

IN CULTURAL CONTEXTS, some prefer to work with a tough boss

In Colombia, Law 1010 of 2006 provided workers with the tools to defend themselves from harassment in the workplace. Sometimes, however, what they call harassment is really not. This prompted Adriana Camacho and David H. Barbosa, researchers at the Universidad del Rosario, to undertake a study of cases of harassment in the culture and leadership of organizations which seem to be inappropriate.

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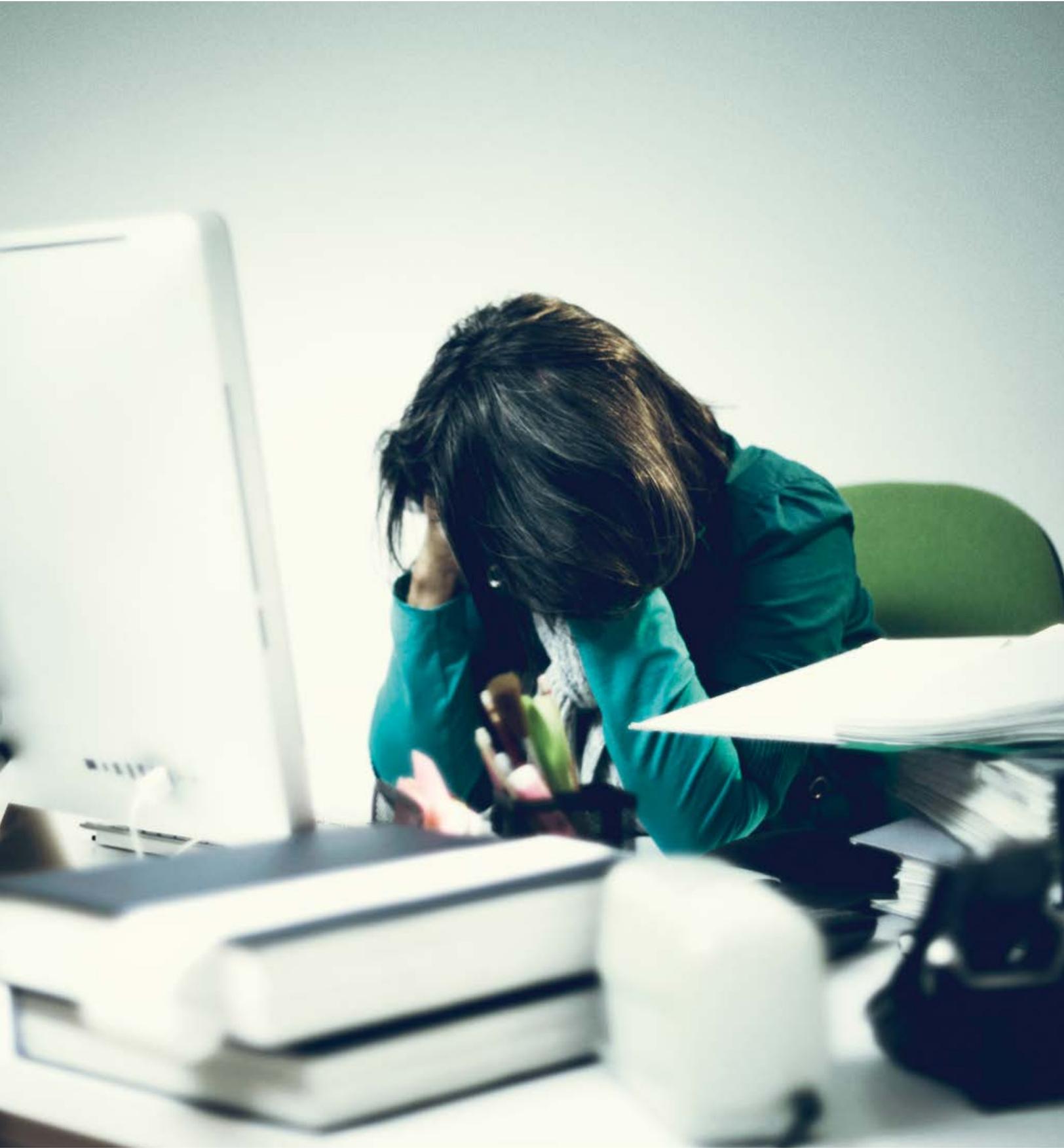
Apart from depending on logical factors like their salary, working hours and the benefits which they are provided with, the well-being of the collaborators in any company is more and more linked to the atmosphere and working climate which surrounds them in their daily tasks.

In that regard, harassment is an aspect which has a fundamental influence on the good performance of workers and the way in which they handle their obligations in an organization. It is a fact that in cases where an employee feels harassed, his or her performance is directly affected and, in the end, so too are the results of the job he or she does.

However, just as these phenomena may occur in companies and should be denounced, it is equally important to avoid making the mistake of thinking that any expression of authority or demands made by the employee's superiors is a kind of harassment.

That is why Law 1010 of 2006 specifies the cases where such acts occur: The same norm defines it as "any persistent and demonstrable conduct towards





an employee on the part of a boss or the employee's immediate superior or someone of higher rank in the company's hierarchy, a workmate or subordinate, meant to instill fear, intimidation, terror and anguish, harm his or her work, discourage the employee or lead him to resign."

Nevertheless, due to different variables of a cultural nature, in some organizations the styles of behavior among those who enjoy some kind of higher rank associated with a power of authority may cause that culture to have certain features which lead to actions which would clearly amount to harassment, but go unnoticed and are regarded as natural.

This complex panorama led two researchers at the Universidad del Rosario – Adriana Camacho, professor at the Faculty of Jurisprudence, and David H. Barbosa, professor at the School of Management and Business Administration – to analyze these problems where there is evidence of an institutionalization of harassment in some companies and certain kinds of leadership which, while they may seem negative to anyone, may turn out to be favorable.

Speaking of that aspect, Camacho says that it is obvious that a company must always have a leadership but what happens is that nowadays some people think that if the leader calls their attention to some fault or tells them that they haven't done their job well, that amounts to harassment. But to demand that an employee fulfills his duties is not harassment.

"In terms of the study of a leadership that is poor and may cause a case of harassment, that is what has been called institutional or organizational harassment at the workplace, which happens when the company has created a culture of poor leadership and there are no clear rules. We are all against that because there is no person in particular who is being harassed. That is because an ambit of harassment at the workplace has been created and the company allows it due to its poor practices, whether in a conscious or unconscious manner," she points out.

In many companies, there is evidence of this problem in the high turnover of personnel or persistent absenteeism, even though they may be classified as good employers because of the acknowledged benefits they provide to their collaborators. These situations may go beyond the control of the employee relations committees or human resources departments, so that the owners or members of the board of directors are not really aware of what is happening in the company.

The above does not fit into the "normal" definition of workplace harassment, which is that it is done by a person and is also the one



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David H. Barbosa, professor at the School of Management and Business, and Adriana Camacho, professor at the Faculty of Jurisprudence, have analyzed harassment at the workplace in order to spot its institutionalization in some companies and certain kinds of leadership which, even though anyone would think they are negative, may turn out to be favorable.

laid down in the abovementioned Law 1010 when it speaks of the subjects involved in harassment.

For his part, Barbosa explains that the basis they chose for the study is the interactional framework of leadership, in which the leadership includes the leader as a subject and leadership as a process. Here, three dimensions interact in this framework: The leader, the subordinates and the situation (where all that is cultural lies).

"What happens is that the concept of harassment is usually associated with the dimension of the leader in terms of his or her style of directing things and even though it is not frequent, one may have a leader who is abusive or who harasses but nevertheless has a very friendly style. That is why the style of the leadership is a concern from the standpoint of administration and in the end what interests the owners or senior executives is the style which leads to the highest productivity," Barbosa explains.

In that respect, Carlos Eduardo Méndez, who has been a professor at the School of Management and Business of the Universidad del Rosario for more than 40 years, proposes a model where there are four cultural dimensions: The mental model of the boss, the organizational design (as the structure which does or does not facilitate harassment), the values and beliefs of the company and the working climate.

"What struck our attention here is that, even though the literature on the subject pointed to certain aspects which allowed scholars to say that the desirable style (of the leader who treats employees as equals, is friendly, who says hello, who consults them, etc.) had a positive and noticeable impact on the quality of life in a company, compared to that of the undesirable leader (who is rude, uses foul language, who does not say hello, who is nasty), which, we assumed, was done in a negative manner, by contrast, our study, entitled the *Effects of leadership and the organizational climate on psycho-social risk, as a criterion of social responsibility in Colombian companies in the health sector*, found that there were people (employees of a health provider company) who preferred to work with an undesirable boss," notes Professor Méndez.

That led the researchers to review other studies done in the region with similar findings. And the explanation for this phenomenon which they obtained is that individuals who do not have the educational level or cultural values which are re-

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF DESIRABLE AND UNDESIRABLE BOSSES

WEIGHT OF THE ADJECTIVES IN THE RESULTS OF A QUESTIONNAIRE ON LEADERSHIP*

Adjectives	Leader 1 (Desirable)		Leader 2 (Undesirable)
Funny	173		034
Oriented towards people	352		000
Thoughtful	322		001
Honest	365		032
Distant	002	The desirable leader is: Cooperative Human Balanced Imaginative Intuitive	263
Frank	365		The undesirable leader is: Unpredictable Volatile Controlling Conventional Difficult
Brilliant	283		018
Hardworking	232		015
Rational	341		005
Responsible	239		027

*For the effects of this print-out, each result has been multiplied by one hundred



quired for empowerment may feel that they are experiencing an undesirable situation, which tends to turn into a source of stress. In addition, even though they are not usual, results like these ones allow one to think that, in our country, organizational cultures which are too horizontal (where there is not much distance between those who give the orders and those who follow them) are not necessarily always the ones where their workers are going to feel better.

To that is added another factor which complicates things even more, and it is that since people live longer now than in the past, a single company may have workers who belong to what is known as the “baby boomer” generation interacting with others who belong to “generation X” or the “millennials”, which implies a strong challenge, due to the cultural differences between one generation and the next, a situation which is characteristic of the leadership of people in the 21st century.

The progress made by companies

Professor Adriana Camacho believes that, thanks to Law 1010 of 2006, one began to see signs of a greater awareness of the problem in organizations and a stricter control of their leaders, who, before the norm was issued, seemed to have a certain license to act any way they liked, while their employees did not feel they had a sufficient support to challenge their conducts, unless it was a very extreme situation which would justify a lawsuit.

But with this law, she thinks, workers now talk about this subject. They know what workplace harassment is, they

have committees of employee relations (not only for cases of harassment but psychosocial risks) and count on training on how to deal with possible harassers, all of which has improved the conditions many persons work in.

“There is more interest now in improving the treatment of these kinds of psychosocial risk, as well as the leadership and the workplace climate, because there are many studies which show that the perception of a good workplace climate results in higher productivity, since the workers become more committed. When they like the workplace, their performance improves,” Camacho notes.

However, the two professors have called upon judges, academics, legislators and researchers to take a stronger interest in these subjects, learn about the dynamics of such psychosocial factors (like stress, overwork and mental fatigue, dissatisfaction with the job, problems of relating to others and discouragement at the workplace) and employ the same concepts in order to speak about it in a suitable way, from a standpoint which integrates both the juridical and administrative aspects. ■