

Workplace Bullying

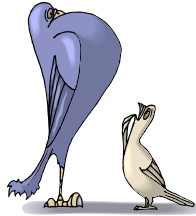
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Sally Jetson & Associates

Facts About Bullying

In the workplace we have an obligation not to harm or allow harm to employees or others in our workplaces. Bullying behaviour breaches our duty to provide a safe and hazard free work environment, both physically and psychologically.



Some forms of bullying in the past have passed as acceptable management practice. People refer to this as a culture of bullying. In other situations bullying behaviour is influenced by situational factors where those who bully exercise their power to control situations or people.

How widespread is workplace bullying?

The following statistics have been drawn from Australian and international literature:

- *Estimated 1 in 4 employees have been bullied at some time in their working life*
- *75% of targets had to leave work to make the bullying go away*
- *70% of reported occurrences from male to female*
- *30-50% of stress claims at work are related to bullying, intimidation and related forms of abuse*
- *Bullying is 4 times more prevalent than sexual harassment*
- *Approx 70% of reported bullying involves a person in a position of authority*
- *Estimated 4-8% of the workforce is being bullied at any one time*
- *Estimated 75% employees have witnessed bullying*
- *About 20% of those who witness bullying will leave their employment within a year. Where the bully is male or female, the target is more likely to be another female*
- *Not all people who work with someone who bullies will become targets. Bullies usually select their targets according to whom they can control.*

Reports or complaints of bullying must be taken seriously and properly assessed.

Bullying Defined

"Bullying is a set of persistent, coercive behaviours that causes chronic and cumulative detriment to the victim/s and work performance." (Jetson/Broadly 2002)

Worksafe WA defines bullying as **"repeated, unreasonable or inappropriate behaviour directed towards an employee, or group of employees, that creates a risk to health and safety"**

Bullying exists whether or not there is an intention to cause harm. Impact, not intent, is a key factor in determining bullying.

How do you tell? - 6 key defining points!

- 1. Is it a form of negative workplace conduct or treatment covered by your organisation's policies?**
- 2. Is it behaviour that the person does not want and is unable to readily defend themselves against?**
- 3. Is the treatment persistent and coercive, or has it formed a pattern over time?**
- 4. Is it behaviour that is detrimental to the victim and their work performance?**
- 5. Is there risk to the mental or physical health, safety or wellbeing of those subjected to behaviour?**
- 6. Is the behaviour detrimental to work or organisational performance?**

Bullying is rarely a one-off event. It is a cycle of behaviour with characteristics similar to the cycle of domestic violence. However, in the bullying cycle, control is more likely to be achieved through psychological and emotional means than physical violence.

This is the typical cycle of bullying:

- A person is bullied for months, perhaps years.
- Eventually, they may assert their right not to be bullied by making a complaint.
- The bully presents (or lies) convincingly, often portraying themselves as the victim.
- It's one word against another with no witnesses and little direct evidence.
- Decision-makers are persuaded by the bully into seeing the target as a trouble-maker or as a defective individual.
- Pressure amounts on the target so they leave, are dismissed or managed out of the job.
- When the target is gone, within 3-21 days, a new target is selected and the cycle of bullying starts over again.

Common Myths About Bullying

Myth No. 1: "It's one of those personality clashes ... or ... it's his personality, that's just the way he is."

Bullying is not a form of conflict, although bullying can evolve from unresolved conflict. Nor is bullying a 'personality clash'. 'Personality Clash' is a term used to deny or discount the experience of those bullied, or used as a reason to avoid getting involved.

Myth No. 2: "Sometimes people who get bullied deserve it. It's their own fault if they can't stand up for themselves."

Bullying is the preferred behaviour of the bully. It is not the preferred behaviour of the target. The target does not cause the bullying nor does the target choose to be bullied.

Research indicates that those who are bullied are more likely to be conscientious and effective employees. They are usually co-operative and non-confrontational people and are generally unlikely to be subservient or want to go along with being controlled. This increases their likelihood of being targeted.

Common Bullying Behaviours

There are five well reported categories of bullying that occur in workplaces.

1. Threat to professional status

- Humiliation in front of colleagues or others
- Intimidating or illegitimate use of procedures for performance management or discipline

2. Threat to personal standing

- Name calling, teasing and inappropriate jokes about the person
- Unreasonable job demands and overloading
- Belittling opinions and undermining of work
- Discounting or denial of accomplishments
- Destructive innuendo and sarcasm
- Verbal and non-verbal threats
- Physical violence or violence to property

3. Isolation

- Preventing access to opportunities
- Withholding information required to do the job
- Under-resourcing, withholding resources or clawing-back resources.
- Freezing out, ignoring or excluding
- Unreasonable refusal of applications for leave, training or promotion

4. Overwork

- Undue pressure to produce work
- Impossible deadlines
- Unnecessary disruptions

5. Destabilisation

- Meaningless tasks or removal of responsibility
- Shifting goal posts
- Unpredictable behaviour and moods – 'running hot and cold'
- Undervaluing of efforts
- Derogatory comments about others behind their back

How Do Bullies Behave?

Most bullying is controlling behaviour done out of sight or out of earshot of superiors. In many situations, the expression of overt aggression is curtailed and the bullying behaviour becomes hidden from view and difficult for victims to prove. This has significant implications for grievance resolution, should a complaint be made.

What Motivates People To Bully?

People who bully continue their tactics because they can. They are usually high achievers (or perceive themselves to be) who have a strong desire to be 'in control' and have little or no tolerance for being 'controlled'.

Whether the bully is in a position of formal authority or not, the bully is always boss! People who bully can gain positions of importance and authority. Before long they are indispensable to the organisation and as consequence, often untouchable.

Typically they are unable to see their own weaknesses, preferring to shift any blame to others and receive any accolades for themselves. Their self-esteem is distorted and they see themselves as more talented, gifted and generous than they really are.

How is Bullying Condoned?

Like all behaviour, bullying is rewarded and reinforced in many ways. Failing to set limits on bullying behaviour in the workplace is a form of reinforcement.

Experience shows that in 90% of complaints made about bullying in the workplace are about matters already known to the responsible managers. By the time a complaint is made, costs associated with HR support, turnover, work quality and absenteeism are significant.

So, those who can prevent bullying often fail to do so. Why?

Environments in Which Bullying Thrives -

For bully to continue it requires conditions that only too often our workplaces are able to provide. There are three main reasons why bullying thrives.

1. Legitimacy or Protection

– Often provided at the highest level of the organisation because the person who bullies is powerful, popular or good for business.

In competitive work environments bullying may be encouraged and rewarded for the outcomes it achieves. Success is often measured on relative standing, rather than absolute performance, so the human and organisational costs associated with bullying are accepted.

2. Isolation and Oppression of Those Bullied

– People who are bullied are fearful and can almost always be relied upon not to speak out. They experience shame and humiliation, and are often not believed.

Research shows that in cases of workplace bullying, 75% of management came out in support of the bully and 56% of the bully's peer supported the bully. Those bullied were often not believed, had their motives for complaining questioned and were labeled as 'personality' or 'performance' problems by others.

3. Complicit Witnesses:– people who know things or have witnessed bullying behaviour, however do not report.

If bullying is condoned at higher levels, it makes it harder for co-workers to support targets of bullying, even though they don't take part in the bullying themselves. Co-workers want to be on the winning side, not the losing side and if the target looks as if they might be losing, then it's easier to withdraw support from the target and turn a blind eye to the bullying.

A Message For Managers

If you manage someone who bullies you are likely to be aware of:

- The bully's general behaviour, their style, alleged incidents, who is targeted and who is affected.
- Increased turnover rates, absenteeism, workers compensation claims, complaints and other indicators of management deficiencies in the work environment.
- Conflicts between the bully's work area and other work areas in the organisation; shortcomings in service delivery and co-operation.
- Benefits that you or the organisation has achieved by condoning a 'results at all costs' approach.
- Turning a blind eye to the bullying and its consequences.

Actions to Stop and Prevent Bullying

1. Identify the behaviour for what it is.
2. Confront such conduct so that those bullied do not retreat into shame, self-doubt or self-blame.
3. Skill and support employees and management to effectively identify and address bullying behaviour.
4. Take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that people are not victimised for whistle-blowing on bullying.

People who bully often go to great lengths to keep their victims quiet, using threats, either direct or veiled. What they fear most is exposure and being called publicly to account for their behaviour and its consequences. Bullies will use intimidation to get their way.

Listed below are the three major types of bullying and some of their characteristics:

1. Chronic bullies
2. Opportunistic bullies
3. Blind-Spot bullies

Types of Bullying

Chronic Bullies

Justification: "I can't help it. It's just who I am. If you don't like it, then leave."

Behaviour:

- Will dominate people in most encounters at work and away from work.
- Will claim it's their personality.
- Competitive in all aspects of human interaction.
- Are used to getting their way in every situation in which dominance is exerted.
- Targets submit or retreat and the bully continues to dominate.
- This pattern becomes a self-reinforcing cycle.
- In companies that promotes strong competition amongst individuals; chronic bullies are over-represented and may be seen as leaders.

Opportunistic Bullies

Justification: "Play the game in order to get to the top"

Behaviour:

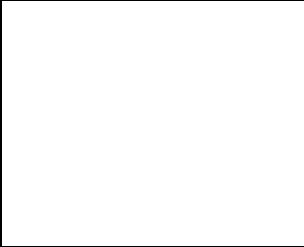
- Good at reading cues from the workplace.
- Whilst organisation preaches co-operation and teamwork, bully understands what is actually rewarded.
- Can be competitive if that's what is required.
- Away from work are able to suspend their competitive nature.
- Capable of being charming and supportive and likely to be involved in 'good works'.
- Well-connected in chain of command. Presents caring, supportive and successful side to those higher up.
- Targets have difficulty in getting their case heard, as supporters believe person can do no wrong.
- Behaviour is fostered by reinforcement. As the behaviour is opportunistic, call to account may stop mistreatment continuing.

Blind-Spot Bullies

Justification: "But I'm just trying to help." "It's just the way I am." "I can't seem to get good employees around here."

Behaviour:

- Others can see their shortcomings but they can't or won't.
- Can hurt or insult with inappropriate comments or personal affronts.
- Applies none of the subtleties of social interactions.
- May show a new employee a task, and then do it themselves because they lack patience to wait.
- When confronted, retreats or apologises, but doesn't change the unacceptable behaviour.
- Retreats to old patterns when stressed or frustrated.
- Readily shifts the responsibility for own shortfalls or behaviour onto others.



Strategies for Countering Workplace Bullying

Common pitfalls Do's and Don'ts

Recruitment and Selection:

- Prevention is better than cure. Avoid employing bullies in the first place. Whilst they present well and look good on paper, the cost to the organisation will be experienced in the longer term.

Induction, Training and Support:

- Ensure all new employees are properly inducted in professional conduct requirements and all relevant policies, and sign-off!
- Annual training for all employees, including all levels of management, in Diversity/EEO/Harassment/Bullying /Code of Conduct and Unacceptable Behaviour.

Leadership:

- Ensure that performance management is not restricted to achievement of outcomes. The behaviour demonstrated on the job is also evaluated.
- Demonstrate leadership. Don't wait to deal with matters until a complaint is made. *(Many managers wait for a written complaint before taking action. This type of management should not be mistaken for leadership.)*

Notification Processes:

- There are safe and secure systems for notifying matters that ensure the confidentiality of complainants.
- Provide appropriate support for those involved.
- Don't send the local EEO or OSH officer to confront the bully, as they are likely to be bullied or intimidated themselves. Managing these situations is a line responsibility.
- Allegations of bullying **must** be properly assessed. If the allegations have merit they should be investigated. Avoid Alternative Dispute Resolution processes such as conciliation or mediation to address the bullying behaviour itself. ADR isn't designed to change behaviour. ADR as first level interventions run the risk of compounding the problem! (ADR is useful for re-establishing the working relationship **after the bullying behaviour has been addressed, managed and has permanently ceased**).

Behaviour Management:

- When dealing with bullying, there is a tendency to manage the behaviour and motivations of the target in order to avoid dealing with the unacceptable behaviour of the bully.
- Be prepared to manage your way through defensiveness, denial, blaming, threats and hostility.
- Bullies like to control others, so expect that they will react badly when others try to manage their behaviour.
- State clearly what needs to change about their behaviour.
- Establish what you want from them; when you want it by; what resources you will provide to achieve it and the consequences of breaches. Because bullying is a serious matter, and likely to be repeated, document and formalise all interventions.
- Targets and others are likely to be victimised one way or another. Ensure protection is provided for these people.
- Provide proper follow up and monitoring, otherwise your efforts will be wasted and your actions will serve to reinforce the bullying behaviour.
- Use behavioural agreements or discipline processes where necessary and don't accept excuses from the bully for not upholding their side of the bargain.

The bully counts on you giving up!

- Most managers give up because the process of managing a bully becomes too difficult, too time consuming and too emotionally draining. Managers then unwittingly collude with the bully, justifying their actions by claiming the targets are over-sensitive and behaviour wasn't all that bad. Research shows that 70% of managers come out on the side of the bully.
- Chronic bullies in particular have energy for maintaining their behaviour over the long term. Managers need to be aware of this. Transferring them to another work area without modifying their behaviour only increases the number of potential targets. This is not duty of care.

Get tough before you get tired!

- Remember, bullying continues because it is enabled and reinforced. Apply behavioural principles and balance consequences and rewards.
- Get professional help. This is a very tricky area to deal with and experienced people can save a lot of time, money and grief.