



"Mobbing" spells emotional abuse

by Mary O. Bradley, *Sunday Patriot-News*, August 22, 1999, Harrisburg, PA

One of the most vicious subcultures of collective humanity is a mob.

Whether pursuing the hapless Frankenstein creature, lynching a gunslinger in the Old West or rioting at the gates of a sold-out rock concert, the human mob takes on horrifying dimensions. Single-focused, whipped to a frenzy by a puffed-up martinet and unfettered by normal restraints of morality, the mob is merciless in its assault.

When mob mentality sinks its claws into a colleague or supervisor in the workplace, the results can be terrifying, especially when the demoralized victim internalizes that a fault of his justified the attack.

The collective assault in the office, on the assembly line or on the board room is known as mobbing, according to Gail Pursell Elliott, co-author of a new book titled **"Mobbing: Emotional Abuse in the American Workplace."**

"People are aware of it, but they never had a name for it," said Elliott, a human-resources and training consultant in Roland, Iowa. "When we speak to people, they know immediately what we are talking about. One person called it 'barnyard mentality', similar to chicken pecking.

Mobbing is defined as a concerted effort by co-workers, subordinates or superiors to force someone out of the workplace through rumor, innuendo, intimidation, discrediting, isolation or humiliation. It is a form of nonsexual, nonracial harassment.

It is a psychological form of bullying without the in-your-face confrontation or physical assault of the macho combatant. The assailant attacks with an iron fist encased in a velvet glove.

Managers and supervisors often are targeted by subordinates or peers. Most disconcerting of all is that "some companies condone this to get rid of someone", said Elliott, a former Cumberland County resident and graduate of Cumberland Valley High School.

German industrial psychologist Dr. Heinz Leymann, who died in January, identified and studied the syndrome in Europe, Japan and Australia for two decades, but the behavior is only now being quantified in the United States, according to Elliott.

The book by Elliott, Dr. Noa Davenport of Colins, Iowa, and Ruth Distler Schwartz of Des Moines, Iowa, is considered the first published book examining the incidence of mobbing in the United States.

Davenport, of Swiss origin, is a cultural anthropologist who has worked internationally in research and administration, in government and nonprofit organizations and in higher education and business. She is an adjunct assistant professor at Iowa State University and principal of DNZ Consulting & Associates, a company that focuses on conflict management education.

Schwartz is president of R.A. Schwartz & Associates, a national consulting and marketing firm. She has held management positions in nonprofit organizations, higher education and the health-care industry.

A nationally certified trainer in communications and behavior management, Elliott has more than 20 years of experience in administration, training and motivation. The name of her business is "Innovations: Training with a Can-Do Attitude"

The 214-page book is filled with examples of mobbing victims who have been systematically professionally and emotionally starved out of their jobs. The victims were interviewed by the authors.

They were victims of a new manager who wanted his own people on the management team. They were employees who were taken out of the loop on projects and left with nothing to do. They were the victims of lies and innuendoes spread by colleagues standing at the water cooler.

Some of the victims tried to tough it out. Others took a different job in the organization. Others resigned.

One interviewee was no longer working in any job. The person was "permanently disabled and unable to re-enter the work force" after a traumatizing incident 15 years previously, Elliott said.

In a worst-case scenario, the victim may be so emotionally scarred that he is driven to suicide. Heinz Leymann, who lived and worked in Sweden, estimated that 15 percent of the suicides in Sweden were attributed to workplace mobbing.

"Mobbing is very inhuman behavior," Elliott said in a telephone interview. "It has a devastating effect on people, organizations and families".

Sadly, the mob conspirators either wear blinders or justify their actions, believing that the victim wasn't fit for the job. In some Swedish studies, Elliott said, people who mobbed the person had "no idea their actions had such an effect."

The authors include chapters on how mobbing affects the victim and what victims can do to cope, as well as the effects of mobbing on corporate America.

Despite the weighty subject, the book is approachable and readable. "Anybody can pick it up," Elliott said. It is a wake-up notice to employees and managers and a self-help book for victims and families."

"I believe everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and respect, " Elliott said. Too often today employees are treated as "objects and opportunities, rather than people with wants, needs and desires."