

# Initiatives to manage bullying

Jean Crispin offers a shortened version of her talk at the 2009 Health and Wellbeing Conference

What I would like to offer you here is a series of practical steps to address bullying in the workplace. Bullying will never be eradicated as long as you have groups of people working together, but it can be recognised, understood, and robust measures put in place that will gradually reduce the problem.

## Why tackle bullying?

I have worked directly with probably hundreds of cases that involve bullying and seen the damage it can do. However, bullying is an emotive subject, and organisations may fear that highlighting the problem and attempting intervention, runs the risk of making matters worse. The challenge for those who are committed to addressing the problem is to make a compelling case to the top of the organisation, to convince senior management that it is worth putting resources into tackling bullying. You are asking your organisation to embark upon a systemic change process, and to do that, you need to create a sense of urgency that action is needed, and a vision of where the organisation needs to be. If you are to gain support for action, you will almost certainly need to make a business case, which could include arguments from financial, moral and legal standpoints.

Many successful organisations make an ethical approach to doing business part of their brand. It is about building trust and loyalty, both internally with staff, and externally with customers and business partners. Respectful 'win-win' relationships at every level are key to this approach. In organisations where bullying is tolerated, the fear and aggression generated by a bullying culture leak out to customers and service users, destroying customer satisfaction and damaging reputations.

Research suggests that bullying contributes to the loss of 18 million working days each year in sickness absence, or £26 billion in lost revenue. This is a huge cost, not just in money but in human misery, that touches not only the employee but also has a ripple effect on colleagues, family and friends. Bullying does not just affect those directly involved, but also those who witness it or come to hear about it. The effect is to make the working environment feel unsafe. This increases fear and defensive behaviour, diverting attention from work, making a direct impact on an organisation's productivity and success.



From the legal standpoint, compliance with health and safety legislation demands that companies and organisations take steps to protect their workforce against work-related stress, including that caused by bullying.

The following steps draw from Kotter's<sup>1</sup> eight-stage organisational change process.

## Step one – how to start

First of all, gather together a group of people who will maintain a focus on the issue of bullying over an extended period. The composition of this group will vary depending on the size and type of organisation, but must include a senior champion, plus those who have both the interest and knowledge to contribute: counsellors, occupational health, health and safety, unions etc. This group needs to have the remit to meet at an agreed frequency, and have the power to recommend or commission action.

## Step two – assessment

The first task of this group will be to assess the organisation's starting point. Is the issue being ignored currently? If not, what is in place and what are the shortfalls in what is being done? What attitudes to bullying are prevalent – is it understood? How much training do managers

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have in dealing with this issue and in people management generally? Other indicators will be statistical evidence such as sickness absence data, turnover, staff satisfaction surveys, exit questionnaires, formal and informal complaints and inquiries. How do your organisation's statistics compare with similar companies or institutions? Qualitative evidence is also useful. Listen to the views and experiences of personnel managers, counsellors, unions, occupational health and third parties such as customers and service users.

Detailed information may reveal patterns to the bullying. Are there issues of gender, age, sexuality, race or culture that can be specifically targeted by training and management intervention?

Professor Charlotte Rayner's<sup>2</sup> recent research at the University of Portsmouth on workplace bullying suggests four categories of organisation:

- The 'oblivious' organisation is characterised by ignorance or denial of the problem, and because nothing is in place to record or measure, instances may go unrecognised. There may be a few cases that get to the level of employment tribunal, and other organisational problems are likely such as high turnover of staff.
- The 'fragmented' organisation has some policies and supports in place but implementation is patchy and staff may not be fully aware of them. There will probably be a significant gap between stated policy and implementation.
- Some organisations may be 'near', where there is an awareness of shortcomings, and sustained efforts being put in place to address them.
- The 'strategic' organisation is the aim. There is good knowledge and awareness of the level and scope of the problem. Most instances of bullying get dealt with at the most informal level, with very few, if any, progressing to formal proceedings because the systems are in place to encourage people to come forward earlier and are effective in dealing with the matter.

### Culture and context

What are the particular conditions in the culture and context of your organisation, which could potentially foster bullying? An example of this might be found in the police service, where officers need to be able to use and channel aggression in the pursuit of their normal duties. Managing the boundaries of power and its use can be problematic and potentially lead to a bullying dynamic when it goes wrong. This can manifest in all kinds of ways from poor treatment of junior recruits to disrespectful, even gratuitously violent, interactions with the general public. A psychological perspective on these types of problem would suggest that unconscious conflicts and anxieties may underpin poor behaviour<sup>3</sup>. Understanding and articulating the psychological reasons for behaviour does not absolve the individual from responsibility for their actions but it can help the organisation prepare people for the predictable pressures they will face.

### Types of bullying behaviour

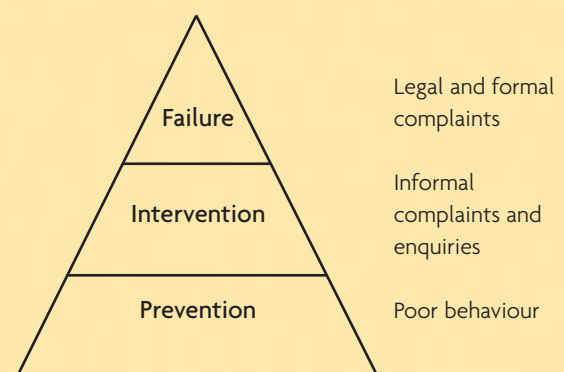
We cannot assume that all bullying behaviour is deliberate and vindictive, although much of the literature on bullying would seem to imply that it is. Damian Stoupe<sup>4</sup> suggests that the language of victim and persecutor tends to demonise the bully. The emotive language makes people defensive. Who would want to consider the impact of their behaviour on others, if admitting to bullying behaviour makes you an evil person? Much poor behaviour in the workplace arises from thoughtlessness and lack of skill, some from competitiveness, the 'career bully', and a much smaller proportion from the 'psychopath in a business suit' who subtly and deliberately sets out to psychologically destroy their chosen victim. If we want to encourage early resolution of bullying problems, we need to make it easy to listen.

### Step three – establishing the information/analysis/intervention cycle

Data collection and analysis will need to be an ongoing process. Observation in itself may influence the organisation in any number of unpredictable ways. People may be more ready to report problems, and therefore it may appear that bullying is on the increase. It may drive it further underground. It may be an educative process that in itself makes people more aware and improves behaviour.

Having collected the data, and begun an initial analysis, a first cycle of action can begin. This could be, for example, an awareness campaign, or some training specifically targeted to address identified problems. There will then be a further round of data collection to monitor change, and the group can then decide what the next actions should be and where they should be targeted.

The diagram below is helpful in identifying positive shifts in the types of problem that occur.



The aim will be to catch problems early so as to have the best chance of success. By the time a complaint has become formal, many opportunities for intervention will have been lost. By this time, the people involved will have become so damaged or disaffected that the situation will almost certainly be beyond recovery and

this represents a failure by the organisation. When someone makes an informal complaint or enquiry, the situation may already have been going on for some time, but it does provide an opportunity to intervene and resolution may still be possible. Best of all are interventions that discourage poor behaviour or improve the management of minor incidents. Problems are caught early before they have a chance to escalate, and it is intervention at this level which is most likely to influence the atmosphere of an organisation, and ultimately its culture. Professor Charlotte Rayner makes the comparison with health and safety compliance. Those organisations that are careful about minor day-to-day observance of health and safety practice will have fewer major incidents and fatalities.

### Step four – getting the message across

The group directing the change process must be able to communicate its vision throughout the organisation. If the organisation has internal PR specialists, it is helpful to include them in the group. Even if there are regular reports about the work of the group, how many members of staff diligently read the company newspaper or listen to the latest speech? In order for the anti-bullying message to percolate through the organisation, every possible opportunity needs to be taken to repeat and reinforce the ongoing work and the vision of change. The quantity of information flowing through any organisation means that inevitably only a certain percentage will be absorbed. The message must be simple, repeated often, and in as many different ways as possible.

At some point in the process, others outside the group leading change need to be engaged and involved. When others are genuinely on board and acting in a way that reinforces the desired change, action will start to happen on the ground. If staff genuinely understand what is being attempted and are in sympathy with it, the change process acquires energy and power. Organisational values and the reasons for change need to be constantly reinforced.

### Step five – policies and systems

At this stage, the group can assess the organisation's policies, systems and processes. Too often, organisational change starts with a policy which is then not understood, communicated or implemented effectively. When some groundwork has been done, changing policies to fit the new vision, and adapting personnel and administrative systems, clears the way for change that has already begun.

Some key issues that policies and procedures need to cover include:

- An unambiguous statement of intention to create an environment of interpersonal respect.
- Shared responsibility for maintaining a culture of respect. Witnesses to bullying are able to make a

complaint so the onus is not always and invariably on the recipient of behaviour.

- Clear distinction between formal and informal complaints procedures.
- Adequate training and support structures for those who are tasked with informal resolution.
- Independent investigation of formal complaints with trained investigators who have full access to all relevant evidence and records. The important principle is that investigators need to be viewed as independent and credible by all the parties involved.
- Follow-up monitoring after a complaint to guard against the possibility of subsequent victimisation.

What support systems are in place to encourage early reporting? How can they be made accessible and regularly publicised? Who is responsible for keeping records, and how many different ways can you find of capturing the information you need?

### Step six – reinforcement

A few highly visible and early successes offer a powerful reinforcement of change. If management are backing an anti-bullying initiative, they need to feel that it is genuinely worthwhile. If senior management falters in its support, then others will quickly detect this and the process will stall. In addition, there will always be cynics who resist and undermine change. Some early success makes that harder. It is also an essential morale booster for the group driving the process forward, helping it maintain energy and motivation.

The focus on bullying needs to carry on over an extended period. Some figures can only be collected annually, so an absolute minimum of two years is necessary. How do you know when to stop? It is almost certainly not at the first signs of improvement because it is so easy for old patterns to reassert themselves. Only when the changes are embedded in the system can cultural shifts survive changes in personnel, or old attitudes resurfacing when attention is not being directed at the problem.

What I am advocating is a sustained period of focus on anti-bullying, based on a sound understanding of the characteristics of your own organisation. It requires a powerful champion, excellent communication and a programme of varied interventions needing time and money. The end result is a successful workplace where everyone has freedom to flourish. ■

### References

- 1 Kotter JP. Leading change. Harvard Business School Press; 1996.
- 2 <http://www.port.ac.uk/research/workplacebullying>
- 3 Bonifacio P. The psychological effects of police work – a psychodynamic approach. Plenum Press; 1991.
- 4 Stoupe D. Workplace bullying. *Counselling at Work*. Spring 2009; 30-33.