

# Minimizing Harassment At Workplace: Role Of Positive Leadership Deeply Rooted In Ethical And Spiritual Values

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## Abstract

Workplace harassment is very often the result of negative leadership when leaders and his/her clique and coterie exert power in arbitrary and capricious way. If harassment is perpetuated due to negative leadership, it can be minimized with positive leadership such as transformational, authentic, ethical, spiritual and servant leadership which is deeply rooted in spiritual and ethical values. Practising different spiritual and ethical values by leaders leads to minimizing harassment at workplace. As harassment is evil with negative consequences, it needs to be minimized. The victim can also minimize the effects of harassment by practicing meaning in life.

## Introduction

Workplace harassment has attracted attention for study since 1980s (Velez, 2011, Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010; Zapf & Einarsen, 2005) because of increasing number of incidences of harassment. Scornful attitude, indifference, utterance of harsh words by boss or colleagues, and arbitrary as well as vindictive functioning destroy inner happiness. As a result, not only individual but the organization fails to perform at optimum level. Therefore harassment being violence against humanity needs to be minimized. As harassment is correlated with negative and destructive type of leadership (Einarsen et al, 2007), it needs to be minimized with positive leadership deeply rooted in ethical and spiritual values. Positive leadership is perceived as minimizing harassment (Astrauskaite et al, 2015; Baillien et al, 2009) because of effective conflict and stress management (Bass & Riggio, 2006) and fostering ethical and moral environment (Burns, 1978). The present paper attempts to study the role of positive leadership in minimizing harassment at workplace by practicing ethical and spiritual values.

## Harassment at workplace

Workplace harassment, bullying, and mobbing describe the similar or equivalent phenomenon (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2010). To Leymann (1996) “ Mobbing is repeated instances, over a period time, of hostile remarks and actions expressed or carried out by one or several persons towards a third person [the target].” To Bjorkqvist, Osterman, and Hjelt-Back (1994), workplace harassment is “repeated activities, with the aim of bringing mental [but sometimes also physical] pain, and directed toward one or more individuals who, for one reason or another, are not able to defend themselves”.

Harassment causes different social, psychological, psychosomatic and psychiatric effects that results in bad effects on health due to emotional stress, adverse effects on the quality of professional and personal life with ripple effects and chain reactions, channelization of psychic energy into negative direction, depression and alienation at work place, etc. As harassment is evil in itself, it needs to be eradicated and minimized.

### Harassment the result of negative leadership

One of the studies conducted in Sweden(Laymann, 1990) reports that horizontal mobbing accounts for 44% of cases, descending mobbing for 37% and ascending mobbing for 9%. The other 10% are formed by a combination of the first two directions. Thus 91% harassment takes place by the destructive leader and/or his/her clique and coterie as power gives them better bargaining power and opportunities to fan the expression of their inner complexes with use of conspiracies and cheap tactics.

Salin and Hoel (2011) point out factors increasing the risk of bullying/harassment that include work changes, organizational conditions with pressure of work and uncertainty as well as conflicts of role, organizational culture with short-termism and self-centered behavior, and autocratic management styles.

Although, there is no empirical research study dealing with the psychology of the perpetrators, yet different psychologists have described the personality of the perpetrators of harassment as “excessively controlling, cowardly, neurotic, and hungry of power” (Davenpot et al. 1999, 58) or narcissistic personality disorder who needs to cover up their own deficiencies (Leymann, 1993). These are evil personalities who like to pursue their self-interest at the cost of others. Their threatened egotism and inflated self-appraisals compel them to direct their outward angers towards others than to avoid downward revisions of self-concept (Baumeister et al., 1995 p 5). These negative qualities are quite found in negative leadership. As the person assumes power or builds connections, unless and until inner transformation takes place, s/he is likely to indulge in unethical leadership styles like abusive supervision displaying hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors (Bies, 2001; Keashly & Harvey, 2005), petty tyranny misusing power and authority in oppressive and vindictive manner (Ashforth, 1977), supervisor aggression intended to physically or psychologically harm staff member in a work-related context (Schat et al., 2006), supervisor undermining intended to hinder others and establish favorable reputation at the cost of others (Duffy et al, 2002), negative mentoring giving wrong direction to deplete their valuable resources (Eby, et al., 2000), destructive leadership intended to harm organization (Krasikova, et.al, 2013; Einarsen et al. 2007), and toxic leadership generating poisonous effect (Whicker, 1996; Lipman-Blumen, 2005). One of the extreme cases of the negative leadership includes corporate psychopaths who are “emotionally shallow, calculating and cold, glib, and superficially charming, have a grandiose sense of self-worth, are pathological liars, are good at conning and manipulating others, and have no remorse about harming others; they are callous and lacking in empathy and fail to take responsibility for their own action.”(Boddy et al, 2020), relish abusive and bully behavior(Porter et al, 2003), and are perpetrators of harassment at workplace.

If harassment is perpetuated due to negative leadership, it can be minimized with positive leadership. Based upon authors’ long observation in context of educational institutions, different styles of functioning in VUCA(Volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) environment that humanity faced in COVID or routine situation, as noticed due to exercising positive and negative leadership are illustrated in following table (Kumar & Modi, 2022):

<b>Positive leadership</b>	<b>Negative Leadership</b>
Engagement	Entanglement in activity without productivity
Fruitful and mutually beneficial direction	No sense of direction,
Foster “bounded” optimism through creative thinking	Fear mongering and anxiety
Compassionate and caring	Callous and rubbing salt in the wounds
Shared and sustainable future	Focus on formalities or skin saving

Altruistic or shared	Selfish and corrupt
Developing the people	Depleting the time, talent and toil of its people
Looking at the opportunities in challenges	Looking challenges in opportunities

### Positive Leadership minimizing harassment

Positive leadership such as transformational leadership (Burns, 1978), authentic leadership (George, 2003), ethical leadership (Brown & Trevino, 2006), spiritual leadership (Fry, 2003) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1997) can minimize harassment as this leadership is deeply rooted in spiritual and ethical values (Kumar & Vij, 2014). Transformational leadership with idealized influence, inspiration motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1990, Bass & Avolio, 1993) has potential for enhancing the well-being of employees (Sivanathan et al, 2004). In the time of crisis, transformational leadership with higher level of motivation and morality of followers with fused purposes (Burns, 1978) is able to win willing cooperation with display of idealized influence besides wellbeing of the employees. As employees cooperate willingly, chances of harassment are reduced as they are more motivated, energized and engaged than coerced or manipulated with fear. Such leaders inspire their followers to aspire for greater challenges along with empathic listening and valuing their options which is in quite contrast to harassment and bullying. As this leadership involves an ethical influence process (Kanungo & Mendonca, 1996), it is guided by universal ethical principles such as responsibility, fairness along with empathy (Johnson, 2013, p. 190) that contribute to employees' well-being and minimize negative effects as noticed in situation of harassment and bullying.

Similarly, authentic leadership, another form of positive leadership talks about fostering positive self-development, bringing people together around a shared purpose and empowering them to set up and lead authentically in order to create value for all stakeholders (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) which is diametrically opposite to harming and harassing others. To Avolio, Luthans, and Walumbwa (2004), authentic leaders are deeply aware of their thinking pattern and behavior and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspective, knowledge and strengths. This makes their behavior predictable that helps to overcome the situation of harassment with uncertainty of roles and responsibilities of different people.

Ethical leadership incorporates, demonstrates and promotes moral principles- like integrity, fairness, honesty, trust, etc. among followers through communication, reinforcement, and decision-making (Brown & Trevino, 2006). Such leaders engage in acts beneficial to others, refrain from causing harm to others (Kanungo, 2001). Ethical leadership behavior involves being very supportive and helpful when someone has a problem, being fair in distribution of rewards and benefits, being open and honest while communicating, making sacrifices to benefit others, setting clear ethical standards for the work and adhering to them strictly by holding people accountable (Yukl, et al., 2013). This behavior further contributes to happiness and wellbeing of followers which overcomes the negative effects as noticed in harassment.

Similarly spiritual leadership practicing "the values, attitudes, and behaviors necessary to intrinsically motivate one's self and others so that they have a sense of spiritual survival through calling and membership" (Fry, 2003, pp. 693-727) demonstrates reflective practices or ethical, compassionate and respectful treatment of others (Reave, 2005; Fairholm, 1996; Pruzan, 2008). Their act of empathy, compassion, integrity, patience, courage and humility contribute to overcome the situation of harming and harassing others.

Servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2003; Spears, 2010) attuned to basic spiritual values like service motive and taking care of others with sublimation of ego for higher purpose enables to enter into authentic relations (Covey, 2003) than compelling others to work in compliance.

### Positive leadership deeply rooted in Spiritual and Ethical Values

Positive leadership such as transformational leadership and its variants are deeply rooted in spiritual and ethical values as they emphasize moral values like liberty, equality, justice, and is guided by universal ethical principles-responsibility, fairness, etc.-along with empathy (Johnson, 2013, p. 190) that act as inexhaustible source of working for the well-being of others. Laura Reeve (2005) reviewed 150 studies and finds consistency between spiritual values and practices in context of positive leadership. The study demonstrates that values which were considered spiritual-integrity, honesty and humility-have definite effect on leadership success including minimization of harassment at workplace.

Authentic leaders are altruistic, honest, trustworthy, and principled decision-makers who care about the well-being of their followers and the needs of the broader society. Servant leadership represents a shift from followers serving leaders to leaders serving followers. Since leadership is an expression of who we are, in discovering, living and sharing our deepest values lies the fulfillment of our life and leadership. Positive leadership such as transformational, ethical and authentic leaders lead others by their examples than directing others. Ethical leaders act as moral persons as well as moral managers while discharging their role as leaders (Johnson, 2009, p. 76). They treat their people fairly and express care and concern for them. Authentic leaders draw both positive and psychological capacities among the followers by generating greater self-awareness and self-regulated positive behavior besides fostering positive self-development (Luthans & Avolio, 2003). Practising spiritual and ethical values results in minimizing the negative effects as noticed in hurt, harassment and humiliation of others, and contributing to the wellbeing and happiness of others:

### **1. Self-awareness**

The first quality of positive leadership is self-awareness gained through self-knowledge. Advocates of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2003) regarding self-awareness hold that knowledge about one's emotions is the first and foremost requirement of leadership. Without self-knowledge, service of others cannot be authentic or ethical as one cannot transcend one's narrow self-interest. Self-awareness has profound impact upon the ethics of the leaders. Self-aware leaders are unlikely to manipulate and coerce others, misuse power for selfish ends, claim excessive privileges or engage in fraudulent and inappropriate behavior that contribute to harassment. They are more willing to contribute to the welfare and wellbeing of others, and consequently act as role-models for their followers. Their self-awareness enables them to become open and transparent about their limitations and take suggestions from others which contribute to learning and sharing, and help them to harness trust and cooperation of other members.

### **2. Interconnectedness**

To Mitroff and Denton (1999) the single word that best captures the essence of spirituality is "interconnectedness" that plays important role in people's lives in the form of compassion, humanity, acceptance, holism, non-violence, etc. with other human, animate and inanimate beings. Feeling of interconnectedness prevents leaders to exercise destructive leadership as they realize that hurting others means hurting oneself. As a result, they work in harmony without ego and without manipulating through exercise of power mechanism or controlling others' behavior in dictatorial manner. Feeling of interconnectedness enables the leaders to contribute to the happiness and wellbeing of others as they view it as their own happiness and wellbeing.

### **3. Humility**

Research by Collins (2001) provides strong evidence of the usefulness of humility in context of positive leadership as he finds the great companies being led by Level 5 leadership are blend of humility and strong personal will. Level 5 leadership helps to engage the members in effective way. Nielson et al(2010) study states that humility prevents excessive self-focus and permits understanding of oneself and one's relationship with others. As business environment in 21<sup>st</sup> century is becoming more unpredictable and uncertain, researchers suggest that humility would play critical role in leadership (Morris et al, 2005; Vera & Rodriguez-Lopez, 2004). As self-focus and selfishness lead to

harassment when the leader or his/her clique and coterie target others as raw material for achieving their target or satisfying their psychological whims. Humility prevents self-focus and selfishness that cause harm to others.

Authentic leadership (Luthans & Avolio, 2003) also emphasizes humility as the essence of authenticity is to ‘Know Thyself’ (Avolio et al, 2004, p 802). Humble people are less likely to experience negative emotions like envy and jealousy compared with low-level humility people (Ricard, 2008) as they exercise greater self-awareness. This self-awareness helps the leaders to accept their personal shortcomings than indulging in any kind of impulsive, impetuous, self-aggrandizing and narcissistic behavior with ‘self’ orientation that lead to harassment.

#### **4. Harmlessness**

Harmlessness and non-violence being deeply rooted in spirituality, have been discussed in different spiritual texts. To understand harmlessness in depth, it is essential to understand its opposite- violence. Violence in general is “the ensemble of actions and hostile aggressive attitudes between individuals, including use of constraint, and force in order to obtain something against the other’s will or in order to harm his physical or mental integrity” (Ricard, 2013, p. 339). Violence is meant to intentionally harm others and includes not only physical harms but also harms inflicted to destroy happiness of other beings through the use of power. Harassment and bullying, oppression and suppression, are common forms of violence noticed at workplace. Violence at workplace is an extension of violence residing inside oneself which usually takes place in the form of negative and harmful thoughts, words and deeds. As leaders practice harmlessness, they overcome their inner violence and extends it to others. As a result, they do not indulge in harassment and humiliation of others.

#### **5. Harmony**

Positive leadership deeply rooted in spiritual values fosters harmony not only within themselves but also among other members of the organization. To them “harmony means being comfortable with oneself as well as with others” (Balsekar, 2003). They defuse the differences with their idealized image and profound influence that results in positive effect on the group’s innovative performance (Barsade, 2002; Forgas & George, 2001) and creativity (Amabile et al, 2005) with members’ focus on value-producing activities (Mayer & Gavin, 2005). They not only manage task conflicts but also overcome tension, anxiety and harassment of different individuals due to conflicting roles by getting their willing cooperation even transcending their defined roles. Their acts of creating harmony in spontaneous way prevent leakage of vital energies and diversion of psychic attention.

Harmony among different group members leads to positive communication that ensures respect and dignity of members, positive resonance among members and engagement of different persons. This leads to freedom from negative emotions and happiness of different persons.

#### **6. Transparency**

Transparency contributes to wellbeing at workplace with reduction in anxiety and stress and fostering trust among people. As leaders become transparent, their actions become more predictable that leads to happiness and authentic connections without being entangled. This prevents wastage of time and energy on superfluous works resulting in activities without productivity that contribute to harassment. Thus transparency is conducive in checking harassment at workplace.

#### **7. Truthfulness and honesty**

Considering truthfulness and honesty as unique virtue, leadership researchers have linked it with transformational leadership (Burns, 1978; Parry & Proctor-Thompson, 2002; Tracey & Hinkin, 1994), and its variants. Transformational leadership has been found to be positively related to perceived leader’s integrity (Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002). Kouzes and Posner(2011) after their more than 30 years of research on relationship between credibility and leadership remark, “Honesty is absolutely essential to leadership. If people are going to follow someone

willingly, whether into battle or into the boardroom, they first want to assure themselves that the person is worthy of their trust.” (p. 8). As people follow others willingly, they accept him or her, and cooperate willingly without feeling compulsion which is negatively associated with harassment.

## Pursuit of Meaning in life Minimizing effects of Harassment

Pursuit of meaning in life is the most appropriate remedy to overcome the negative consequences of harassment. Meaning in life entails different personal experiences and their interpretations with transformed attitude. It includes not only life-altering experiences but also understanding the importance beyond “the trivial or momentary [experiences of daily life] to have purpose, or to have coherence that transcend chaos” (King et al, 2006, p. 180). As meaning in life is associated with spirituality-transcendence, connectedness with higher purpose and sacredness (Mitroff & Denton, 1999), positive leaders being fully evolved persons actively search the meaning of their lives, facilitate others in realizing meaning in life, and create work environment supportive to one’s spiritual development along with organizational mission.

Meaningful work is negatively associated with depressive symptoms, hostility, burnouts, absenteeism and other negative outcomes at workplace and life (Steger, et al 2012). Therefore victims of harassment are suggested to view that if there are sufferings, there is inherent meaning to those sufferings which one has to search individually (Frankl, 1959). The wasp takes caterpillar, puts in helve and keeps stinging it to inject eggs which will grow inside its body to turn it into genetically modified organism like wasp or butterfly. Which new creature in the form of the butterfly or wasp shall emerge, that all depends upon the expression of genes as the theory of epigenetics states. Similarly the victim of harassment if has no control over macro environment, can transform the environment under their control with their individualistic efforts for bringing peace of mind and expression of their creative potentials to fullest extent for human flourishing. Victor Frankl narrates about the brutal cruelties of the Nazi torturers and exterminators, and one’s attitude towards those sufferings in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1959). This book is an elaboration of Friedrich Nietzsche’s quote: “He who has why to live, can find anyhow’ with authenticity of experiences of the author. By keeping one’s attitude positive to those sufferings, one can minimize the negative effects of harassment with pursuit of meaning in life in those sufferings.

## Conclusion

The above discussion demonstrates that workplace harassment is very often caused due to negative leadership such as abusive supervision, petty tyranny, toxic leadership, corporate psychopaths, etc. As negative personalities assume power, they along with their clique and coterie exert power to hurt, harass and humiliate others. If harassment is perpetuated due to negative leadership, it can be minimized with positive leadership such as transformational leadership, authentic leadership, ethical leadership, spiritual leadership and servant leadership. Positive leadership results in positive influence and is deeply rooted in spiritual and ethical values. This positive leadership provides fruitful and mutually beneficial direction, fosters optimism, works for shared and sustainable future, act in caring and compassionate way, develops people and looks at opportunities in challenges that help employees to work with human flourishing and to lend willing cooperation without feeling depletion of vital energies. This positive leadership does not coerce and manipulate others with fear, but leads

with love and affection. This helps in minimizing harassment at work place. As this leadership is deeply rooted in spiritual and ethical values, practicing these values enables to minimize harassment at workplace. The victims facing negative consequences of harassment can minimize its effects with pursuit of meaning in life.

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