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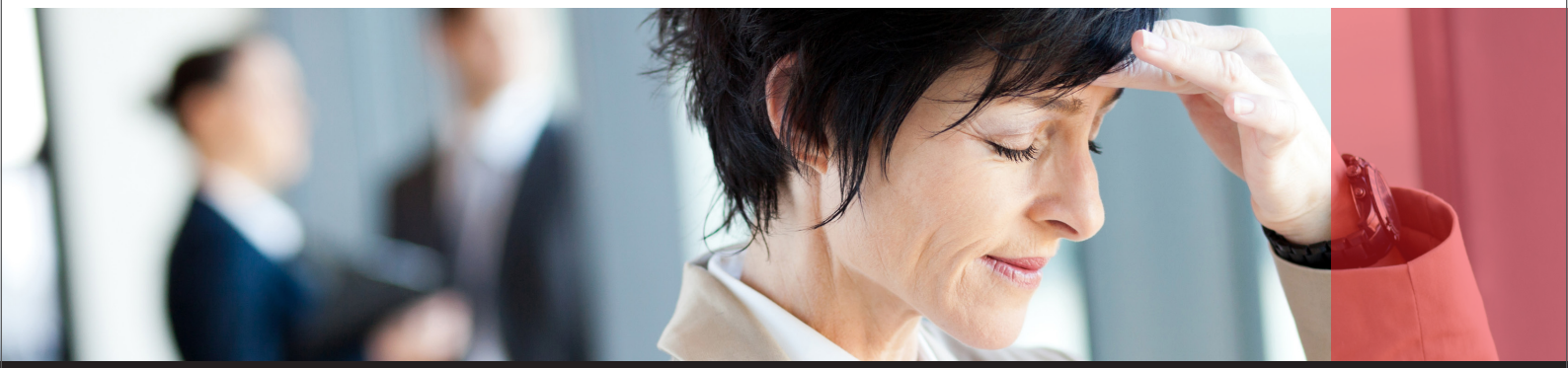
PREVENTING AND MANAGING WORKPLACE BULLYING



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In spite of increased media attention, improvements to health and safety legislation, and trends demonstrating a general increase in complaints, workplace bullying continues to be a misunderstood phenomenon that most organisations struggle to combat effectively. There is a general lack of understanding of human behaviour combined with an absence of reliable data on appropriate organisational interventions. This paper seeks to provide some clarity on what workplace bullying is, what drives this behaviour in the workplace, and what we can do to prevent and manage it.

WHY WE CAN'T IGNORE IT

It is considered that bullying in Australian workplaces is widespread[1]. Researchers have estimated that approximately 25-50% of Australian workers will experience workplace bullying at some point during their working life[2], and it's very costly for individuals and organisations. Bullying increases stress, reduces wellbeing at work, has negative impacts on job performance, and influences workers' intentions to leave their organisation. Importantly, the longer the bullying persists, the greater the impacts to the individual's physical, social and psychological wellbeing[1]. Of those that experience workplace bullying, it is estimated that between 35% and 50% of affected workers will quit their jobs and approximately 75% will take sick leave or extended time off work[1,2].

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Bullying behaviours are neither predictable nor easy to identify in most cases, which poses great challenges for organisations in terms of how they combat this emerging risk. Each type of bullying behaviour can show a different frequency, occur in different circumstances, hold a variety of consequences, and have different motivators on the part of the perpetrator. However, it is important to acknowledge that anyone can become the target of workplace bullying and it can occur at all levels of organisations. No organisation is immune to this issue[3]. There are a number of factors that determine whether or not such a situation will arise; these include the interaction of individuals involved, the individual characteristics of the target and perpetrator, and the work environment[1].

In addition to the fact that workplace bullying has serious health and safety implications for those individuals involved, the Australian Productivity Commission estimates that workplace bullying could be costing Australian organisations up to $36billion a year. The reality is that obtaining accurate measures of the costs of workplace bullying is exceptionally difficult. Most organisations would not be aware of the hidden costs associated with presenteeism and sick leave for which the reason for absence is unknown.

WHAT BEHAVIOURS DO CONSTITUTE WORKPLACE BULLYING?

Defining workplace bullying has often been problematic because it is regarded as being subjective in nature, and so tends to become a contentious issue. In Australia, workplace bullying is defined as repeated, unreasonable behaviour, directed towards a worker, or a group of workers, that creates a risk to health and safety. This is the definition provided in Safe Work Australia's Guide for Preventing and Responding to Workplace Bullying. In order to understand what this definition means, it is important to unpack some of the key terms.

Repeated refers to behaviours that are systematically engaged in over time. A one off instance of counterproductive behaviour does not constitute workplace bullying – we would expect to see a pattern of behaviour. Each individual type of behaviour does not need to be repeated, i.e. the bullying behaviour may include a range of behaviours over time, and they also do not need to be directed towards the same individual. In assessing workplace behaviour, we are concerned with observing the behaviour of the perpetrator, not the experiences of the targets.

The impacts of workplace bullying are far more wide-spread than many managers and executives realise.

Unreasonable behaviour refers to behaviour that a reasonable person (i.e. one that is objective and of sound mind and body) would reasonably consider to have a detrimental impact to the individual experiencing the behaviour. Bullying behaviours are often described as those that offend, humiliate, intimidate, undermine, exclude, discredit, annoy, oppress, sabotage, or are performed as a form of unfavourable treatment[1,4,5].

Finally, creates a risk to health and safety refers to the likelihood that exposure to the behaviour could reasonably be expected to result in impacts to physical and/or psychological wellbeing. Researchers have documented numerous individual impacts of workplace bullying, including symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress, impacts to sleep, the manifestation of physical symptoms and diseases (e.g. gastrointestinal disorders), and reduced productivity and financial strain through absenteeism and job loss.

The impacts of workplace bullying are far more wide-spread than many managers and executives realise. A number of recent studies have outlined the psychological impacts of bullying on observers as well as the targets. Observers of workplace bullying may experience feelings of helplessness and unease, fear of becoming the next target, guilt and shame, and are also likely to be dissatisfied with the work environment and the performance of their leaders. This creates a high risk of psychological injury related to stress, depression and anxiety, and for organisations results in high rates of presenteeism, absenteeism and turnover[6,7].

IS YOUR ORGANISATION MAKING YOUR WORKERS SICK?

Heinz Leymann, a German Psychologist, pioneered research into the issue of bullying in the workplace and proposed that bullying is the result of dysfunctional workplaces or organisational deficiencies, including issues with work design, leadership practices and organisational culture. The nature of most work environments means that enabling structures and processes are likely to exist that make it possible for bullying to occur[3]. In a range of studies over the past 15 years, correlations have been found between workplace bullying and an unsettlingly long list of organisational factors[1,3,8,9], most of which can be better managed and improved upon.

Such factors include:

+ High work demands
+ Lack of job control
+ Poor communication processes
+ Lack of clear work goals
+ Ambiguous work situations
+ Lack of job clarity
+ Poor physical working conditions
+ Increased competition
+ Lack of performance feedback
+ Inflexible working hours
+ Perceived power imbalances
+ Lack of systems to deal with conflict
+ Lack of employee involvement in decision-making processes
+ Work environments in which employees are fearful of speaking up and voicing opinions
+ Authoritarian leadership styles

It is most likely that these factors are significant due to their influence on high levels of tension, stress and frustration in the workplace, a high degree of ambiguity and confusion, and increased levels of interpersonal conflict, which create an environment in which workplace bullying is able to flourish[10].

THE MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Inaccurate stereotypes of workplace bullying provide considerable challenges to the successful implementation of organisational strategies to address workplace bullying. This is due to the creation of heightened emotional responses to the issues, leading targets to subscribe to a victim mentality, and leaving the perpetrators psychologically distressed . These are five of the most common myths and misconceptions about workplace bullying:

1. All workplace bullying behaviour is intentional, and is engaged in with the goal of harming, undermining and controlling other workers.
2. The targets of workplace bullying behaviours are either weak and incompetent, or antagonistic, and therefore deserve to be mistreated as they have invited the behaviour upon themselves, and should therefore be held accountable.
3. Only people with certain personality characteristics can become either the target or the perpetrator of workplace bullying behaviours.
4. Further to point three above: there are psychopaths in our workplaces that are largely responsible for workplace bullying behaviours. Those individuals that have indeed been engaging in bullying behaviours towards others must have a personality disorder or suffer from some other sort of mental illness.
5. Performance management processes are a bullying tactic used by managers to apply unreasonable, non-contingent forms of punishment to belittle workers and force them out of their jobs.

In order to successfully address workplace bullying, one of the first steps is in considering the attitudes that workers have to bullying, and how these attitudes may hinder efforts to prevent, respond to and manage the behaviour. The truth is that workplace bullying is a concern, but the behaviour is largely preventable by understanding what the behaviour is, where it comes from, and how to prevent and manage it.

It is critical that workplace bullying is appropriately integrated into the organisation's health and safety management systems and wellbeing practices.

PREVENTION IS BETTER THAN A CURE!

If organisations are to have a chance of preventing workplace bullying, there are several factors that need to be considered. Essentially, it is critical that workplace bullying is appropriately integrated into the organisation's health and safety management systems and wellbeing practices. Workplace bullying should not be treated solely as an employee or industrial relations issue – that will see the organisation end up processes in place to deal with complaints, which will only serve to manage issues once they arise rather than prevent them in the first place. Following this, organisation's should implement appropriate learning and development programs and engage in organisational development strategies to equip the workforce to safeguard the organisation against the emergence of workplace bullying.

Integrating workplace bullying into safety management systems

The first step is putting policies, procedures, and systems in place for identifying the risks associated with workplace bullying and ensuring these are appropriate managed. Having an effective workplace policy in place on the topic of workplace bullying can assist employees to understand what is expected of them in terms of their behaviour, and also point them in the direction of support and guidance in the event that they are experiencing an issue. In a qualitative study on workplace bullying, MacIntosh[22] found that employers were most likely to be successful in limiting instances of workplace bullying when they used appropriately implemented and enforced policies and procedures on the prevention of workplace bullying.

Failure to establish a comprehensive zero tolerance policy, a lack of appropriate forms of punishment for perpetrators, and the absence of a policy for reporting and managing cases of bullying, could lead to interpretation that the organisation in some way recognises this behaviour as normal or acceptable. Leaders should be trained on the implementation of workplace bullying policy, and should understand where to direct employees should they require assistance. They need to be trained on the organisation's safety management system, how to identify the risks and hazards associated with workplace bullying, appropriate methods for addressing these, and how to investigate complaints when brought to their attention.

Similarly, many health and safety professionals are well-educated on how to apply health and safety practices to physical safety risks, but are not well-informed about psychosocial safety (encompassing fatigue, bullying, harassment, stress and violence). If organisations are to take workplace bullying seriously, health and safety personnel, along with HR personnel, need to be up-skilled on their role in the prevention and management of bullying in the workplace.

Awareness and Education

Education for employees and managers is a well-documented strategy for addressing the issue of workplace bullying. It is apparent from research findings that organisations need to focus on training employees to correctly identify workplace bullying and to understand the care required to look after the needs of both the accuser and the accused in complaints of workplace bullying and subsequent investigation processes[23].

Training designed to increase employee awareness about what constitutes workplace bullying, its determinants, its impacts and how to prevent and manage it, is considered to be a vital step in preventing bullying[24]. The sorts of topics that employees should be educated on include problem solving methods for addressing cases of workplace bullying and mediation techniques for resolving conflict[4]. It is also expected that awareness and education programs may also result in a decrease of frivolous complaints and accusations against managers for what could be best regarded as reasonable management action[24].

Leadership Development

Professional development for managers and leaders is expected to have one of the greatest impacts in addressing the issue of bullying, and it is suggested that separate programs be provided to managers on how to prevent and manage bullying[24]. It should be mandatory for all managers and supervisors to attend training on the management of workplace bullying[11]. Several skills are likely to be most effective in increasing competence: emotional intelligence, communication skills, conflict resolution, interpersonal relations, leadership skills, negotiation, restorative justice practices, stress management and team building[16,24.]

The consequences of not having well educated managers on this topic is that they may be unable to address and manage the behaviours, and often react with denial that there is even an issue present within their team[24]. Research has shown that employees that report having been bullied are far more likely than those that haven't to indicate dissatisfaction with their supervisor's ability to manage workplace conflict[20]. This highlights the importance of managers possessing these critical soft skills.

Organisation Development

Lastly, organisations should consider how they are managing and developing the organisation as a whole. Organisation development largely involves change processes, which are notorious for being difficult to manage. In the 21st century, organisations tend to move at a quick pace as they respond to technology, consumer demands and competition, amongst other challenges. Poorly managed change processes are often associated with poor communication, high degrees of uncertainty, stress, job insecurity, poor morale and decreases in employee satisfaction and commitment.

In order to prevent workplace bullying, senior managers need to maintain a broad overview of the dynamics of the organisational system and how these impact on employees. These are the very situations in which managers need to become risk aware, and consider how such processes can be better managed to maintain positive environments that foster and support employee wellbeing.

The consequences of a workplace bullying incident can be very serious and costly, both for the individual, their broader work group and the organisation.

CONCLUSION

Workplace bullying is a complex phenomenon requiring careful management. The consequences of a workplace bullying incident can be very serious and costly, both for the individual, their broader work group and the organisation. However, workplace bullying is a topic that managers should not feel overwhelmed by. Considered planning and effective leadership practices can go a long way to ensuring strategies are in place to minimise occurrences of workplace bullying. Being proactive rather than reactive to workplace bullying may well save your employees and organisation from significant harm in the future.

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