

Bullying and Harassment – climate control

In the minds of many senior executives bullying and harassment are problems that exist in other organisations but not their own. If they think about it at all, such matters are the province of the HR department. This being so, only rarely do they reach the ears of top management and never the boardroom agenda.

With executives' time at a premium more pressing and 'real' business issues are on the programme; it's an increasingly tough business world out there and meeting targets and, these days, just keeping the company afloat requires 'strong management'. If such themes have an archaic ring to them it is because they have been around a long time, but they are still alive today.

Many organisations have 'ticked the box' and have a policy on bullying and harassment, and the associated grievance and disciplinary procedures. Many more have done nothing, in the belief that no complaint equals no problem. There is a third group that I come across when discussing training: those that are 'in the process of preparing the policy as we speak', work which apparently takes a long time to complete.

None of these approaches is sufficient to ensure that staff are treated with dignity and respect and none would help much when a headline grabbing case reaches the courts. Incidentally, when such cases are reported, it matters little to the reading public – or the shareholders – who eventually wins the case; the damage is already done. Bullying harms everyone, the individuals involved and the organisation.

Workplace bullying is related to organisational culture. Clear management, true leadership and management by example are antidotes to it. On the other hand, domineering behaviour, a poor understanding of what makes people tick and lack of respect for staff create a toxic environment where the problem can thrive, especially when the person at the top displays this behaviour themselves.

Though most senior managers would be shocked to hear that they are guilty of bullying, that is precisely what their staff often say about them according to successive surveys. In contrast to this, well-led organisations, thuggish or overbearing behaviour is not needed or tolerated; staff work more collaboratively with their management.

It has to be recognised that in the demanding world of business it is results that count and improving the bottom line is frequently used as justification of undesirable management behaviour. It seems to escape the apologists' notice that when staff know that they are respected both productivity and profitability

benefit. There is a huge amount of evidence to support the 'happy staff' hypothesis and why business cannot afford to let the dinosaurs among their managers continue to roam about bullying people.

Is it really bullying?

It must be said at this point that the term 'bullying' gets over-used. This is a highly emotive topic, and one that can produce a knee-jerk reaction by HR and others when complaints are made, so in the interests of balance both sides of the story have to be considered. While bullying is common, it is far more common for people to use the term whenever they are being asked to do something or pushed to get results in a way that they disagree with.

Bullying involves specific types of behaviour on the part of the perpetrator, and this provokes specific reactions in the target or 'victim'. I speak about this in detail in my workshops and give guidance with these definitions. It is not sufficient, in my view, to say that bullying necessarily occurs when someone thinks they are being bullied. Nor is it appropriate to use the term when a manager is setting targets and monitoring output in an attempt to manage an individual's performance. Even though a manager in such a situation may lack the skills to do this with subtlety, or may get frustrated and use inappropriately heavy-handed or loud-mouthed behaviour, this is not bullying, which is defined quite specifically as:

"The persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, abuse of power or unfair penal sanctions which make the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated, or vulnerable, which undermines their self confidence and which may cause them to suffer stress."

(MSF Union)

I am not condoning bad behaviour on the part of managers. Over the years I have heard horror stories about poorly trained or incompetent management, but I have also heard 'bullying' used inappropriately so clarity on this point is important.

Managers are paid to get results, organisations exist to make profit and/or deliver services – depending on whether they are in the private or public sector – and staff are paid to help them fulfil their aims. Informed employers want to create a working climate that enables all their employees to perform well and get the results they want, and most work to achieve this. Nevertheless, when groups of people are working together this can produce many forms of undesirable behaviour and bullying is one of them.

Improving the climate

Chief Executives who want to improve the working culture have only to ask a few simple questions with regard to their own behaviour and that of their senior management colleagues (see box 1). They must also remember that demonstrating leadership means breaking down the kinds of barriers that bullying can hide behind. Accessible and visible management and opportunities for genuine exchange of information can produce real dialogue that will enrich the working environment in far-reaching ways.

Bullying is less likely to survive in an environment where it can be openly discussed, so the right information is vital if managers are to manage performance without drawing accusations of bullying against them. Policies and codes of conduct play an essential part in tackling bullying, but probably the least important aspect of creating the right environment.

Where human relationships are concerned policies can demonstrate and support intention, but they won't change behaviour unless they are part of a package involving education, information, good role modelling and visible respect for staff. The essential ingredient in this mix is that to be most effective the head man or woman must buy into it and visibly support any initiative – they have to walk their talk.

This means a proactive strategy aimed at tackling the problem upstream, before it becomes a problem, by teaching managers how to manage respectfully, supporting them with training *and* guidelines (usually one without the other is money ill-spent), and ensuring that staff receive the same basic information. It is also important to create the sort of environment where managers and supervisors believe that they can communicate their concerns freely to *their* managers. Behaviour that can be classified as bullying often has its roots in an unhealthy organisational culture where managers say that they cannot talk to their bosses through fear, or because they are too busy or otherwise unavailable.

The benefits for any organisation should no longer need spelling out; a positive working culture fosters creativity, motivation, attendance, productivity and much more besides. The business world may sometimes be referred to as a jungle, but it is the Chief Executive and Senior management who set the climate

BOX 1

The Litmus Test – excusable or not?

- Would you say or act like this in front of your partner, children or parents?
- Would you say or act like this in front of a colleague of the same sex?
- Would you like to see your behaviour reported in the local press?
- Would you like a member of your family to be on the receiving end of behaviour the same as yours?
- Does it need to be said or done at all?
- Is there a more respectful way of saying or doing it?

BOX 2

It may be worth noting at this point that lack of awareness on the part of a chief executive is no defence should things go wrong

Damien Gaunt, MD of Bruce Transport Services, Sheffield, was imprisoned after turning a blind eye to a campaign of abuse by three of his staff against a black colleague. The judge said the men's activities left their victim an 'psychological cripple'

The court was told that Gaunt was a decent, hard working family man whose wife was expecting their first child. But the judge felt this was no excuse for inaction against racism.

He was sentenced to 18 months in prison.

Box 3

Manager do's and don'ts

Taking responsibility for an equitable workplace

Do

- Set a good example by treating all staff with dignity and respect
- Be alert to unacceptable behaviour, and correct it
- Ensure staff know how to raise bullying problems
- Deal with complaints promptly, fairly and thoroughly
- Remember that impact of behaviour, not its intent, is the issue

Don't

- Assume that no complaint means no problem
- Try to discourage people from making complaints
- Assume that complainants are over-sensitive or 'weak'

- Accept “I didn’t mean any harm” as an excuse for bad behaviour
- Allow retaliation, victimisation or revenge

Box 4

TUC Definitions

According to the TUC there is no comprehensive list of bullying behaviours, it gives the list below to give an idea of some of the behaviour that constitutes workplace bullying.

- Competent staff being constantly criticised, having responsibilities removed or being given trivial tasks to do
- Shouting at staff or using threatening behaviour
- Persistently picking on people in front of others or in private
- Blocking promotion
- Regularly and deliberately ignoring or excluding individuals from work activities
- Setting a person up to fail by overloading them with work or setting impossible deadlines
- Consistently attacking a member of staff in terms of their professional or personal standing
- Regularly making the same person the butt of jokes.

In conclusion

Bullying occurs across the board in most organisations. The term is often over used so before accusations are made or acted on calm and informed discussion needs to establish the accuracy of claims and identify the behaviour involved. Whether such behaviour constitutes bullying or not, anything which demeans employees or causes stress must be stopped and staff protected, and employers have a responsibility to ensure this as far as possible. Key to this is creating a healthy working culture, a climate where respect can flourish.