological acts of aggression (Chappell and Di Martino, 2001). Consistent with this definition, workplace mobbing can be described as a covert process whereby the perpetrators act collectively to direct psychological attacks towards those targeted until they are forced to leave their employment (Shallcross et al., 2008). Similarly, workplace mobbing is also described as “a malicious attempt to force a person out of the workplace through unjustified accusations, humiliation, general harassment, emotional abuse, and/or terror” (Zapf and Leymann, 1996). The outcome of mobbing, most often identified by

researchers, is the target's expulsion from the workplace, causing psychological and physical injuries, and financial distress (Groeblichhoff & Becker, 1996; Zapf & Leymann, 1996).

## Five Phases

Mobbing is identified by some researchers as a five phased process of isolation, exclusion, and expulsion commencing with an unresolved conflict (first phase), followed by psychological assaults (second phase), after which management escalates the conflict (third phase). During the fourth phase targets tend to be blamed as the problem, and the fifth phase is identified as the expulsion where those targeted are forced to leave their position (Davenport et al., 1999; Zapf & Leymann, 1996). Furthermore, the extent to which mobbing is experienced can be assessed according to the three “degrees” of mobbing analogous to first, second and third degree burns (Davenport et al., 1999).

While some researchers have merged the terms mobbing and bullying to mean the same phenomenon (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005), others suggest that bullying is less likely to include mobbing (Leymann, 1996; Schuster, 1996). Bullying is sometimes stereotypically perceived, for example, in the media as direct forms of aggression where managers bully the staff they supervise (see for example, Robinson, 2000). In contrast, mobbing refers to covert collective behaviours of “ganging up” against a targeted co-worker with malicious intent to cause harm (Davenport et al., 1999).

## Mobbing factors

The need for objective factors by which mobbing can be assessed has been identified by some researchers as essential (Fox & Spector, 2005) if human resource managers are to effectively address the problem. For example, the situation has been recognized whereby bullies sometimes claim victim status to portray themselves as “fair and innocent” to be protected from the “bullies” who are demonised as “unfair and guilty” (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). While workers may perceive that they have been bullied, it is nevertheless reasonable for decision makers to assess the behaviours against objective factors and in keeping with the principles of fairness and natural justice (Van-Gramberg & Teicher, 2006). An analysis of the mobbing literature identifies twelve factors that converge to provide a basis for assessing the degree of mobbing experienced by participants. The 12 mobbing factors, as synthesized from the literature, are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1: Twelve Mobbing Factors**

1. Systematic collusion, or ganging up by groups of employees to isolate, discredit, or humiliate a target employee.
2. The collusion is done with malicious intent to cause harm to the target.
3. The behaviour is frequent and enduring often occurring over a period of months and years.
4. The power imbalance is most often not that obtained through formal hierarchical employment relationships, as occurs between a supervisor and a subordinate, and tends to be more powerful although informal in nature.
5. Perpetrators can direct abuse towards targets at any level in the organisation. i.e. perpetrators can target their supervisors and managers and their co-workers as well as those that they supervise.
6. Women are especially at risk from psychological passive forms of aggression from other women, particularly in women-dominated workplaces.
7. Targets are often trusting, co-operative, conscientious, and high achievers, loyal to the organization and who identify strongly with their work.
8. There is an identifiable pattern that commences with a minor conflict that escalates.
9. Management is unlikely to recognise the behaviour and tends to side with the group against the target and sometimes instigates or condones the behaviour.
10. The group and/or organization portray the victimised person, or target, as the one at

fault.
11. The behaviour causes the targets expulsion or elimination from the workplace.
12. The target is severely damaged resulting in psychological disorders, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), premature death, suicide and/or homicide.

Sources: Davenport et.al. 1999; Einarsen et al., 2003; Leymann, 1996; Namie & Namie, 2000; O'Moore, Lynch & Nic-Daeid, 2003; Salin, 2002.

In addition to identifying the mobbing factors, the extent to which the participants were psychologically damaged was assessed according to the three degrees of mobbing, that is, either first, second or third degree harm (Davenport et al., 1999).

## Gossip and Power

Bullying is most often recognised in organisational hierarchies where there is a power imbalance due to hierarchical organizational structure and where position power is abused by a manager towards the staff they supervise (Meglich-Sespico, Faley, & Erdos-Knapp, 2007; Vickers, 2006). However, there are other forms of less well recognized sources of power, for example, power gained through length of experience in a workplace or through access to influential networks. This study highlighted that informal sources of power are not to be underestimated in their capacity to deliberately perpetrate mobbing behaviours based on strength of numbers and influential contacts (Breed, 2001; Farrington, 2007; Meglich-Sespico et al., 2007; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). Additionally, those isolated or excluded from social networks may be at higher risk of being targeted (Westhues, 2002). For example, although a manager may have power due to their position in the hierarchy, they cannot protect themselves against manipulative covert attacks including rumour, gossip, and hearsay (Hockley, 2002).

Gossip can be defined as the “informal and evaluative talk in an organization about another member of that organization who is not present” (Kurland & Pelled, 2000, p. 430). Some researchers suggest that power is enhanced by negative gossip because of the implied threat to the recipient that they too may become the target of malicious gossip if they do not comply with the expected behaviour. Additionally, rumour can be defined as communication about “... a specific (or topical) proposition or belief, that is passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present” (Brown & Napier, 2006). However, this discussion is not intended to imply that all networks or all gossip are harmful but rather to recognise that informal sources of power can be successfully manipulated to deliberately cause harm to others.

## Gender and Gossip

There are some researchers that suggest a strong link between women and gossip. However, these are dismissed by others as stereotypical myths rather than empirically substantiated facts (Michelson & Mouly, 2000, p. 339). These researchers warn human resource managers to be wary of making assumptions about gossip or rumour being associated only with women because men are not exempt from gossiping behaviours. While supporting this warning, the gendered nature of the problem was nevertheless evident in this study, with reports from women, that psychological assaults are directed at them from other women more often than from men. Another researcher, investigating workplace violence among women in the nursing profession (Hockley, 2002), also concluded that while female violence may be more subtle, the behaviours, including the malicious spreading of rumours, are just as damaging as stereotypical male forms of aggression. These views are consistent with some other findings, including the US Hostile Workplace Survey (Namie, 2000) that found women were targeted by other women 84% of the time. The findings of these studies raise the question for future studies as to whether there is a gender dimension to dealing with workplace conflict in the public sector.

## TARGETS AND PERPETRATORS

Some researchers oppose the argument that bullies and victims display personality traits that give them a predisposition to bully or to be bullied, claiming that targets can simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time (Davenport et al., 1999; Einarsen et al., 2003; Leymann & Gustaffson, 1996; Zapf, 1999). However, this is a controversial issue, as others suggest there are recognisable character traits displayed by targets and perpetrators. For example, some suggest that targets exhibit personality traits such as being less independent and less extroverted, less stable, and more conscientious than non-victims (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). This rationale is provided as a possible reason as to what it is about the target that attracts psychological attacks. Perpetrators tend to be described as authoritarian, manipulative, lacking people skills, insensitive, evil, sadists and psychopaths (McCarthy, 2000). Other sources of research, however, identify that cooperative and enthusiastic staff, with notable achievements and a high level of competence, are likely to be targeted (Scutt, 2004b; Westhues, 2006). This study identified that these latter attributes, along with a commitment to achieving results, and a degree of naivety in relation to the good intentions of others, appear to expose those workers as easy targets.

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## THE STUDY

The data collection method for this study was comprised of individual interviews with public sector employees who perceived that they had been forced to leave their employment due to their mobbing experience. The interviews followed responses to key incidents using the episodic interview method (Flick, 2000) with questions focused on the mobbing experience that resulted in their departure from their employment. The interviews were transcribed and the data was coded using qualitative data analysis software. Themes were established based on the commonalities of the experience of the participants and these were consistent with the common themes in the literature. Additionally, departmental, legal and health records pertaining to the participants were also scrutinised and sighted and signed by a Justice of the Peace to add validity to the interviews.

### Method of Assessment

Each participant was assessed against each of the twelve factors outlined in Table 1. The analysis suggested that the majority of the participants had experienced workplace mobbing consistent with the five phases. A sample of the analysis, including a tabulation of the severity and degree of workplace mobbing based on the experience of eight participants, is included at Appendix 1. Following the model provided by Davenport et. al., (1999), the degree of damage was also assessed to diagnose either first, second, or third degree burns or damage.

## FINDINGS

Fifty percent were identified as having experienced third degree damage because these participants provided documented evidence of forced exits from their employment, they had been psychiatrically diagnosed with long term psychological damage, and they had been unable to return to full time work. Another 30 per cent had experienced second degree mobbing as they met nine of the twelve indicators including long-term psychological damage and forced exits from their employment. However, although they were initially on extended sick leave, these participants were able to return to full time employment elsewhere within twelve months of their forced exits. The remaining 20 per cent were diagnosed with first degree mobbing because their experience was limited to six or less of the 12 factors. Fifteen of the 212 participants reported that they had experienced workplace mobbing from the staff they supervised while others explained their experience as downward mobbing or horizontal aggression.

### Public Sector Culture

The public sector culture was principally identified as a major factor contributing to workplace mobbing. The public sector culture is captured in the following adjectives from

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one inquiry into the public health system. The system is described as “tribalism”, “tokenistic consultation”, “power and control”, “bullying”, “intimidation”, “blaming”, “avoiding responsibility” and with “needless deaths” occurring as a result (Forster, 2005, p. 56). Other aspects of public sector culture, including the reactive political context, lack of accountability, scapegoating of managers, casualisation of staff, minimal staffing levels, high competition for jobs, and lack of sufficient resources, were also identified as contributing to the mobbing experience of the participants in this study.

For example, due to the urgent nature of filling short term positions, recruitment processes were sometimes abandoned, resulting in quick appointments from the known pool of friends and acquaintances. In this study, it appeared that merit based appointees, including managers, were at risk of mobbing behaviours because they were outside the dominant group culture. In some cases, they had been appointed to introduce cultural change (see for example, Scutt, 2004a). Similar to the findings of other researchers, discrimination on the basis of gender, race, or impairment, was also identified as a mobbing factor because those staff were unable to conform to the values of the dominant group (Lewis & Gunn, 2007). For example, it is near impossible, and undesirable, to change skin colour or race to conform to the values of a dominant group culture that does not value diversity. Those interviewed for this study recognised that they either did not share the culture of the dominant group or that they were not prepared to join in with what they perceived to be destructive, and in some cases, unlawful behaviour, for example, turning a “blind eye” to theft of equipment.

## **Gossip and Power**

The powerful influence of gossip in the public sector is typified in the following comments found in the Public Service Commission’s investigation into one complaint made against one of the participants in this study.

The interviews conducted by [the investigator] with [two of the complainants] some eighteen months after first being interviewed are significant, in that they show a workplace in which people’s behaviour to each other was influenced by rumour, innuendo and gossip. [one complainant] is recorded as stating:  
I don’t know what [the alleged bully] was doing or could have done better ... [the perpetrators] built up the impression that she hated me and so I was scared of [her].

However, the Department continued to portray this target as the cause of the problem and dismissed these comments as irrelevant. The experience of some managers in this study is typified in the following comments from another participant suggesting that:

[we] ... rarely if ever hear the stories of those people who are victims of false accusations of bullying. These people are truly voiceless. I am one such person, and having been a victim of a false accusation of bullying, I have suffered trauma, depression, self-doubt, lowered self-esteem, and the powerlessness that comes from that. Every time I hear the word “bully” I have an almost traumatic response - I become anxious and angry.

This participant further comments that the perpetrators appeared to make unfounded accusations in an effort to unseat her because:

making a false accusation of bullying could be an extremely effective means of intimidating, or undermining, or getting rid of an employee, or a boss. Investigations are often managed like witch-hunts. There is nothing constructive or restorative about current approaches being taken.

## **Middle Managers at Risk**

This study identified the seemingly high level of staff turnover at middle and senior management levels of the public sector where participants suggested there was a toxic culture of scapegoating, blame, and psychological abuse. This finding is consistent with

the dysfunctional culture identified by reports into departmental problems during the past decade (see for example, Davies, 2005; Forster, 2005; Morris, 2005; Scutt, 2004a). Participants claimed that their experience of the public sector exposed them to malicious slander, gossip, constant criticism, psychological abuse, isolation, marginalisation, intimidating threats, and sudden forced exit from their employment. Furthermore, seven percent of the participants, who were managers, reported that the staff they supervised had mobbed them.

## **Deserving Targets and Moral Panic**

Some researchers have identified that in some cases those targeted are perceived as deserving targets, that is, they do not deserve to be treated fairly. This can be explained further as a situation of moral exclusion where those who are on the inside of our “fairness boundary” are morally included whereas those who are outside the boundary are excluded as undeserving of fairness (Gerson, Woodside, & Opatow, 2005; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). Moral exclusion is described by some as analogous with the 1692 Salem witch-hunt trials where 140 people, mostly women, were accused of witchcraft and where 35 were imprisoned or were hanged (Sutter, 2000). While in hindsight, it is more likely that the baseless accusations were fuelled by politics, religion, family feuds, economics, and the fears of the people, rather than wrongdoing on the part of those accused, this is cold comfort for those falsely accused (Sutter, 2000). Some of the literature warns of the potential for accusations of bullying to arouse a sense of moral panic and outrage and the subsequent indiscriminate pursuit of people accused of bullying (McCarthy, 2003). The potential for those accused to be “trilled by public spectacle” is akin to behaviour described by some as “witch hunting” (McCarthy, 2003, p. 242). This warning is pertinent to this discussion because some participants described the mobbing behaviours to which they were subjected as witch-hunts.

For example, one participant was subjected to repeated public humiliation in the electronic and print media and wrongfully imprisoned for six months after being accused of bullying. However, her claims of being the target of mobbing behaviours were not afforded any credibility (Griffiths, 2005). This participant, Di Fingleton, was the Chief Magistrate of Queensland, and she was sentenced to 12 months’ imprisonment “with no recommendation for parole” on a charge of “retaliating against a witness” (Hunter, 2004, p. 145). The witness was a fellow magistrate whom the Chief Magistrate had attempted to discipline. The circumstances of the situation were published regularly in the media where she shamed as a “bully” and publicly humiliated on many occasions for two years between 2003 and 2005. The extent of the humiliation included a detailed description, outlined on the front page of the Brisbane *Courier Mail* newspaper, describing her strip search on the day she was imprisoned as follows:

Her life as a prisoner began with the standard strip search ... to stretch her arms out sideways so they could check her armpits under her breasts and any folds of skin -- and ... inspected her hair, ears, nostrils, and between her fingers and toes .... Prison officers then drove her from the cells to the Brisbane watch house where she had to undergo a second strip search and dress in prison browns (Doneman, 2003, p. 1).

However, she was later found by the Australian High Court, to have been wrongly imprisoned and was subsequently released after serving six months of her sentence. The apparent injustice directed at Di Fingleton resonated with some of the other participants in this study because they could relate to the seemingly relentless pursuit of those targeted, when accusations of bullying are made against them. The impact of the mobbing on other senior staff in the public sector was described by one author as having a “terrorising effect” (Hunter, 2004) because of the unnecessarily harsh punishment to which she was subjected. However, “no one in any position of prominence dared to speak out about her treatment” (Hunter, 2004, pp. 152-153) in case they became the next to be targeted.

## Targets and Perpetrators

Some studies claim that there are personality traits or types that predispose individuals towards becoming either a target or a perpetrator of mobbing. Some researchers argue that targets exhibit personality traits such as being less independent and less extroverted, less stable, and more conscientious than non-victims (Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Randall, 2001; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Perpetrators, on the other hand, tend to be described as authoritarian, manipulative, lacking people skills, insensitive, evil, sadists and psychopaths (McCarthy, 2000). However, consistent with reports from other researchers, this study found that, in some cases, cooperative and enthusiastic staff, with notable achievements and a high level of competence may be targeted (Davenport et al., 1999; Westhues, 2002; Zapf, 1999). Furthermore, it is also argued that some targets can simply be in the wrong place at the wrong time (Davenport et al., 1999; Einarsen et al., 2003; Leymann & Gustaffson, 1996; Zapf, 1999).

## Unconscious Discrimination

This study highlighted that along with female gender (Hunter, 2004) there are other characteristics that may increase the risk of being targeted in the public sector. These include sexual preference, race and accent, culture, marital status, social class, ill health, and impairment. The likelihood that people with these characteristics are at high risk of being targeted does not appear to be explored in the literature on the basis that these issues are dealt with under anti-discrimination legislation. The line of reasoning is that workplace mobbing is “status blind” as anyone can be targeted regardless of these characteristics (Yamada, 2000). However, this study suggests that workers with these characteristics may be at higher risk of being targeted by the dominant group. While the category of age was not identified by the research participants as a possible reason for them being targeted, it is nevertheless interesting to note that the majority were over 45 years of age and therefore might be considered by some to be a high risk group (Elliott & Kirk, 2006). These findings support those of other researchers who suggest that there is a human preference for the familiar reflected in expressions such as birds of a feather flock together (Stephenson & Lewin, 1996). They argue that there is a fundamental fear of the difference of others and that difference is not likely to be valued in workplace cultures where there is a sense of “You don’t look like me, you don’t dress like me and you don’t think like me; therefore I don’t want to know or understand you” (1996, p.195).

## CONCLUSION

The study revealed mobbing behaviour to be a symptom of a destructive and toxic workplace culture rather than because there is a particular perpetrator or target personality type. This paper reported on the experience of 212 public sector employees from across Australia, who had been forced to exit their employment. The behaviours included spreading rumours, gossip, and the making of false or unjust accusations, and were identified as symptoms of a dysfunctional public sector culture. A finding not inconsistent with various commissions of enquiry and investigations into departmental problems (see for example, Davies, 2005; Forster, 2005; Morris, 2005).

Despite efforts to improve public sector cultures, such as workforce diversity and equal employment opportunity programs, and more recently the introduction of workplace bullying policies, this study highlights that practice rarely matches policy expectations. Despite codes of conduct to the contrary, this study identified a culture of blame and scapegoating, discrimination, lack of merit in recruitment, and corrupted investigation processes that denied fair treatment. After nearly 20 years of implementation, some argue that equal employment opportunity and workforce diversity programs have not been successful in introducing significant organisational change (Mor-Barak, 2000; Naff & Kellough, 2003). The instability of the public sector, where there is a high level of staff turnover, increasing politicisation, ongoing departmental restructuring, and job insecurity, have been found by some researchers to be counterproductive in terms of achieving cultural change (Colley, 2001; Hunter, 2004; Spry, 2000).

While ongoing efforts continue to be made to improve the system, strategies are also required to encourage prevention of workplace mobbing with the implementation of guidelines for fair and just processes for dealing with complaints (see for example, WorkSafe Victoria., 2003). A commitment to establishing a culture of respect for all workers, regardless of impairment, culture, religion, politics, sexual orientation or marital status, is essential to reducing workplace mobbing behaviours. This study identified that a renewal of commitment to policies, and more importantly to practices, that promote justice and fairness in employment is necessary if mobbing is to be effectively addressed. While there are many models of good practice policies and programs in the system, these are not legally enforceable and some have exemptions or exclusionary clauses that undermine the policy or program. For example, the Workplace Harassment Advisory Standard in Queensland deplores bullying and mobbing behaviours but allows the exemption for “reasonable management action” (*Prevention of workplace harassment advisory standard*, 2004).

The extent of morally and ethically questionable behaviours that are exempt under reasonable management action is a highly contested issue in the industrial court system in some jurisdictions (O'Sullivan, 2005). While psychological injuries are often not disputed, compensation for those injuries is dependent upon whether the behaviours are determined by industrial courts to be reasonable management action or not (Calvey & Jansz, 2005). The inclusion of the reasonable management action exemption in policies and procedures, therefore, effectively condones and perpetuates workplace mobbing behaviours. On one hand, while unacceptable behaviours appear to be prohibited in codes of conduct, policies, and procedures, on the other hand, there appears to be little accountability in practice.

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## Appendix 1. Sample of Mobbing Assessment

Mobbing Factors	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Tabulated Factors	Degrees
Participant 1	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	12Y:0n	3rd
Participant 2	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	n	n	n	Y	9Y:3n	2nd
Participant 3	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	12Y:0n	3rd
Participant 4	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	n	12Y:0n	3rd
Participant 5	n	n	n	n	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	n	n	6Y:6n	1st
Participant 6	Y	Y	Y	n	Y	Y	Y	n	n	Y	Y	Y	9Y:3n	2nd
Participant 7	Y	Y	Y	n	Y	n	Y	n	Y	Y	Y	Y	9Y:3n	2nd
Participant 8	Y	Y	Y	n	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	n	11Y:1n	3rd
TOTALS	7Y:1n	7Y:1n	7Y:1n	4Y:4n	8Y	7Y:1n	8Y	6Y:2n	6Y:2n	7Y:1n	6Y:2n	7Y:1n		

### 12 Mobbing Factors

1.	Systematic collusion or ganging up
2.	The collusion is done with malicious intent
3.	The behaviour is frequent and enduring
4.	The power imbalance is most often that obtained through informal or social networks
5.	Anyone can be targeted at any level including managers, peers or towards staff supervised
6.	Women are especially at risk from other women, particularly in women-dominated workplaces
7.	Targets are often trusting, co-operative, conscientious, high achievers, and loyal to the organization
8.	There is an identifiable pattern that commences with a minor conflict that escalates
9.	Management is unlikely to recognise the behaviour and tends to side with the group against the target
10.	The victimised person, or target, is portrayed as the one at fault by the group and/or organization
11.	The behaviour causes the targets expulsion or elimination from their employment
12.	The target is severely damaged, i.e. psychiatrically diagnosed psychological disorders, including Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).