

[WORKPLACE WELL-BEING: DION KLEIN]

No place for office bullies

STANDOVER TACTICS

Bullying behaviour includes:

- verbal abuse
- excluding or isolating employees
- setting unreasonable demands
- assigning meaningless tasks unrelated to the job
- giving employees impossible assignments
- deliberately changing work rosters to inconvenience particular employees
- withholding resources necessary for effective work performance
- distorted or fabricated allegations of underperformance

Bullying at work

It's costly, damaging and unacceptable in any organisation – here's how to recognise and deal with bullying in the workplace

WERE you one of those children on the playground that got bullied or beaten up? Maybe you were geeky-looking or wore glasses at a young age and were called names (for example, "four eyes")? Children can be cruel but they don't know any different.

In the formative years we attribute the mean antics to the process of growing up. The sad part is that bullying, which traditionally has been in the playground, has moved to the grown-up "playground" known as the workplace. These bullies are still acting like children and are doing just as much psychological damage as they did in the playground of yesterday.

In *Workplace Bullying: An Employer's Guide*, published by the Queensland government, workplace bullying is defined as "the repeated less favourable treatment of a person by another or others in the workplace, which may be considered unreasonable and inappropriate workplace practice".

Examples of bullying behaviour include verbal abuse, excluding or isolating employees, setting unreasonable demands, assigning meaningless tasks unrelated to the job, giving employees impossible assignments, deliberately changing work rosters to inconvenience particular employees, or withholding resources that are vital for effective work performance. In the workplace, bullying usually focuses on distorted or fabricated allegations of underperformance (Field, 1996).

An industry watchdog recently reported that the number of incidents of workplace bullying had risen about 140 per cent in two years. The Workplace Bullying Project Team, Griffith University (2001), calculated that workplace bullying costs Australian employers \$6-\$13 billion dollars every year when hidden and lost opportunity costs are considered.

Aside from the costs to the organisation, the victim suffers great psychological and physical damage that can last long after the bullying has stopped. The Australian Council of Trade Unions (1999) campaign showed that 73 per cent of respondents felt stress as a result of the bullying, 67 per cent felt angry, 60 per cent said it affected their home and social life, 59 per cent felt depressed, while 48 per cent had sleep difficulties.

In one case, verbal attacks on individual staff that were inappropriate, intimidating and appeared to be quite unjustified, led to some staff experiencing considerable difficulties in simply conducting their duties. Due to the occurrence, at least one third were currently and actively seeking employment elsewhere.

Though supervisors, managers, and people in "power" positions are most often the people doing the bullying of employees, there are cases in which employees have bullied the supervisor, as well as peer-to-peer bullying.

In New Zealand, a general manager who complained of relentless bullying by a worker won NZ\$40,000 in damages. Research conducted by the Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute indicated that half of all bullies were women, with the primary



targets of bullies also being women. Women bullies target women 84 per cent of the time while men target women 69 per cent of the time.

The organisation's culture can add to the occurrences of bullying in the workplace. Poor people-management practices and skills among managers, as well as pressures of restructuring and downsizing, are other reasons why bullying may occur at work.

Bullying at work is an occupational health and safety issue. Under OHS law, workers have the right to a safe and healthy working environment, and employers have a legal duty to protect the health and safety of workers, including from bullying.

Therefore, employers must take reasonable steps to prevent harassment and bullying in the workplace. This includes establishing codes of conduct, developing policies and grievance procedures, and identifying a contact person in the organisation to provide advice, support and assistance to a worker.

When developing and implementing a plan to minimise workplace bullying, it should be done in consultation with management and non-management staff.

If you feel that you are being bullied, the first thing to do is to seek advice from a contact or grievance officer, OHS representative, human resource officer or union official. Keep a detailed record of what has happened.

Check to see if there is a workplace bullying policy which may state the organisation's grievance procedures. There may also be counselling services available at the workplace that you could use to discuss the issue. You should also let the bully know that his/her behaviour is unwanted and unacceptable and that you won't tolerate it.

Though there are guidelines and laws to protect people from harassment and discrimination, employees should treat each other and work together in a civil and professional way. It is the right thing to do.

As the Canada Safety Council points out, "There is no place for bullies in a well-run organisation."

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RESOURCES ON WORKPLACE BULLYING

Australian Industrial Relations Commission
<http://www.airc.gov.au/>

Australian Council of Trade Unions
<http://www.actu.asn.au>

Beyond Bullying Association
<http://cwpp.siq.qld.gov.au/BBA/>

Bullies Down Under
<http://www.bulliesdownunder.com/>

Bully Online
<http://www.bullyonline.org/>

Canada Safety Council
<http://www.safety-council.org/info/OSH/bullies.html>

Human Rights Office
<http://www.hro.acl.gov.au>

Queensland Government Workplace Bullying Taskforce
<http://www.whs.qld.gov.au/taskforces/bullying/>

Workplace Bullying
<http://www.workplacebullying.com>

The Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute
<http://www.bullyinginstitute.org>

Workplace Bullying, Stress, Employment Law and You
<http://www.workplacebullying.co.uk/>

Workplace OHS
<http://www.workplaceohs.com.au>

WorkSafe – Consumer and Employment Protection (WA)
<http://www.safetyline.wa.gov.au>