Critique of:

How Effective Is an Apology in Resolving Workplace Bullying Disputes?

February 20, 2014

SOC-345

Critique # 1

 The principal focus of the research conducted by the authors of the article “How Effective Is an Apology in Resolving Workplace Bullying Disputes”, as the title suggests, was on the role that the use of apologies plays in the resolution of workplace disputes. Some of the questions that the researchers sought to investigate were “Would African-American workers be more likely than white workers to accept apologies? Would female workers be more likely than male workers to accept apologies? And would workers (including managers) who felt that an apology would make a difference in the resolution of a workplace bullying dispute also be more likely to support the use of internal conflict resolution processes?” (Fox & Stallworth, 56:2006). The authors of the article also attempted to examine the ways which respondents preferred to have workplace complaints handled. Another assumption that is examined in this study is the idea that personal experience with being bullied will influence that person’s feelings regarding the fairness and the effectiveness of the means used to address the issue of bullying.

 These questions and assumptions were examined through the use of questionnaires, which were sent out to respondents via letters and e-mail messages. In order to find the respondents for the study, Fox & Stallworth used lists provided by the National Association of African-American Human Resources Professionals, Hispanic MBA Association, Loyola University Chicago Alumni Association, and the National Black MBA Association to build their mailing list. The researchers obtained 262 usable responses, the majority of whom – 62% - held managerial positions (Fox & Stallworth, 56:2006). The questionnaire consisted of questions to determine the demographic characteristics of the respondents, questions about general bullying behavior, including whether the bullying was perpetrated by a supervisor or by a co-worker, questions relating to bullying based on the respondents’ demographic characteristics, such as race or ethnicity, and questions that examined the respondents’ views regarding the efficacy of their human resource system in handling unfair or discriminatory situations.

 According to Fox & Stallworth (59:2006), the majority – 67% – of the respondents felt that an apology would have made a difference in their situation, but only about a third of the respondents said that the apology would have caused them to withdraw EEOC charges or prompt the settlement of the case. The study also was unable to show that African Americans gave more significance to apologies than Whites, that females would be more receptive to apologies than males, or that the level of acceptance regarding apologies among workers and managers had a direct relationship on a particular person’s support of internal conflict resolution over official EEOC charges. Overall, the researchers concluded that “an apology has the *potential* to resolve workplace harassment disputes involving bullying” (Fox & Stallworth, 62:2006).

 I agree with the conclusion presented by Fox & Stallworth in this article. It makes sense to me that the victim of a bullying incident would feel better about the issue after the other person apologized for his or her actions. The victim might feel as if they were treated as “less than” how they ought to be treated because they were bullied, but the act of their “bully” expressing their regret for acting that way, asking for forgiveness, and apologizing for what they did can show that the victim is a real person who deserves to be treated with respect. However, I do not think that Fox & Stallworth (2006) chose the best way to examine the role of apologies in incidents of workplace bullying. First, the respondents for this study were chosen in what seems to me to be a biased way. Many of the organizations who provided lists to the researchers to create their mailing list were racially- or ethnically-based – such as the Hispanic MBA Association – which is likely to produce skewed data and conclusions. Second, I do not think that the use of questionnaires is even the best method of examining the issue. Rather, I think that it would have been better for Fox & Stallworth (2006) to conduct their research in a more experimental process. They should have focused on a small number of actual workplace incidents or EEOC charges, where one group is left to handle their dispute on their own and the other group is assigned a mediator whose job it is to persuade one party – the bully – to apologize to the other – the victim. This type of study might yield more definitive results, at least as long as the two groups are observed properly, making that the control group’s results only consist of those that did not involve an apology and that all of the experimental group’s cases did involve the use of apologies.

References:

Fox, Suzy. & Lamont E. Stallworth. 2006. “How Effective is an Apology in Resolving Workplace Bullying Disputes?” *Dispute Resolution Journal, May-July 2006:* 54-63