

POWER AND CONTROL

How power and control is wielded in the workplace.

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Workplace Bullying – In a Nutshell.

The more we learn and understand about workplace bullying, the clearer it becomes that it is the deliberate repeated, hurtful verbal, physical, emotional, economic and spiritual mistreatment of workers. This definition also describes family violence and the way power and control is used by perpetrators who abuse family members.

Some facts about workplace bullying in Australia

'The South Australian Office of the Employee Ombudsman receives over 500 complaints each year on workplace bullying issues, and the figure is increasing.

The SA Working Women's Centre survey on bullying in 1997 found that over half the respondents had been bullied in the previous three months, and almost all of those said it was still continuing.

Griffith University's Dr. Paul McCarthy has estimated that 350,000 people are subjected to long term bullying in Australia, while 2.5 million experience some aspect of bullying over the course of their working lives. Workplace bullying may be costing Australian business up to \$3 billion annually.

Although bullying affects employees at all levels, most perpetrators are managers. A study by the University of Manchester found that 94% of people thought bullies can get away with it, 92% say bullying is caused by work, and one in six say that their employers 'encourage bullying management'.

The University of Manchester also found that bullying is associated with autocratic management styles, divisiveness and 'punishment for no obvious reason', and with a negative work climate, high workload and unsatisfactory relationships at work.

Over 85% of the SA Working Women's Centre survey respondents said that the bullying was carried out by a person in authority - manager, employer or supervisor. Over 80% added that others at work were also being bullied.

Eight out of ten people surveyed about bullying by Staffordshire University on behalf of a UK trade union said that it was their manager doing the bullying.¹

Let's take a closer look at how bullies operate.

Using Intimidation

- Shouting, or abusive language (including body language and gestures)
- Constant, intrusive surveillance or monitoring
- Interference with personal belongings or sabotage of work
- Plagiarism of ideas and poaching of contacts (taking credit where not due)
- Threatening job loss or removal of worker from current position
- Threatening to hurt worker's family

Using Emotional Abuse

- Putting the worker down
- Spreading rumours and talking derogatively about the worker
- Constant and unwarranted questioning of his integrity
- Making the worker cry or get angry

¹ ACTU National Health and Safety Campaign 16 to 27 October 2000

Using Isolation

- Not allowing the worker any say in how their job is to be done
- No recognition of effort put in by worker
- Controlling worker's decision-making powers
- Not allowing worker attend support or training programs including Union meetings
- Limiting outside involvement in activities of workers
- Structuring breaks so that worker's are not able to meet
- Ignoring the worker

Minimising, Denying and Blaming

- Workers feel there is an oppressive, unhappy work environment due to the bully's behaviour and the bully ignores it
- Making light of the abuse and not taking workers concerns seriously
- Saying the abuse did not happen
- Backlashing – naming the target as causing the bully stress and pain
- Offering mediation, which is not a suitable option for bullying (see paragraph on mediation)
- Offering to send the worker on a stress management course (implying it is the workers fault and lack of coping skills alone)
- Ignoring the worker's complaints or concerns

Using Others

- Behaving in a way that makes people afraid to speak up about conditions, behaviours, or health and safety issues
- Using jealousy and competition to divide workers
- Making offensive and disturbing comments about workers' private lives
- Spreading unfounded rumours about the worker
- Involving upline management staff in the process of continuing and reinforcing the bullying behaviour
- Colluding with other bullies in the workplace (at all levels)

Using Their Position in the Organisation

- Making unreasonable demands and setting impossible targets
- Instituting restrictive and petty work rules
- Compulsory overtime, unfair rostering or allocation of work
- Treating staff like servants, unimportant and unnecessary
- Autocratic decision-making

- Redefining roles and work responsibilities (new job descriptions, often ambiguous and short, fixed-term contracts)
- Supported by their line managers
- Disguising bullying as 'corporate identity', competitive nature of the working environment and economic rationalism
- Use clinical or personal supervision as a way to control the worker
- Use performance reviews to further victimise the worker

Using Economic (Resources and Information) Abuse

- Workers required to perform tasks without adequate training
- Open or implied threat of the sack, or demotion
- Work overload, due to staff doing the same work previously done by more people;
- Organisational restructuring in a way that does not benefit workers or clients/consumers
- Decreasing worker's income through restructuring positions
- Unfair dismissal
- Not allowing the worker information about their operational budget
- Not allowing the worker access to organisation information which impacts on their work and is necessary for the work to be undertaken

Using Coercion and Threats

- Forcing the worker to stay back to finish work or additional tasks
- Threatening job loss or demotion
- Threatening the worker with insubordination
- Making the worker do something they do not want to do

Physical Abuse

- Hitting, slapping
- Sexual advances and gender-specific put downs

NB: As evidence against physical abuse is stronger than emotional intimidation workplace bullies very seldom use physical abuse.

HOW BULLYING IS STRUCTURED IN THE WORKPLACE

'**Organisational bullying** is a combination of pressure bullying and corporate bullying, and occurs when an organisation struggles to adapt to changing markets, reduced income, cuts in budgets, imposed expectations, and other external pressures.

Corporate bullying is where the employer abuses employees with impunity knowing that the law is weak and jobs are scarce, eg:

- coercing employees to work 60/70/80 weeks on a regular basis then making life hell for (or dismissing) anyone who objects
- dismissing anyone who looks like having a stress breakdown as it's cheaper (in the UK) to pay the costs of unfair dismissal at Employment Tribunal (eg £50K maximum, but awards are usually paltry) than risk facing a personal injury claim for stress breakdown (eg £175K as in the John Walker case)
- introduces 'absence management' to deny employees annual or sick leave to which they are genuinely entitled
- regularly snoops and spies on employees, eg by listening in to telephone conversations, using the mystery shopper, contacting customers behind employees backs and asking leading questions, conducting covert video surveillance (perhaps by fellow employees), sending personnel officers or private investigators to an employee's home to interrogate the employees whilst on sick leave, threatening employees with interrogation the moment they return from sick leave, etc.
- deems any employee suffering from stress as weak and inadequate whilst aggressively ignoring and denying the *cause* of stress (usually bad management and bullying)
- "encourages" employees (with promises of promotion and/or threats of disciplinary action) to fabricate complaints about their colleagues
- employees are "encouraged" to give up full-time permanent positions in favour of short-term contracts; anyone who resists has their life made hell.²

'Results of union surveys on workplace bullying in Australia

As part of the ACTU National Health and Safety Campaign '**Being bossed around is bad for your health - the workplace is *no place for bullying***', some unions are surveying workers about bullying.

Early results from over 3,000 responses so far received by the ACTU, from a range of unions representing the health, education, finance, manufacturing, clerical and administration, in the public and private sectors, are presented below:

² **Those who can, do. Those who can't, bully.** Answers the question Why me? Why has the bully picked on me? **Bully OnLine**, web site of the UK National Workplace Bullying Advice Line.

- Over half the respondents (53%) report an unhappy and oppressive workplace and 54% say that that intimidating behaviour - shouting, ordering and belittling people happens in their workplaces. Almost a third report abusive language.
- Forty-four per cent say that people are afraid to speak up about those behaviours in their workplaces, or about working conditions and health and safety.
- Around a third report pressure of impossible targets and demands to perform tasks for which they have not been adequately trained.
- Twenty per cent have been threatened with the sack, 10% have experienced physically threatening behaviour, and 5% report being assaulted at work.
- Almost 70% report that either a manager or supervisor carries out the bullying behaviour and 14% say it is the employer. Less than 30% say that the bullying is carried out by fellow workers or by clients or customers.
- People are reporting a range of symptoms as a result of being bullied, including feeling stressed (73%); feeling angry (67%); feeling depressed (59%); sleep difficulties (48%); headaches, and feeling helpless (45%); feeling fearful (29%); and stomach problems (24%).
- Sixty per cent say that workplace bullying is affecting their home and social life, and 44% say that they have taken time off work due to the bullying. Most (39%) have taken sick leave, 8% have used recreation leave, 6% have taken leave without pay, but only 4% have received workers' compensation.
- Only 18% say that anything is being done to stop the bullying behaviour.³

Why Mediation Does Not Work

Mediation relies on the fact that participants take responsibility for the issue. Interpreted this means that the victim or target of the bully must accept some ownership and responsibility for the bullying. In fact, this process reinforces further abuse and victimisation and is not an acceptable way of eliminating bullying from the workplace.

³ ACTU National Health and Safety Campaign 16 to 27 October 2000

Why Stress Management Training Does Not Work

Often bully managers will insist that the target worker attend a stress management program. This reinforces that the problem is that of the worker and it is the workers lack of coping skills. This strategy allows the bully to continue their abuse and leads the target to believe that it is their lack of skills that is the problem. Attending stress management courses does not stop the bully from continuing their abuse.

SO, WHAT DO WE DO?

Read up on anti-workplace bullying literature. They all have some sound strategies that workers can use to eliminate bullying.

Put in policies and work practice guidelines that prevent bullying. Anti-discrimination policies are not adequate. The issue needs to centre on the issue of bullying and not get sabotaged by the belief that it is about something else.

Strategies for dealing with children who bully or are bullied do not work. Strategies for dealing with family violence are more appropriate when dealing with bullying.

Act. In all research gathered so far, the fear and immobilisation of workers to DO anything in stopping the abuse and the abuser/s allows the bullying to continue. In cases where workers have united and acted on anti-bullying in the workplace strategies, the situation has changed dramatically often ending with the removal of the perpetrator/s.

If workers health is at extreme risk the bully must be removed immediately as healing or post-trauma recovery is not possible with the perpetrator present.

The organisation as a whole must support anti-bullying in the workplace and agenda it as of extreme importance otherwise they are simply reinforcing and allowing the abuse to continue. We are all responsible at every level for taking care of each other and keeping the workplace safe.

Each time a person stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, they send forth a tiny ripple of hope.

And crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance...

Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential vital quality for those who seek to change a world that yields most painfully to change.

Robert F. Kennedy.