

Effective Prevention of Public Sector Workplace Bullying: Are we there yet?

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High levels of workplace bullying in the New Zealand public sector have the potential to severely impact the individuals and organisations who are tasked with delivering core government services to millions of New Zealanders. Is enough being done to effectively prevent and manage this destructive workplace phenomenon?

The findings of a Victoria University Masters research project indicate that whilst departments generally have adequate policies in place, there are further steps that should be taken to provide our public sector workers with a safe work environment free from bullying and harassment.

Bullying defined

A good definition of workplace bullying should emphasise the presence of negative or unwanted behaviours, that occur frequently, and over a period of time (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). The elements of power imbalance and intent are contentious, and it is recommended that they are excluded from definitions. WorkSafe NZ's definition of bullying as *'repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety'*, is sufficient for New Zealand organisations, and provides a degree of consistency important for monitoring trends and making inter-organisational comparisons (Worksafe NZ, 2014).

An environment conducive to high levels of bullying?

Public sector organisations seem prone to workplace bullying, and are likely to encounter additional challenges in effectively dealing with bullying (Bradbury & Hutchinson, 2015; Omari, 2006). Elevated levels of bullying may be explained by the high levels of organisational change, media scrutiny, political interference, shifting performance expectations, and vague, disputed, and conflicting goals experienced in the public sector (Caverley, 2005; Omari, 2006). Accordingly, high levels of workplace bullying have been reported within the wider New Zealand public sector (see NZ State Services Commission, 2014; Plimmer et al., 2013; Plimmer & Cantal, 2016).

Potential for severe harm

Workplace bullying has the potential to cause significant harm to individuals and organisations. Individual consequences include heightened anger and anxiety; poor concentration; feelings of isolation and sadness; low self-confidence; high stress levels; increased work errors and lost time; and lower performance, commitment and job satisfaction (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011; Cooper-

Thomas et al., 2013). These factors can result in increased organisational costs associated with higher absenteeism, recruitment and compensation for unjustified dismissals (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011). An organisation's culture and reputation may also suffer, as a climate of low morale, ineffective teams and poor interpersonal relationships takes hold (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011).

A framework for effective intervention

The Public Health Model outlines primary, secondary, and tertiary anti-bullying intervention opportunities, and is useful for structuring organisational responses to workplace bullying. *Primary interventions* are focused on preventing the occurrence of workplace bullying and include the development of policies, training programs, and the identification of potential bullying antecedents (M. Vartia & Leka, 2011).

Secondary interventions are designed to slow, reduce or reverse the progression of bullying behaviour, prevent its recurrence, and provide individuals with effective coping resources. These could include complaint investigation procedures and the use of conflict resolution strategies such as mediation (M. Vartia & Leka, 2011).

Tertiary interventions aim to reduce the negative impacts of bullying, and restore worker health and wellbeing. Specific strategies include counselling, group recovery programs and other forms of redress (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001).

Effective primary level prevention initiatives should be prioritised, although, as bullying is unlikely to ever be eliminated, effective secondary and tertiary interventions are necessary (Blackwood, 2015).

Selected research findings

Given the severe consequences of workplace bullying, it is important for organisations to have strong preventative and management initiatives in place. The following selected research findings provide insights into current workplace anti-bullying initiatives within the core New Zealand Public Service, and should be viewed as opportunities to enhance public sector responses to dealing with a complex and destructive workplace phenomenon.

1. Few bullying complaints are upheld, and are generally viewed as performance management, relationship or behavioural issues

Data obtained from a sample of twelve Public Service departments revealed that of the 155 formal bullying complaints received between 2010 and 2016, 111 complaints (72%) were found to be unsubstantiated. Furthermore, Human Resource Practitioners perceived most allegations of workplace bullying to be unsubstantiated, generally viewing them as performance management, relationship or behavioural issues.

2. Other than the development of anti-bullying policies, primary-level anti-bullying interventions are generally limited

Whilst all organisations involved in the study held organisational anti-bullying policies, and these did generally follow best practice, there was little emphasis on perpetrator consequences, and policies generally focused on secondary interventions to manage complaints of workplace bullying, rather than discussing practical preventative measures.

Furthermore, other than the development of policies, organisations generally appeared to take few steps to proactively prevent workplace bullying. This is concerning as the development of a policy in isolation is generally inadequate to effectively prevent workplace bullying.

3. Weak management as a driver of bullying complaints

Significantly, all participants involved in the study discussed poor managerial skill as a key driver of bullying complaints, especially where performance management is concerned. Managers' failure to effectively deal with performance issues in a timely manner seems to allow the escalation of minor conflict to the level of bullying, and inconsistent performance expectations across managers seems to result in either real or perceived injustices, prompting complaints of bullying.

4. Unions as key players in the prevention and management workplace bullying

Organisational anti-bullying policies rarely reference trade unions, however, in practice, unions seem to play several important roles in effectively dealing with public sector workplace bullying. Unions act as intermediaries between management and complainants; are a source of information and support for complainants; and provide a 'toolbox' of innovative and practical ideas to help prevent and manage bullying.

5. Mediation as a preferred secondary and tertiary intervention

Mediation is used in resolving bullying complaints, and for repairing workplace relationships following the resolution of a complaint. The use of mediation to repair workplace relationships is an interesting finding, and there is some evidence to suggest that this may be a product of MBIE's unique mediation style (for a good discussion of these styles see Morris 2015). This finding may have wider implications for managing workplace bullying in other contexts, and MBIE should take pride in the positive reports of their mediation service.

Implications for practice

How can public sector managers, human resource professionals and union representatives further protect their workers, members and organisations from the severe consequences of workplace bullying?

- Ensure policies are regularly updated to keep abreast with changes in recommended best practice. The SSC has a copy of IRD's policy on their website as an example for other departments - this is a good starting point, but should be tailored to suit an organisations needs and take account of any changes in legislation or best practice.
- Provide training for all employees on 'what does workplace bullying look like in our organisation?' There is a chance the high level of unsubstantiated complaints could stem from a poor understanding of what constitutes bullying behaviour.
- Improve managerial skills around the delivery of effective performance management - dealing with performance concerns in a timely manner, having 'courageous conversations', and ensuring consistent intra-organisational performance standards.
- Involve unions from start of any anti-bullying initiative and pursue a 'partnership approach' - some good steps are being made by some departments in this respect.

- Focus on training to mitigate investigator bias in complaint handling/investigation - if managers and investigators expect that most bullying complaints are unsubstantiated, there is a risk that this perception could influence formal investigation outcomes.
- Continued support for affected parties following 'resolution' of the bullying situation, to avoid conflict re-escalation. The use of MBIE's mediation service as a tool for repairing workplace relationships following the resolution of conflict is likely to be useful here.

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