

Workplace Bullying

By Julie Crosland

The term “bullying” is not an accurate one to describe what can occur in the workplace. Not all unpleasant behaviours or experiences in the workplace can be termed as bullying. There are important distinctions between workplace bullying and harassment. Harassment often involves a physical component such as unwanted contact, intrusiveness into personal space or linked to sex, race, prejudice and discrimination. Harassment can be a single incident or many incidents but the person who is being harassed usually knows straight away they are being harassed.

When we think of bullying it generally conjures up images of overt behaviours such as shouting, swearing, intimidation and threats. It is, however, much more subtle, covert and almost exclusively psychological. It is insidious and is calculated to gain control of and psychologically harm the person or people targeted. Bullying can be frequently misunderstood and fails to be recognised as bullying.

Workplace bullying is characterised by a pattern of repeated, seemingly trivial behaviours that are intended to undermine a colleague’s work and reputation. Because the behaviours are subtle and covert, it often takes some time before the individual identifies what is happening. By then, they have begun to feel intimidated, isolated, degraded and humiliated. The target person is less subjected to a single incident but an ongoing pattern of small, seemingly insignificant incidents. This is why the behaviour tends to be minimised, particularly in the beginning. These isolated incidents added together, however, create a serious problem.

Workplace bullying is damaging to the target person’s health. The person being bullied may experience sleep disorders, difficulties in personal relationships, depression, heart and blood pressure problems and self esteem will usually be significantly affected. This then begins to be a cost to the organisation in terms time off for stress leave, loss of productivity and retention and recruitment problems. Usually, the targeted person ends up leaving and the bully remains and a new target is selected.

How to recognise bullying:

The following definition used by the Workplace Bullying Trauma Institute (2002) states that the “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 one-on-one 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.”

If bullying does occur:

Employers have a responsibility under the Health and Safety Employment Act 1992 to ensure that employees are protected from the effects of bullying behaviour. Employees also have a responsibility to notify their employer if they believe they are being subjected to bullying behaviour. The employee should document all incidents and bring them to the attention of their manager. The employee should seek help from colleagues, family, their union, and their health and safety representative. A complaint in writing to the employer, stating what is happening and what is required to make it stop, places the onus on the management to investigate the matter. Mediation may be useful to assisting both parties to determine whether bullying is occurring or there is another problem. (However, the problem should not be minimised as a ‘personality conflict’).

The workplace bully needs to be help to change his or her behaviour. Most will not recognise they engage in this behaviour. The pattern of behaviour has developed over a long period, usually from childhood, and a fundamental shift in behavioural patterns, values and beliefs is required. This will not happen in the short term and will require commitment from the perpetrator to have many months of counselling, training, monitoring and mentoring.

Source Material

Needham, A. (2003). Workplace Bullying: The Costly Business Secret. Auckland: Penguin Books.

Olsen, H. & Needham, A. (June 2003). Turning the Spotlight on Workplace Bullies. Employment Today