

Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying is sometimes a hidden problem that affects both individuals and organisations. There are a range of symptoms individuals can experience as a result of bullying, e.g. distress that manifests itself in anxiety and panic attacks, loss of self-esteem and confidence, fear caused by not being able to cope, and physical symptoms, e.g. palpitations, sweating, broken sleep patterns, withdrawal. Financial costs and productivity problems related to bullying can affect organisations. This fact sheet explores the symptoms and characteristics of workplace bullying and what you could do to identify bullying tactics and the effects of bullying.

Background

Bullying is an issue that most people commonly identify with the school playground. In recent years people involved with schools are starting to see that bullying isn't necessarily a part of a child's developmental experience. This effort to deal with bullying at school has in turn opened people's eyes to problems and issues relating to bullying at the workplace.

What is workplace bullying?

The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines bullying as *to act the bully towards* someone. The dictionary further states that a bully is a *blustering, quarrelsome, overbearing person who browbeats smaller or weaker people*. In simple terms, workplace bullying occurs when someone at work acts as a bully towards someone else at the workplace. Bullying can exist in various forms and can occur at all levels of employment.

Workplace bullying has been 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 (Workplace Bullying — a worker's guide, Division of Workplace Health and Safety 1998).

How do you recognise workplace bullying?

The tactics used to bully people at the workplace are as varied as the behaviour of those who choose to employ them. Examples of bullying behaviours are:

- Non-verbal, for example, offensive gestures, inappropriate written or pictorial material, tampering with a worker's space or equipment, continual practical jokes and intentional non-communication or avoidance.
- Verbal, for example, insults, yelling, constant negative criticism and feedback, belittling opinions, sexual or racial taunts, inappropriate comments about appearance or lifestyle or withdrawing support or interaction.
- Exclusion, for example, isolating workers from normal work interaction and preventing access to learning and development opportunities.
- Work performance, for example, assigning too much or too little work, allocating meaningless tasks, not receiving required work information or resources and providing false feedback on performance.
- Cultural or spiritual — preventing the expression of cultural expectations and beliefs.

Employee Assistance Fact Sheet

How does it affect you?

The varying nature and level of workplace bullying means that people exposed to it experience a range of symptoms. In some instances, people experience painful feelings that they do not associate with bullying. Commonly reported affects are:

- high stress levels;
- anxiety;
- ill health (headaches, backaches, tiredness, stomach cramps);
- loss of confidence and self-esteem;
- feelings of social isolation at work;
- reduced work performance.

Action

Bullying behaviour frequently involves the abuse of power relationships, rarely in a single incident, although there is a mounting body of evidence that some threatening behaviour can also induce similar symptoms on one occurrence. This behaviour tends to build up and can be composed of many small incidents over time. It can take some time for an employee to realise that they are being bullied.

What can you do?

If you suspect or feel that you are being bullied at work, there are a number of approaches that you could choose to use.

1. Ask an external person to act on your behalf

You can approach a person from an external organisation (union, mediator) to approach the person on your behalf to discuss your issues with their behaviour.

2. Keep a diary of bullying

Keeping a record of details of possible bullying can be useful. This record can:

- help you in proving your case in the future;
- allow you to record names of people willing to support you.

You should ensure that this documentation is secured away from the worksite.

3. Use the Employee Assistance Service

The EAS can help you to cope with the situation at a personal level as well as explore an action plan to deal with the issue at the workplace.

4. Follow the department's grievance resolution process

If the matter cannot be resolved through personal resolution, then a stage 2 grievance can be lodged with your district director or central office director. Information is available through your union or professional association, regional Principal Human Resource Consultant or Workforce Standards and Performance Unit in central office.

Taking the right action to deal with bullying can be very difficult. The best thing you can do is seek support from co-workers or talk to someone outside the workplace about your perceptions.