

Turning the spotlight on workplace bullies

Bullying isn't confined to the schoolyard. It happens in the the workplace too and has a significant impact on employee performance, health and productivity. Ignoring it is not the answer, say Hadyn Olsen and Andrea Needham. Confronting it is.



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"I was taught early in my professional career that you don't complain about your boss. No matter what," Sarah told me. "It was part of the culture of senior managerial staff."

I met Sarah in 2002 after she had been on a sickness benefit for four months, diagnosed with clinical depression. She had lasted only four months with what may be described as a chronic bully. Her life had been turned upside down by a more senior manager who had groomed her, burned her out with ever increasing responsibilities and then used her as the scapegoat for his own inefficiencies and insecurities.

In the end she had arisen to go to work on a Monday morning, but couldn't get out the front door. She collapsed. She spent most of the first week in bed crying, barely able to feed herself. "I found it immensely difficult just to make a cup of coffee," she said. "I couldn't watch TV because I would lose my train of thought and be totally confused."

The workplace bully was a senior manager adept at covering his tracks and creating a persona of innocence. When she first told another staff member the reply was, "I can't believe you are talking about X. He seems fine to me."

Sarah's workplace bully is still out there and is continuing to target competent individuals in his workplace. No one is stopping him—his staff cannot and his colleagues will not. Has he terrorised them as well?

Sarah's boss is a chronic workplace bully. In the words of *Take the Bully by the Horns* author Sam Horn, he is 'someone who knowingly abuses the rights of others to gain control of the situation and the individuals

involved'. Workplace bullies deliberately and persistently use intimidation and manipulation to get their way. The key words here are knowingly, deliberately, and persistently.

Unfortunately, workplace bullies seem to be common in New Zealand yet complaints against them rarely get to a court hearing. Rather, complainants are often paid to leave and keep quiet. The workplace bullies, meanwhile, are rarely confronted or removed.

Workplace bullying is a term describing a range of simple to complex dysfunctional behaviours. At the extreme end, chronic workplace bullies have been described by psychologists as workplace psychopaths—psychologically deficient and with a need for power and control that supersedes almost all other needs. Control becomes their addiction.

The definition used by the Workplace Bullying Trauma Institute (WBTI) 2002 is all-encompassing and states: "The phenomenon of workplace bullying or psychological violence at work:

- is the repeated, health-endangering mistreatment of a person (the target) by a cruel perpetrator (the bully);
- is best understood through the bully's behaviours—acts of commission (hostile verbal, nonverbal communication and interfering actions) and omission (the withholding of resources [time, information, training, support, equipment] that guarantee failure)—which are all driven by the bully's need to control the target;
- involves the bully alone at first deciding who is targeted, when, where and how psychological violence will be inflicted. Later, others may be coerced to participate in the assaults;
- is not 'tough' management—it is illegitimate behaviour, unrelated to accomplishing productive work, so outrageous as to be the antithesis of what a good employer values and encourages;
- escalates from 1:1 harassment after bullying is reported and the employer responds inappropriately and inadequately to engulfing an entire work

unit in chaos, pitting co-workers, management and management's allies against the target."

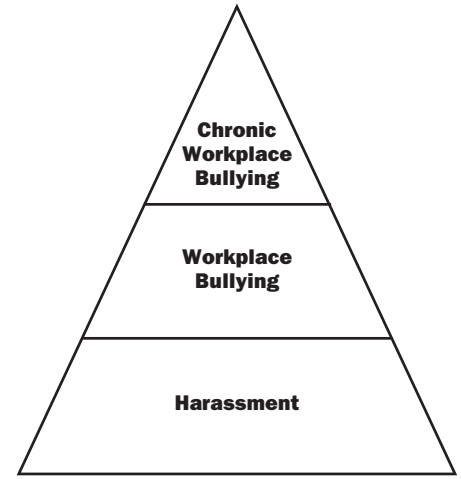
Workplace bullying is often seen simply as a form of harassment and is therefore downplayed. However, there are significant differences between workplace bullying and harassment as shown in the table below.

Harassment is the most common form of unwelcome workplace behaviours and will often mean that an individual is taunted for her/his outward appearance, genetic or cultural differences. Harassing behaviour may involve verbal abuse, teasing or taunting people, yelling and screaming, threatening and hostile behaviour. Studies show that harassment is quite common with up to half the working population experiencing it at some time in their working lives.

All about control

Workplace bullying is more insidious and is calculated to gain control of, and psychologically harm, innocent individuals. It usually involves a pattern of repeated, seemingly trivial behaviours that are calculated to undermine people's work and reputations. People are targeted and victimised primarily on their work performance—which to begin with is usually good or even high because targets are often top performers. The workplace bully targets competent individuals who tend to be good at networking and who have sound emotional intelligence skills—they work and interact well with others. The nature of workplace bullying guarantees that it is usually covert and extremely devastating to individuals.

While harassment may well be more common, chronic workplace bullying is far more harmful over the longer term to an individual's and to an organisation's well-being (see pyramid diagram). The chronic workplace bully often resides near the top of an organisation that values hierarchy and provides benefits not related simply to job performance. While this attainment level of positional status may mean they are fewer in number, the positional power enables a chronic workplace bully to cause far more damage.



Source: WAVE 2003

Chronic workplace bullying tends to be more typical in corporates where positional power can be valued more than individual worth or performance. For whatever reason, our society renders these people untouchable as it places them above and beyond reproach and censure. The lack of collegial censure is where workplace bullying thrives. The truism: 'Bad things happen when good people do nothing' is one that applies when good executives do nothing about their toxic colleague.

To date, because there has been no substantive recognised research on workplace bullying in New Zealand, we must rely on overseas sources. The Beyond Bullying Association in Queensland cites the following on their website: "The best international research shows that 25-50 percent of employees will experience bullying at some time in their working lives (although in some occupations the figure is up to 95 percent) and 4-20 percent of people have been bullied in the past six to 12 months."

Organisations that tolerate or even encourage workplace bullying tend to:

- be traditional organisations with a strong belief in hierarchy;
- value and provide unnecessary rewards for increased positional power;
- restructure often and attempt change frequently;
- use a leadership language but exhibit few or no leadership behaviours;
- encourage closed systems of recruitment, succession, etc. within an industry.

Recognising the bully

How, then, does an organisation recognise a workplace bully is in its midst and that workplace bullying is its organisational problem? If you're concerned that bullying is occurring in your workplace, the signs to look for are these:

- consistent and constant complaints;
- high rates of absenteeism, sickness or staff turnover;
- high rates of conflict, poor morale, poor

Workplace bullying or harassment?

	Harassment	Workplace bullying
Number of acts	possibly just one	generally more than one act
Deliberateness	can be unintentional due to different views held	is almost always deliberate
Who does it	all levels against all levels	usually manager against employee
Target	usually sex, race, disability, or other characteristics listed in law	can be anyone for any reason

- performance and team dysfunctionality;
- sudden changes in an individual's or a team's performance and morale;
- constant reorganisations in an area to cover people leaving or being forced out—under the guise of 'resignation' with payments to silence them.

Dealing with bullying

So what can people do to confront workplace bullying? Most simply leave when they are bullied. They put up with it for a while and then look for another job. If they try to confront it at work, using procedures available under grievance and complaints policies, they are often disadvantaged and bullied even more. Often the workplace loses patience with the complainant and colludes with the bully in supporting the abuse.

Currently our laws confront sexual and racial harassment, but general harassment and bullying outside of these definitions is not illegal. Most people who seek to challenge general harassment and bullying must use constructive dismissal, unfair treatment and breach of duty of care grounds to be heard in an employment court.

Our current emphasis upon mediation in the first instance unfortunately only serves to make the process more difficult for targets to find justice. Mediation is entirely the wrong process for dealing with workplace bullying, just as joint counselling was entirely the wrong process for dealing with domestic violence throughout the 70s. Mediation is just another way for the workplace bully to abuse, undermine and accuse the target.

How does an organisation address workplace bullying and deal with the phenomenon? Here are some general principles:

1. Adopt a no-bullying management/leadership philosophy and develop policies and procedures to ensure employees at all levels are able to seek protection from a workplace bully. This needs to be personally supported from the most senior level.
2. Recognise workplace bullies as real hazards to health and safety in the workplace. The workplace bully and the workplace bullying process each meets criteria listed in the 1992 Health and

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Safety in Employment Act and its 2003 Amendment. A workplace bully is a hazard on legs. They will cause stress and damage the health of employees.

3. Educate the workforce by naming the behaviours and the harm caused. Workplace bullying thrives in ignorance but shrivels up in the light of day. In a healthy workplace, bullying is not ignored or entertained. Senior management confronts it and stands up to it.
4. Develop and maintain sound feedback systems for performance management; ie, systems that do not include one manager making performance, reward and career decisions on one employee. Development of feedback systems must include training on confrontation skill building.
5. Develop and communicate a safe and effective complaints procedure. This must include not having to follow the 'hierarchy' if an employee has an issue. He or she must be able to go straight to Human Resources or to the top if they feel unsafe. It is also critical that a complaints procedure includes a no victimisation clause. Too many people are afraid to make complaints because they fear the repercussions. Workplace bullies are highly skilled at covering their tracks and changing their style to suit the environment.
6. Remove workplace bullies from positions of power over others while they are being 'retrained'. Terminate their employment if they do not show any change in their behaviours towards others. Unfortunately workplace bullies are often consistent achievers of KPI results—although usually on the back of fear—and employers are reluctant to get

rid of them in the mistaken belief that they add value. If an individual is a chronic workplace bully, she or he will be adding zero overall value to a workplace.

Guidelines needed

Slowly the Western world is confronting workplace bullying and putting guidelines and legislation in place to provide avenues of assistance and protection for organisations and targets. Sweden has a bill specifically addressing the victimisation of employees. Employment law in Norway has always protected an employee from psychological harm. The United Kingdom and California in the USA each have legislation that is moving slowly through their respective legislatures. Ireland and the Australian state of Queensland have each carried out extensive research and are deliberating next steps. Other states in Australia have issued guidelines for employers and employees on how to address the issue if and when it arises.

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However, workplace bullying can be identified and eliminated. Workplace bullies cannot survive in a culture of openness, respect for others and with sound organisational systems that exist to protect people not police them.

Workplace bullying is a cancer that blights the dignity of our workplaces. It can and should be removed and eradicated. Ignoring it does not remove it—confronting it does. Turn on the light and confront the workplace bullies in the midst of your organisation.



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Hadyn Olsen is the Development Manager for WAVE (Workplaces Against Violence in Employment). Andrea Needham is an experienced Human Resources consultant who is currently preparing a book to be released by Penguin in September. Hadyn and Andrea have a web site www.beyondbullying.co.nz and can be contacted through this.