

Dealing with Workplace Bullying

Hamish Crimp and Kate Hansen

There's an old adage – prevention is better than cure – and a recent literature review on bullying in the public sector reminds Human Resource Management of ways in which it can manage bullying at its source.

For the NZ public sector, the cost of workplace bullying, both personally and financially, is a critical issue. The 2013 Integrity and Conduct Survey found that 25% of state sector staff had experienced bullying (NZ State Services Commission, 2014) compared to only 18% within the private sector¹.

Not only do employers who ignore bullying risk breaching legislation, but the personal costs include anxiety, stress, deterioration in physical health and possible serious mental health issues. At the Organizational level bullying impacts team relationships, organizational culture and business outcomes as well as financial, through recruitment and retention costs (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011)

What is bullying

Although definitions vary, NZ Guidelines developed by WorkSafe NZ and MBIE define workplace bullying as repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety. (WorkSafe NZ, 2014). This can be carried out via email, text messaging, internet chat rooms or other social media channels in addition to direct verbal or physical interaction. In some cases workplace bullying may occur outside normal working hours (WorkSafe NZ, 2014).

Bullying may be particularly prevalent in the public sector due to higher rates of restructuring and change compared to the private sector (Beale & Hoel, 2010); and high levels of emotional labour and personal involvement required in many public sector jobs (Zapf et al., 2011). It may also be because management skills are low. Research conducted at CLEW has also found high levels of bullying in the public sector, associated with lower organisational capability (Plimmer et al., 2013).

What conditions lead to bullying?

Although many factors contribute to workplace bullying, poor psychosocial work climates have higher rates of bullying, increasing the vulnerability of targets or the bullying behaviours

¹ http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=11386510

of perpetrators (Salin & Hoel, 2011).

A poor psychosocial environment has three broad categories: enabling, motivating and precipitating. The literature shows human resource management can offer a number of practical solutions to tackle these antecedents to bullying.

1. Enabling contributors and recommendations

Enablers include structures and processes that make it possible for bullying to occur in the first place and can be work specific or organizational.

Work-related enablers include role ambiguity and conflict, excessive and unreasonable job demands, and limited job autonomy (Tuckey, Dollard, Hosking, & Winefield, 2009; Bowling & Beehr, 2006). A thorough job analysis, with well-defined, well-communicated job roles and a strong performance review process are essential in tackling enabling work factors (Tubre & Collins, 2000).

Organizational enablers include a normalized bullying culture with little support for prevention and management initiatives (Skogstad et al., 2011; Zapf, Knorz, & Kulla, 1996); and leadership styles which are typically more authoritarian, or conversely, laissez faire (Johan Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2007; Mathisen, Einarsen, & Mykletun, 2011; Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007).

A thorough job analysis, with well-defined, well-communicated job roles and a strong performance review process are essential in tackling enabling work factors (Tubre & Collins, 2000).

The support of management from the outset is critical for any prevention initiative. Boundaries and expectations that are established and led from the top, coupled with strengthening the induction and socialisation processes helps destabilise the normalisation of bullying (Salin & Hoel 2011). Training in performance management, delivery of feedback, and bullying identification and awareness, on bullying, in addition to management-led anti-bullying policy require helps develop leaders to recognise and enact change (Ferris et al 2007, Salin 2008, Rayner & Lewis 2011).

Arthur (2011) also recommends greater use of internal hiring practices, which he found to be empirically related to lower levels of workplace bullying.

2. Motivating contributors and recommendations

Motivating factors - particular circumstances/factors/systems within an organisation which might indirectly encourage/incentivize bullying behaviours -may exist in a workplace. These may include performance-based remuneration where workers or teams could undermine and bully each other in competition for finite organizational resources (Salin, 2003).

A well-designed individual and collective reward system linking performance to positive behaviours and ensuring transparency is key to tackling this kind of bullying (Frey, Homberg, & Osterloh, 2013; Armstrong & Murlis, 2007).

3. Precipitating contributors and recommendations

Precipitating contributors are triggers to workplace bullying (Salin, 2003). These include extensive use of part-time or temporary workers, pay cuts or freezes, changes in

organizational management or restructures (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Salin, 2003). A shift to policies that emphasize permanent employment or strengthen the socialization and induction program for part-time workers ensures staff understand workplace culture and ways to identify and deal with bullying (Hoel & Cooper 2000).

In times of high change and pressure, HR must support staff by ensuring they manage any conflict that may arise. There is typically a spike in bullying at such times. (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Salin, 2003)

Moving forward

CLEW researchers are working with both the SSC and the PSA on the development of effective programmes to reduce the incidence of public sector bullying.

References

- Armstrong, M., & Murlis, H. (2007). *Reward management: a handbook of remuneration strategy and practice*: Kogan Page Publishers.
- Arthur, J. B. (2011). Do HR System Characteristics Affect the Frequency of Interpersonal Deviance in Organizations? The role of team autonomy and internal labor market practices. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, 50(1), 30-56.
- Bartlett, J. E., & Bartlett, M. E. (2011). Workplace Bullying: An integrative literature review. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 13(1), 69-84. doi: 10.1177/1523422311410651
- Beale, D., & Hoel, H. (2010). Workplace bullying, industrial relations and the challenge for management in Britain and Sweden. *European Journal of Industrial Relations*, 16(2), 101-118.
- Bentley, T., Catley, B., Cooper-Thomas, H., Gardner, D., O'Driscoll, M., & Trenberth, L. (2009). Understanding Stress and Bullying in New Zealand Workplaces: Final report to OH&S Steering Committee. In T. Bentley, B. Catley, H. Cooper-Thomas, D. Gardner, M. O'Driscoll, & L. Trenberth (Eds.).
- Bowling, N. A., & Beehr, T. A. (2006). Workplace Harassment from the Victim's Perspective: A theoretical model and meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(5), 998. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.91.5.998
- Hoel, H., & Cooper, C. L. (2000). *Destructive Conflict and Bullying at Work*: Manchester School of Management, UMIST Manchester.
- Ferris, G. R., Zinko, R., Brouer, R. L., Buckley, M. R., & Harvey, M. G. (2007). Strategic bullying as a supplementary, balanced perspective on destructive leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(3), 195-206.
- Frey, B. S., Homberg, F., & Osterloh, M. (2013). Organizational control systems and pay-for-performance in the public service. *Organization Studies*, 0170840613483655.
- Johan Hauge, L., Skogstad, A., & Einarsen, S. (2007). Relationships Between Stressful Work Environments and Bullying: Results of a large representative study. *Work & Stress*, 21(3), 220-242. doi: 10.1080/02678370701705810

- Mathisen, G. E., Einarsen, S., & Mykletun, R. (2011). The Relationship Between Supervisor Personality, Supervisors' Perceived Stress and Workplace Bullying. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 99(4), 637-651. doi: 10.1007/s10551-010-0674-z
- NZ State Services Commission. (2014b). *Integrity and Conduct Survey 2013*. Wellington: Author.
- Plimmer, G., Wilson, J., Bryson, J., Blumenfeld, S., Donnelly, N., & Ryan, B. (2013). *Workplace Dynamics in New Zealand Public Services*. Wellington: Industrial Relations Centre, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Rayner, C., & Lewis, D. (2011). Managing Workplace Bullying: The role of policies. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace: Developments in theory, research and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 327-340). Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press.
- Salin, D. (2003). Ways of Explaining Workplace Bullying: A review of enabling, motivating and precipitating structures and processes in the work environment. *Human Relations*, 56(10), 1213-1232. doi: 10.1177/00187267035610003
- Salin, D. (2008). The Prevention of Workplace Bullying as a Question of Human Resource Management: Measures adopted and underlying organisational factors. *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, 24(1), 221-231. doi: 10.1016/j.scaman.2008.04.004
- Salin, D., & Hoel, H. (2011). Organisational Causes of Workplace Bullying. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D. Zapf, & C. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and harassment in the workplace: Developments in theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed., pp. 227-243). Boca Raton: CRC Press.
- Skogstad, A., Einarsen, S., Torsheim, T., Aasland, M. S., & Hetland, H. (2007). The Destructiveness of Laissez-faire Leadership Behavior. *Journal of occupational health psychology*, 12(1), 80. doi: 10.1037/1076-8998.12.1.80
- Skogstad, A., Torsheim, T., Einarsen, S., & Hauge, L. J. (2011). Testing the Work Environment Hypothesis of Bullying on a Group Level of Analysis: Psychosocial factors as precursors of observed workplace bullying. *Applied Psychology*, 60(3), 475-495. doi: 10.1111/j.1464-0597.2011.00444.x
- Tubre, T. C., & Collins, J. M. (2000). Jackson and Schuler (1985) revisited: A meta-analysis of the relationships between role ambiguity, role conflict, and job performance. *Journal of Management*, 26(1), 155-169.
- Tuckey, M. R., Dollard, M. F., Hosking, P. J., & Winefield, A. H. (2009). Workplace Bullying: The role of psychosocial work environment factors. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 16(3), 215. doi: 10.1037/a0016841
- WorkSafe NZ. (2014). *Preventing and Responding to Workplace Bullying: Best practice guidelines*. Wellington: Author.
- Zapf, D., Escartin, J., Einarsen, S., Hoel, H., & Vartia, M. (2011). Empirical Findings on Prevalence and Risk Groups of Bullying in the Workplace. In S. Einarsen, H. Hoel, D.

Zapf, & C. Cooper (Eds.), *Bullying and harassment in the Workplace: Developments in Theory, Research and Practice* (pp. 75-105). Boca Raton: CRC Press.

Zapf, D., Knorz, C., & Kulla, M. (1996). On the Relationship Between Mobbing Factors, and Job Content, Social Work Environment, and Health Outcomes. *European journal of work and organizational psychology*, 5(2), 215-237.