<u>Bullying – A view from the Corporate World.</u>

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<u>Bullying – A view from the Corporate World.</u>

If we believe some of the reported research findings in Australia[1], as many as 70 per cent of employees are currently being bullied or have been bullied in the past. 38 per cent indicated that the bullying activity had occurred for periods longer than six months. Of the remaining sample, just over 13 per cent claim they will have witnessed workplace bullying. Even if only half of these figures are true these are staggering numbers. The Labour Council of New South Wales (Australia) claims that workplace bullying is the number one occupational health and safety issue in New South Wales[2]. As a corporation that has many workplaces in Australia including two in the state of New South Wales why, as an ombudsman for this company, have I not seen these high levels of bullying? To be able to answer this better, I have reviewed firstly what workplace bullying is and isn't, and secondly, when it is most likely to occur. Using this information as a reference, I have compared what our corporation does in relation to these factors and how I believe this contributes to lessening the opportunity for workplace bullying in our organisation.

<u>What is workplace bullying?</u>

Although this is an Australian definition I have seen similar definitions for other parts of the western world.

'Workplace bullying means any behaviour that is repeated, systematic and directed towards an employee or group of employees that a reasonable person, having regard to the circumstances, would expect to victimise, humiliate, undermine or threaten and which creates a risk to health and safety.'[3]

Unpacking this definition there are four key elements that are important to recognise:

     (i)   workplace bullying has it's origins in a workplace conflict
     (ii)   it is repeated in nature and can be long lasting
     (iii)   it is inappropriate behaviour that can be aggressive
     (iv)   it results in a level of (physical and/or psychological) distress that can linger long after the bullying has ceased

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[1] http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/workplace_bullying/
[2] http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/workplace_bullying/
[3] section 55A (1) Australian Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act 1986

<u>Examples of Workplace Bullying</u>

Bullying behaviour can be *obvious* such as abusive or offensive language right up to criminal activity such as physical assaults or unlawful threats. It is this type of behaviour that often springs to mind when we think of bullying.

However, workplace bullying can also be *subtle* and may include behaviour such as deliberately excluding a person from normal workplace activities or intimidating a person through inappropriate personal comments or unjustified criticism.

And finally *covert* behaviour that undermines, treats less favourably or disempowers others is also bullying. Examples of this would be overloading a person with work; setting timelines that are very difficult to achieve or unfair treatment in relation to accessing workplace entitlements such as leave or training.

<u>What is NOT Workplace Bullying?</u>

According to the act[4], the following does not constitute workplace bullying.

<u>Reasonable</u> action taken in a <u>reasonable</u> manner by an employer:

- to transfer, demote, discipline, counsel, retrench or dismiss an employee
- to not award or provide a promotion, transfer, or benefit in connection with an employee's employment
- to carry out reasonable administrative duties in relation to that employees employment

<u>Why does Workplace Bullying occur?</u>

There are a variety of reasons why a person may bully another person in the workplace. These reasons may include:
(i) Power
A bully abuses their power to hurt, demean, or take advantage of others who do not feel they are in a position to protect themselves. For bullying to occur, both parties have to perceive the disparity of power and the paucity of alternatives. Bullies need victims. These are generally people who are weaker, insecure, or feel they can't fight back (whatever their

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[4] section 55A (2) of the Australian Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act 1986

reasons).

(ii) Self-esteem
Bullies may put down others to boost their own self-esteem and confidence to help deal with personal feelings of inadequacy.

(iii) Difference
An individual or group may become targets of workplace bullying because others perceive them as being new or different.

(iv) Perceived Threat
Some people bully others because the other person is perceived as a threat to them personally, or a threat to their position within the company.

(v) Organisational Culture
The culture of a workplace is often shown by its values, beliefs and what is considered to be normal behaviour. If the inappropriate behaviours and attitudes are encouraged or condoned by management then bullying is seen as normal behaviour for the majority of the workplace.

(vi) Organisational Factors
People may harass or bully others due to dissatisfaction with organisational factors such as job insecurity, restructuring or downsizing, change in ownership or poor skills and practices in people management.

(vii) Working Arrangements
Some working arrangements have individual employees or workgroups separated from supervisors and others in the workplace. This can allow bullying to go undetected and prevent effective monitoring and leadership.

What does our company do that helps minimise workplace bullying?

The above seven factors give us reasons "why" workplace bullying occurs so they can also be used as guides as to "what" needs to be done to stop the practice. I will review them through the lens of a typical workplace in our corporation.

The first four factors of "Power, Self-Esteem, Difference and Perceived Threat" all link to our ways of working. Our corporation has a strong belief in what we call the Associate Concept. Our employees are called "associates" and there is a strong egalitarian approach to working relationships. We have very flat organisation structures which minimise the "hierarchal" power available to managers. Part of the Associate

Concept speaks strongly about treating each other with dignity and respect irrespective of race, religion, age or gender.

Of course, putting words together to demand certain behaviours is the easy part. Ensuring those behaviours becomes the fabric of the organisation in its day to day workings is much harder to achieve. This requires significant efforts especially by those in management positions. See below under "Organisational Culture".

The fifth factor mentioned was "Organisational Culture". Our company is very much a values driven corporation with a distinct and unique culture. It places a huge importance on its people and demands very inclusive ways of working especially from its managers. Bullying behaviour is so at odds with this culture that when it does occur; it can be very obvious and so can be addressed early on.

There is also significant investment in time and resources towards training and development of our people especially in our unique culture and expectations of behaviour as a company associate. In Australia there are regular "Fair Treatment" training sessions for all associates to ensure there is clear understanding on what is and isn't acceptable behaviour. Our senior managers are expected to role model these behaviours and take seriously any allegations of improper behaviours. It is made very clear through these sessions as well as through disciplinary measures that improper behaviour will not be tolerated.

"Organisational Factors" was the sixth element of reasons why bulling occurs. We pride ourselves on having very open internal communication channels. Any level of management is available to all our associates to discuss debate or challenge whatever is on their mind. There are regular communications on business updates and the frequencies of these communications are increased in times of significant change such as re-organisations, acquisitions or expansion activities. Where possible and practical, every effort is made to keep our associates up to date with factors that impact their workplace.

We understand the importance of people in the success of any business and so we go to great lengths to ensure we attract, train and retain high calibre associates into our business. A key element of the training is not just on technical / functional delivery of their roles, but also on the softer people skills that are required to fully engage and motivate their teams.

The final reason for bulling mentioned above was "Working Arrangements". A long standing practice at our sites is the open plan office. A typical office will have the desks of the General Managers and their teams positioned in the middle of the office surrounded by the desks

of their respective functional teams. In this layout it would be quite difficult for any *obvious* workplace bullying to occur.

What else is needed to stop Workplace Bullying?

All the activities mentioned above are certainly important in helping to eradicate the bullying practice. However, life is never perfect especially when you are dealing with people. So even with all the above, there is still a need for both formal and informal grievance procedures to be in place so that any workplace bullying can be reported, investigated and actioned.

Formal grievance procedures that have the option to escalate grievances where necessary are very important. However, due to the sensitivity of many bullying incidents, wherever possible, the agreed procedures for "formal" investigations should be conducted as informally as possible, in confidence, and with fair procedures to minimise conflict and stress for the individuals involved.

Why is an ombudsman channel so important here?

Given the nature of the behaviours and in particular the high likelihood for retaliation, it is important to have informal channels as well. This is where an internal ombudsman can really make a difference. Whilst an ombudsman is able to capture feedback on all forms of workplace bullying, it can be vitally important in capturing the *subtle* and *covert* forms of bullying that will generally not be seen by witnesses. These forms rely on the person being bullied to raise the complaint in some fashion. As noted above, victims of workplace bullying are likely to be suffering some form of psychological impact due to the bullying and the thought of going through a formal channel can be quite daunting. Fears of retaliation and job insecurity can exacerbate the psychological trauma. For example, research shows that the action deemed most successful by respondents to dealing with bullying was to "take no action" or "seek a new job"[5]. It is here that the confidential element of the ombudsman channel plays a huge role in helping to surface these types of bullying. It can be the safe haven that they need to help them work through their options.

Our corporation has well established formal grievance procedures and an ombudsman channel has been in place now for the past 13 years. In my time as an ombudsman I have certainly had to deal with workplace

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[5] http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/inpsych/workplace_bullying/

bullying and undoubtedly a key driver to why the employee was raising the issue with me was the fact that they felt "safe" talking to me.

Another positive element of an ombudsman channel with workplace bullying is the "early warning" element of their roles. The ombudsman has the potential to identify any "hotspots" in an organisation; be it a particular person, a particular department or a particular site earlier than might be the case with the formal channels. As mentioned above, there is likelihood that not all bullying will be reported via the formal channels. So with fewer examples to consider, the ability of these formal channels to identify these "hot spots" early on can be limited. Having the confidential channel available is likely to encourage more employees to speak up, which in turn provides more examples of the bullying which in turn can surface the practice earlier. Having the extra examples can also used to strengthen the feedback and recommendations for change back to the organisation.

For example:

Employee A is working on the night shift and is being systematically bullied at work by two of his co-workers. Being on night shift the practice is not readily visible to management who work during the day. Employee A is suffering stress, depression and anxiety attacks and his work performance is starting to suffer but he cannot bring himself to report the behaviour. He resigns because he can't take it anymore but gives the reason that he's found another job that suits him better. Having left and started working somewhere else, he summons up the courage to contact the ombudsman from the previous company and relays the real reason why he left. He just wanted to make sure that no one else would have to go through what he went through. Unbeknownst to employee A his story is now the second the ombudsman has heard of similar behaviours from that site and so, with the approval of the contact, is able to use this added information to strengthen the recommendations to management on what can be done to address the behaviours.

Summary

Workplace bullying is prevalent in our workplaces and is a serious issue. It can cost corporations significantly in lost time and money due to absenteeism, staff turnover, medical costs and legal settlements. With the current challenging corporate times of acquisitions, downsizings, outsourcings and increased competitive pressures, the stage is ripe for

increased levels of workplace bullying. Corporations that want to address this issue are encouraged to take a holistic approach and consider implementing tools and practices that address the various reasons as to why workplace bullying occurs. This will involve:

(i) A clear and decisive top down approach that bullying will not be tolerated
(ii) Adequate training and education of all employees on what is and isn't bullying
(iii) A review of current practices including working arrangements that might be harbouring workplace bullying
(iv) The establishment (or beefing up) of both formal and informal channels of communication and grievance procedures that employees feel "safe" to use.

Given the unique attributes of an ombudsman (especially the confidentiality aspect) an ombudsman channel is an ideal, dare I say it, an essential "informal" channel for any organisation that seriously wants to tackle workplace bullying.