

## Dealing With Workplace Bullying

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Workplace bullying is a complex phenomena often hidden within workplace cultures and protected by both employers and employees alike. The issue has become increasingly exposed across OECD nations in the last 18 years and is recognised as a significant health and safety issue, and in particular, one of the most common causes of psychological injury, workplace related stress illness and workplace related suicide.

In New Zealand a veil of silence over this issue has prevented significant research and development into this issue. It has been a subject that many people have 'turned a blind eye' to and has often been minimised as a 'personality clash', a communication problem or excused as a management tool or simply robust behaviour. Like many others in this field we do not believe workplace bullying is a personality clash, a communication problem, a justified management tool or robust behaviour. It is harmful behaviour that is unnecessary, unwarranted and unreasonable.

In the last four years there has been change in New Zealand and many organisations are beginning to see the value in creating what we call 'Bully intolerant workplaces'. Changes to our Health and Safety in Employment Act and the recognition of stress hazards has meant that bullying can no longer be ignored. My organisation has had the pleasure of being at the forefront of working within the public and private sector across New Zealand establishing programmes that not only expose and minimise the risk of bullying, but also create workplace cultures that are healthy, happy and highly engaged.

This paper focuses on four strategies to create bully intolerant workplaces. These are;

- ?? Education
- ?? Leadership
- ?? Complaints handling
- ?? Support

### **Workplace Culture Shadows**

Workplace bullying may happen in any organisation and at any level. In healthy organisations bullying is not tolerated by anyone, however in unhealthy organisations a shadow develops that forms a basis for it to thrive. We call this the shadow of collusion.

Some bullies actively work to create a shadow of collusion. They do this by grooming people, creating fear, dominating and manipulating people to accept their behaviour. When people begin to collude we notice a number of dynamics appearing. These include;

- ?? A general acceptance of bullying behaviours. "That's just the way he/she is?", "That's just the way things are around here, get used to it." These are common statements in a bully tolerant organisation. The bully is allowed to misbehave and those who complain are seen as weak or overly sensitive. It is common for complainants to be further victimised and mobbed after making complaints. They are seen as the problem simply because they have complained.

- ?? A climate of fear in which people are afraid of speaking up, challenging the bully or making complaints. Like a domestically violent home, everyone sees what happens but no-one dares talk about it.
- ?? A code of silence by which groups are pressured to keep things 'in-house' and speaking up about bullying is seen as an action of betrayal against the group. Codes of silence mean people must turn a blind eye to reality and 'keep their head down' in order to survive.

The shadow of collusion will quickly dominate any workplace culture it is allowed to grow in. It must be addressed in order to prevent bullying from continuing. If the shadow is present and by some chance a bully is exposed and even dismissed, another will simply pop up in their place. To remove the shadow organisations must take a systematic approach and create an environment where respect, dignity and safety are valued.

## Education

One of the difficulties with defining issues such as harassment and bullying is that people have different perceptions in regard to them. To some degree, what one person may see as harassment or bullying, another may see as normal and acceptable behaviour. It is therefore important to have definitions that include not only subjective elements but objective elements as well.

The definition we use and has been taken up by various organisations in New Zealand is;

“Workplace bullying is **unwanted** and **unwarranted** behaviour that a person finds offensive, intimidating or humiliating and is **repeated** so as to have a **detrimental** effect upon a person’s dignity, safety and well-being.”<sup>1</sup>

There are four elements involved in this definition that are necessary to expose bullying. They are both subjective and objective. It is not enough that someone finds behaviour unwanted and may experience it as offensive, intimidating or humiliating, the behaviour must also be unwarranted, repeated and detrimental or harmful.

For example a person may not like being told what to do, or being instructed by a manager. However this is not bullying because this it is warranted managerial behaviour.

We define workplace bullying under the general harassment banner but also recognise there are differences between bullying and harassment. Harassment may be a one-off behaviour such as lewd joke, sexual request or a sexual touch. Bullying is not generally one-off but repeated and targeted behaviour such as a pattern of hostility or victimisation. Harassment is also legally defined under certain grounds; e.g., sex, age, ethnicity, colour, disability etc. Bullying is usually not under these grounds but is simply about the power and control needs of the bully.

Education is concerned with creating clear lines of distinction and creating clear behavioural boundaries. It is about exposing some of the myths around bullying and informing people of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour.

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<sup>1</sup> “Workplace Bullying and Harassment: A Toolbox for Managers and Supervisors” Hadyn Olsen. 2005.

I have worked in the area of violence prevention with over 400 bullies since 1995 and in that time and have found some differences in people who bully.

Some bullies we describe as situational and at the other end of the scale we describe some of them as chronic.

Situational bullies are very common. These are people who at times use bullying patterns of behaviour such as shouting, verbal abuse, intimidation and aggression. However most of the time they may be well behaved and only act this way in relation to certain situations or events. It may be a situation of high stress or change. It may be related to a conflict. These people are the easiest to change and respond well to education and behavioural management.

At the other end of the scale there are the chronic bullies. These people are less common but far more serious. Their behaviour is more predatory and patterned. Chronic bullies bully others not just in situations but as a matter of course. They tend to always be picking on someone. Their dysfunction is deeper and often related to deep personality problems. At the worst end of the chronic scale we are talking about psychopathy. They are extremely dangerous and there is far less likelihood that they will rehabilitate or change.

Some of the characteristics of chronic bullies are;

- ?? They are addicted to power - continually needing to be dominant in order to feel powerful within themselves.
- ?? They have a charming side – often a Jekyll and Hyde personality that hides their dark side.
- ?? They are results focused – ensuring others perform to make them look good. However they often burn these people out in the process.
- ?? They are deceitful and manipulative – able to lie, justify and manipulate people and situations for their own ends.
- ?? They are autocratic – not team players. They may know the language of teamwork but the reality is they dominate, divide and destroys functional teams.
- ?? They are impulsive – often making decisions on the spur of the moment.
- ?? They lack empathy – low emotional intelligence and low ability to understand the emotions of others.
- ?? They don't resolve conflict – fight or flight are their common defensive patterns.

Chronic bullying must be exposed if there is ever a chance to prevent situational bullying. Employers need to be bale to recognise chronic traits and if possible recognise these at recruitment stage. Our organisation has invested in a screening tool that helps employers weed out chronic bullies before they enter organisations. This is important because once a chronic bully is established within an organisation it may be very expensive and time demanding to get change or evict them.

Education is necessary in order to create a bully intolerant organisation. People should understand the organisation's policy and be clear about where the boundaries lie. Employers have every right to expect four standards of employment behaviour. These are;

- ?? Professionalism – doing one's job to the standard required.
- ?? Respect – treating other employers with basic respect as co-employees.
- ?? Communication – ensuring open and clear communication with others.

?? Cooperation – actively working together for the organisations goals.

Employers who allow these standards to be compromised do so at their own peril. These standards form the bedrock of good employment relations. They need to be communicated to employers and be clear to everyone through effective educative programmes.

We have also found that educative processes are most effective when they are run in a facilitative way. Facilitative processes allow people to challenge, talk about perceptions and even offer resistance. Good facilitators will use this to create mind shifts.

## **Leadership**

Unless people in positions of authority are examples of a non-bullying style of management, there is little likelihood of creating a bully intolerant organisation. Leadership and bullying are actually opposite behaviours. Good leaders don't need to bully. They are able to create respect and authority without harming people. Bullies rely on manipulation, intimidation and domination to enforce their rule. In a simple statement: Leaders create followers but bullies create victims.

Creating leaders is first of all about role-modelling and secondly about education, coaching and mentoring. Good leaders have certain strengths. They regularly;

- ?? provide clear communication about the expectations they have
- ?? insist on high standards - being firm but fair
- ?? give and receive honest and open feedback
- ?? operate proactively not reactively
- ?? communicate their values
- ?? gain power with others rather than power over others
- ?? connect empathetically rather than sympathetically or apathetically
- ?? manage their moods – more even tempered
- ?? are humble and respectful of others
- ?? take responsibility and ownership for their problems and their emotions
- ?? give credit where it is due
- ?? facilitate a shared vision
- ?? call forth the best in people

Bullies do not show these traits.

## **Complaints Handling**

As soon as the word 'complaint' is mentioned most employers begin to shudder, but people who make genuine complaints of workplace bullying or harassment are not problems.

They are actually champions of the values of respect, dignity and safety. They are individuals who have the courage to speak up and seek change.

In order to create a safe and fair complaints system it is important to;

- ?? ensure there are both informal and formal processes

- ?? ensure complainants and alleged perpetrators safeguarded from victimisation and disadvantage
- ?? ensure processes are procedurally and substantively fair

Organisations often get informal and formal processes mixed up. There are clear distinctions between them. Informal processes are a 'No Blame' approach. They are not disciplinary but focused on stopping inappropriate behaviour and gaining agreements for the future. The focus is forward. Formal complaints are investigative and may lead to discipline or dismissal. The focus is more backward.

Informal interventions are most effectively handled by first line managers and supervisors. They are generally the closest to the ground and can put a stop to inappropriate behaviours quickly and effectively. Our training focuses on developing first line management capacity to intervene in situations, deal with defensiveness and provide quick and inexpensive resolutions.

Formal interventions need to be carried out by senior management and they need to have robust procedures to investigate and deal with bullying adequately.

Some of the problems encountered with poor formal procedures include;

- ?? not hearing all the evidence
- ?? not allowing parties to respond to all the evidence
- ?? bias on the part of the investigator
- ?? ignoring patterns of behaviour
- ?? investigating for intent and dismissing complaints because intent cannot be evidenced
- ?? failing to ensure people are not victimised during or after investigations

We find that both employers and unions want effective informal interventions. They are one of the most effective tools in stopping workplace bullying. They require some investment however this is also an investment in leadership capacity and the spin-offs are significant in all areas of management behaviour. Manager who can make informal interventions and discuss behavioural issues with people gain more confidence to address all other areas of performance.

In bully-intolerant organisations most complaints of workplace bullying are dealt with on informal levels, either between people themselves or by first line managers. In bully tolerant organisations we find complaints are dealt with through formal complaints or personal grievances, or by the most common reaction; the complainant leaves.

## **Support**

How can an employer provide support for those who may be bullied? What are some of the ways that victims can be listened to and provided with a level of care?

We believe there are a number of support mechanisms that are effective. These include;

- ?? Contact persons who are trained to listen and offer advice to complainants. These people are sometimes called Harassment Officers, however we think this title is ambiguous and may give the sense that they are some type of police

officer in the workplace. Contact persons provide confidential support but do not take up complaints or police the workplace.

- ?? In-house mediators who can run safe and effective in-house mediations. Some bullying involves unresolved conflicts and mediation may resolve the conflicts and problems between people. One of the most beneficial results of creating in-house mediation is that all kinds of problems can be quickly resolved.
- ?? Employment Assistance programmes can also provide a counselling intervention for those who experience workplace bullying. Although this support mechanism is confidential by nature, counsellors can warn employers generally that bullying or harassment may be a problem.
- ?? Mentoring and coaching mechanisms in the workplace can also provide support for employees in dealing with relationship issues. Coaching relationships provide practical support to people who may be experiencing bullying.

## **Conclusion**

To eliminate workplace bullying from our businesses and organisations we need to not only deal with individuals but with the environment and culture of our workplaces. A fence needs to be placed at the top of the cliff rather than simply focusing on the wreckage at the bottom.

Creating a bully intolerant organisation will not just safeguard people from harm but will create a healthy, happy and highly engaged workplace.

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