



Bullying In The Boardroom

Nearly everyone will encounter bullying at some stage of their lives. It usually begins in the schoolyard and it is expected that as we mature, the bullying will stop – but does it?

Schoolyard bullying – the torment of one child by another – is often carried through to the workplace. It represents a grab for control by an insecure, inadequate person in an attempt to exercise power through the humiliation of the target.

Amanda* had worked for the same company for over 10 years and she was happy in a job she loved. But after a sudden re-structure, things started to go horribly wrong and Amanda became the object of victimisation and workplace bullying.

For 12 months the bully continued and shattered Amanda's life. She became stressed, depressed and started having panic attacks. She was simply too scared to go into work. And she has no idea why she became the target of her boss' torment.

"It was a terrible time. I'd worked really hard for years and was happy in my job. I'd won awards for my work and had been involved in developing many successful ventures. Then after several changes of staff, the nightmare began," says 34-year-old Amanda

"I was yelled at, undermined and had work confiscated by the head of the company. I would attend meetings only to be ignored and put down if I made a suggestion."

Sound familiar?

According to Paul McCarthy co-author of 'Bullying: From Backyard to Boardroom' (Federation Press) and member of the Bullying Research Team, Griffith University, Queensland, Amanda isn't alone.

Although there are no official national figures on the incidence of workplace bullying, based on proportionate statistics gathered in the UK, it is estimated that one in four Australians are being bullied.

"The best international research shows between 25 and 50 per cent of employees will experience bullying at some time in their working lives. In some occupations the figure is up to 95 per cent," says McCarthy.

Bullying is one of the major factors behind

workplace stress complaints. In 2002, in Victoria alone, nearly 1,100 WorkCover claims arose out of either harassment at work or exposure to workplace violence. And even though the number of complaints has risen in the past three years, the Bullying Research Team believes workplace bullying is still under-reported.

"This may be due to victims' fears of being labelled troublemakers, being accused of lying, making the workplace harassment worse or losing their jobs," said McCarthy.

What is bullying?

According to the Beyond Bullying Association 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."

Apart from physical violence it is behaviour that is offensive, intimidating, humiliating, or that degrades, ridicules or insults the person at work. It includes yelling or screaming abuse and insults, belittling opinions or constant criticism, undermining work performance, increasing demands, impossible deadlines, isolation from normal work interaction, unexplained job changes or being assigned meaningless tasks.

Bullying occurs across all sectors of the work force but it has been found that the most likely targets are young people, women, casual or temporary workers, contractors and trainees. And the most common fields are education, health services and public administration.

Giovinnella Gonthier, author of 'Rude Awakenings: Overcoming the Civility Crisis in the Workplace' (Dearborn Trade Publishing) says that most bullies exhibit similar behaviour.

"Bullies are weak, mean-spirited people who display hurtful and destructive behaviour. They thrive on bullying those who are vulnerable in some way or those they feel professionally or personally threatened by. Many bullies become managers because of the position of power, and as such no one is likely to check up on their behaviour. They generally have no interest in conforming to acceptable behaviour in society and often think they are a law unto themselves," says Gonthier.

"Bullies derive pleasure from inflicting psychological damage on the victim but what they often don't realise, until it's too late, is that they can actually be doing severe damage to themselves."

The Cost

The financial implications on Australian companies due to absenteeism, paid sick leave, staff turnover, redundancy, staff training and legal and compensation costs arising from complaints and grievances is staggering.

"A recent impact and cost assessment calculated that workplace bullying costs Australian employers between six and 13 billion dollars every year," says McCarthy.

And the psychological affect on the victim can be just as crippling. It is not uncommon for people to turn to drugs or alcohol and some are never able to work again.

"I am normally a strong person," says Amanda, "but the whole experience nearly destroyed me. I was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and clinical depression.

"I could barely leave the house and my relationship with my husband was in ruins. I had started drinking more than usual as a way of trying to drown out the misery of my day at work.

"Sometimes I even thought about suicide. I officially complained about the bullying but nothing was done so in the end I had no option but to leave my job. Looking back I can't believe that one man had the power to nearly destroy my life. It will never happen to me again."

Amanda is lucky. Through extensive psychiatric counselling she has regained most of her confidence and her panic attacks have stopped.

What are your rights?

As bullying is such a grey area most employees are unaware of their rights. They often believe that they just have to "put up with it", but they don't.

Under occupational health and safety law, an employer has an obligation to protect employees from acts of violence, both physical and psychological. A complaint can be lodged with the health and safety representative at work or with a health and safety inspector in your area.

If you are unable to work due to stress you can file a claim with WorkCover. You should be aware that the process can be lengthy and as bullying can often

be difficult to prove, not all claims are accepted.

Despite legislation in all States outlawing bullying, some employers are still unaware of their legal responsibilities. Many companies are, however, seeking advice on how to deal with bullying and actively implementing anti-bullying strategies.

Kerry Fallon Horgan, Managing Partner of 'Flexibility at Work', a national Sydney-based Diversity Management Consultancy, advises employers on how to effectively address the issue of workplace bullying.

"The founda-

tions of a high performing workplace include trust, respect, empowerment and feeling both physically and emotionally safe. These fundamental building blocks are shattered by bullying behaviour that can occur at any level in the organisation," says Fallon Horgan.

"Addressing bullying requires both individual and strategic workplace culture change. Strategies we recommend include the implementation of guidelines such as visible senior management commitment to zero tolerance for workplace bullying, training in dealing with workplace bullying that should start at the top of the organisation, undertaking regular workplace audits to determine the types and extent of bullying, protection for people who complain about bullying and following up all complaints."

Unfortunately for Amanda, even though her organisation did have an anti-bullying policy, it made no allowance for the bullying being committed by the head of the company.

"I was accused of not following the correct proce-

dures when it came to the bullying guidelines but where did I have to go? The last point of contact was the head of the company," says Amanda.

However, many employers are now taking workplace bullying seriously as they realise the devastating affect it can have, not only on the victim, but also the business' bottom line. And if all companies take Horgan's advice and have a zero tolerance policy against bullying, the happier and more productive the workplace will be for everyone.

And as Amanda says, "no-one should have to put up with being bullied – ever."

What can you do?

If you are being bullied the following steps may help.

- Keep a diary. Make sure you keep detailed records of all bullying incidents, dates, times and witnesses. To prove you are being bullied you will need as much evidence as possible.
- Report the bullying to management or an appropriate member of staff. Keep a copy of all correspondence you send.
- Seek medical advice. If your health is suffering see your doctor regularly. You may need this as later evidence.
- If you are unable to work due to stress, seek advice from WorkCover or an employment law specialist to discuss your rights.
- If you are forced to resign as a result of workplace bullying you may be entitled to make a claim for unfair dismissal. Make sure you state your reasons for resigning.

Helping Hands

If you are the victim of workplace bullying there is help available. The following organisations offer confidential advice.

Australian Industrial Relations Commission

Phone: 03 8661 7777

www.airc.gov.au

Working Women's Centre

www.wwc.org.au

Bully Online

www.bullyonline.org

Bullies Down Under

www.bulliesdownunder.com

Safety First

To ensure the workplace is a safe environment, employers should take the following steps.

- Encourage workers to report the bullying or bully
- Display a written policy on workplace bullying
- Make it clear bullying will not be tolerated
- Ensure prompt action is taken when bullying occurs
- Appoint a contact person to deal with bullying complaints
- Provide access to counselling and/or rehabilitation for the victim

Seek advice from Flexibility at Work

Phone: 02 9402 4741

www.flexibility.com.au

*Name has been changed

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