



## Centre for Labour, Employment and Work

### A window into bullying

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*With workplace bullying inquiries increasing along with the number of reports and findings, is it 'PC gone mad' or a reckoning for organisations that have turned a blind eye to such behaviour for far too long, asks Victoria University of Wellington's Dr Geoff Plimmer.*

The number of recent inquiries into workplace bullying spans Parliament, sporting codes such as hockey, football, rowing and cycling, the legal profession and government. Together they provide a good window into the dynamics and impacts of bullying and harassment within organisations.

The findings point to a broad range of behaviours that if repeated over time meet technical definitions of bullying. To protect privacy and dignity, the reports are sometimes opaque about 'what happened', but some themes do emerge that are consistent with the international literature. The most common types of bullying seem to be verbal abuse, belittling, humiliation, ignoring opinions and views, and excessive, unwarranted criticism and monitoring of work. Sexually suggestive comments or jokes are also mentioned in some of the reports.

Report findings from these inquiries are consistent with research that bullying is often devastating for affected individuals. In fact, many studies have found that even minor acts of incivility can be harmful not just to individuals but to the wider organisation in terms of the loss of good staff, lost trust, and absenteeism.

Incivility includes excluding people from discussions or cutting people off when they are speaking, and is often done insidiously with minor, easy to deny but potent behaviours. It is the new, covert way to discriminate — seeing as more overt ways are now illegal.

Just as people who are harmed by bullying have trouble speaking up, organisations have trouble dealing with this behaviour when it is reported. For small organisations such as sporting codes, where physical proximity and personal ties are common, dealing with bullying behaviour is particularly difficult.

What the stream of reports and media coverage show is that organisations that try and sweep these issues under the carpet are running much bigger reputational risks than in the past — a point organisations appear to be getting the message about.

But there is still plenty of room for improvement. For instance, the State Services Commission could publish the information it purportedly collects as part of its human resource capability survey.

Human Resources (HR) is often compromised, as people gossip and confidentiality seems hard to keep, and HR is at times seen as more interested in protecting managers than protecting integrity and conduct. In fact, HR professionals do not come out of the various reports well. Investigations can take too long or be completed too quickly and therefore not provide people with time to process their options. Line managers also understandably struggle greatly in dealing with such issues that carry so many organisational, psychological and legal risks.

The mistake employers sometimes make in these situations is to assume a formal complaint is needed before they can act to help ensure a healthy and safe workplace. But the reality is that employers can choose to act proactively by reminding people of standards and processes, for example. Complainants should also have choices and be informed of their options, have multiple channels of reporting, and have both formal and informal resolution options to avoid issues escalating too quickly.

Reports on workplace bullying and harassment also seem to indicate wider issues, such as sham selection procedures, poor performance management, and top-heavy, conflict-prone organisations. In most cases, managers were not up to the job of preventing, let alone dealing with, bullying when it did happen.

Based on the many reports' findings, it is hard not to conclude that bullying can happen to anyone. There is some research that people who have low self-esteem and experience more negative moods and feelings of hostility are more likely to be bullied. But so are high performers.

The reports do not tell us much about bullies, but research suggests narcissism, vengefulness and anxiety are more common amongst bullies than others. Like their targets, they sometimes have lower self-esteem, but competitive, hierarchical and demanding workplaces seem to be bigger factors. Although some people might be more predisposed towards bullying behaviour, the combination of environment and conflict escalation appear to be stronger explanations than personality traits.

Unfortunately, accusations of bullying are often made too lightly, so the rights of respondents (alleged perpetrators) need to be carefully managed as well. Bullies often claim to have been bullied themselves. No intellectually honest discussion of workplace bullying can take place without also acknowledging that bullying allegations are sometimes made as a tactical manoeuvre by those about to be accused of bullying, or attempting to deflect from legitimate performance problems.

The paradox is that many bullying allegations are not upheld yet many serious cases of bullying go unreported — due to the trauma of being bullied and also of exposing the behaviour. Other reasons for this anomaly include investigations not being sufficiently impartial, technical definitions of bullying not being met even if hurt is caused, and the mishandling of performance problems. There are also reports of accusations that are patently false.

So is it PC gone mad? The evidence in the reports says not. Instead it details destructive behaviours by managers not up to their job and weak accountability for these often highly paid people. Are all allegations of bullying legitimate? Also definitely not.

*NOTE this article from CLEW associate Dr Geoff Plimmer was first published in Newsroom on 12 February.*