There are a variety of terms being used to describe negative behaviors among coworkers: disruptive and inappropriate behaviors, workplace incivility, lateral violence, horizontal hostility, bullying and mobbing. In January 2009, the Joint Commission (TJC) set a leadership standard that applies to all health care providers. They mandated that agencies accredited by them address and correct “disruptive and inappropriate behaviors” in the work environment. The term “workplace incivility” has been used to describe an initial minor incident where there is no clear intent to harm. However, once the intent to cause harm is clear, the more specific terms described below apply (Hutton, 2002).

In her nursing study, Griffin (2004) used the term “lateral violence” to describe the 10 most common forms of negative behaviors occurring within nursing. Although these behaviors inflict psychological pain, they can lead to physical aggression if allowed to escalate (Stanley, et al, 2007). The word “lateral” in the definition implies that the individuals involved are at the same real or perceived power level, e.g., staff nurse-on-staff nurse aggression. Similar terms “horizontal violence” (Farrell, 1997; Freire, 1971; McCall, 1996; Skillings, 1992; McKenna et al., 2003), and “horizontal hostility” (Bartholomew, 2006; Thomas, 2003) have also been used extensively to describe this phenomenon.

Bullying is yet another term used by nurse researchers (Hutchinson et al., 2008; Johnson & Rea, 2009; Simons, 2008; Vessey et al., 2009) as well as many non-nurse researchers (Leymann, 1996; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002; Namie, 2003; Dick & Rayner, 2004; Zapf, 1999) to describe the negative behaviors that occur between nurses where there is a power differential, e.g., nurse manager aggression toward a staff nurse. To meet the criteria for bullying, the behavior must occur at least 2-3 times a week for a period of 6 months or longer. However, some nurse researchers who use the term “bullying” (Hutchinson et al., 2006) report that nurses in their study described intense, painful aggressive episodes of a much shorter duration of time. Bullying has been used to describe both psychological and physical aggression. Finally, “mobbing,” a term used frequently in the general literature about workplace aggression, is sometimes applied to nursing. It describes the ‘ganging up’ behaviors (malicious, nonsexual, nonracial, general harassment) used by co-workers, subordinates or superiors, to force someone to leave the work group (Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott, 2005).

In their recent article, Roberts, DeMarco & Griffin (2009) suggested that “bullying” may be the “umbrella term” under which other specific terms reside.
DISRUPTIVE AND INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIORS & WORKPLACE INCIVILITY:

BULLYING

Lateral Violence
Horizontal Violence
Horizontal Hostility
Mobbing

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The number of terms being used, and the variations in descriptions of the terms, are no doubt causing confusion. The inclusion of the word ‘violence’ in some terms has caused concern for many nurses. However, no matter what term we use, the fact is that hostile behaviors inflict psychological pain on nurses and are damaging to our professional image. Each of us has an ethical obligation to find ways to end the behaviors.

We hope that you will join us on February 12, 2010, at the Mary Ann Parsons Conference, “Create a Cohesive Culture: Stop the Bullying” as a first step to becoming part of our South Carolina initiative to eliminate nurse-on-nurse aggression.

Selected References:


Complete resource list available by email from karen.stanley1988@comcast.net.