

Someone safe to talk to...

THE ROLE OF THE WORKPLACE “CONTACT PERSON”

Hadyn Olsen. WAVE. 2014

Paul Potts, the Welsh singing star ‘risen from the rough’ was in New Zealand recently and was interviewed on New Zealand’s Television One. He was questioned about the subject of bullying, and asked to share his thoughts on what would have made a difference to him as a child when he was relentlessly tormented by school bullies. Paul said the last thing he wanted to do was to tell a teacher, because that usually resulted in the bullying getting worse. Instead he said what he really needed was someone to talk to about it, someone who would listen “without pointing the finger,” someone with whom he could talk about his feelings.

This is a great definition of the role of a workplace “Contact Person.”

Having someone to talk to is usually extremely helpful for people who are experiencing harassment or bullying. They don’t necessarily want this person to “point the finger” or to try to fix the problem themselves. They just want to be heard and to be understood, and to be assisted in exploring options. They want to be able to talk about their feelings because they can be difficult to work through.

The recently published Worksafe Guideline, “Preventing and Responding to Workplace Bullying” suggests workplaces have trained Contact Persons who can offer advice and support to enquirers. WAVE fully supports this view and we have trained Contact Persons in workplaces all over New Zealand in the last 14 years.

In our experience Contact Persons are beneficial to organisations because;

- They help defuse bullying and harassment situations
- They provide people with options and assist by exploring the various advantages and disadvantages
- They are accessible and visible (people will often talk to a Contact Person before talking to a manager)
- They act as a catalyst to support safe and supportive workplaces and generate a caring environment
- They can provide some data (without identifying people) back to the organisation so that hot spots can be identified and further training or coaching provided to eliminate the potential for harassment or bullying. This is a proactive approach.

In any organisation having someone to listen to, with skills that enables people to feel heard and to work out what to do next, is a powerful tool to decrease stress, destructive conflict and toxic relationships. It enables people to reflect on their circumstances, consider their options and make constructive choices.

Here are some answers to questions I regularly hear:

Why don't people just talk to their manager if there is a problem?

Unfortunately research indicates that people who experience harassment or bullying are usually reluctant to talk to management. This is because they don't want it to be taken out of their hands and become worse. Managers have a responsibility to act on issues, but if they don't understand the dynamics of harassment and bullying their well-intentioned responses often make situations worse. Many New Zealand workplaces managers avoid things or try to sort things out in a direct way, but this can exacerbate an already dangerous and stressful situation. According to the ZEROBULLY helpline 53% of people who told their manager they were being bullied, ended up with the bullying increasing.

How many Contact Persons should we have?

Generally the number of Contact Persons advised for organisations is about one per fifty employees but this may vary depending on the structure and geographical layout. Whatever number an organisation chooses, the important thing is to have at least one person who has gone through the extensive Contact Person training and has the capacity to be helpful to enquirers.

How do you choose Contact Persons in an organisation?

WAVE recommends that organisations don't simply advertise to see who is interested. Unfortunately this can result in unsuitable people coming forward. What works better is to ask managers to consider their teams and the most likely candidates based upon specific criteria. These people are then approached and attend the two day Contact Person training workshop. If they meet the requirements of the course they are then provided with an agreement to sign, outlining their responsibilities and commitment to the position. This ensures Contact Persons can be removed at a future time if necessary.

What criteria or qualities should we look for in choosing Contact Persons?

Candidates should be people who have the following characteristics;

- They are generally respected by their peers
- They show a reasonably high degree of ethical (non-harassing/bullying) behaviour
- They are reasonably good listeners

The training further equips them with an extensive knowledge of the dynamics of harassment and bullying, as well as specific skills, safety issues and how to maintain confidentiality.

Can managers or union delegates be Contact Persons?

While managers and Contact Persons can find the training useful, we do find that there can be a role conflict. Managers are trained to fix problems. Union delegates are trained to advocate for their members. Contact Persons do not fix peoples problems and neither do they advocate. They also do not become quasi-counsellors or receive complaints, investigate or mediate. All of these roles are different. Contact Persons assist people with information and knowledge of what they can do. They assist people in working through their situations and exploring appropriate options, but they do not get involved further. This way they stay clear of crossing role boundaries.

Is it useful to have Contact Persons if our organisation already has EAP (Employee Assistance Programme)?

EAP offers a different function than Contact Persons. EAP is mostly accessed externally. Staff do not know who they are going to meet. Contact Persons are often known around the workplace. They are internally based and can be contacted easily. People in workplaces will often talk first to a Contact Person and then be advised to use EAP as well if they feel that is necessary. Contact Person support the role of EAP.

What about confidentiality?

The training for Contact Persons puts a lot of emphasis on the need for confidentiality. Contact Persons understand the limits to that as well and that they should speak to the Co-coordinator of the programme as a first point of contact if there is a difficult situation. Confidentiality means not divulging people's private business or even identifying who has come to see them. Contact Persons understand the legal framework around defamation and privacy and understand that if they break confidentiality they could be removed from the position.

What difference do Contact People make to the culture of a workplace?

Contact Persons are part of an organisation's programme to prevent harassment and bullying. They are one piece of the jigsaw but an important piece. The most effective way to prevent harassment and bullying is to create the kind of workplace culture that stops it and is intolerant of it. This change in culture involves various components including policy, complaints procedures, informal resolution strategies, equipping managers and supervisors, ongoing training as a Health and Safety issue, and of course having effective people who can listen without "pointing the finger" or making things worse.

What about ongoing support?

WAVE provides an ongoing external support to workplace anti-harassment programmes. We are an external resource should you wish to have advice about an issue, or whether you want to discuss strategy for creating a harassment free workplace. WAVE also involves other specialist mediators, facilitators and investigators.

Choose WAVE for your external support specializing in harassment and workplace bullying.

Hadyn Olsen. WAVE. www.wave.org.nz www.facebook.com/wave.org.nz info@wave.org.nz

- Workplace bullying and Harassment consultancy
- Individual coaching for managers, perpetrators, complainants
- Training workshops
- Mediation and informal interventions
- Group facilitation and culture development
- Formal complaints investigation
- Contact Person external support