

## Bullies in the workplace – they're just too damn 'expensive' to keep!

### **Bullying in the workplace is on the increase, largely 'unaddressed'—and wreaking 'havoc' on staff, and organisational productivity.**

In fact, the 2007 U.S. *Workplace Bullying Survey*<sup>1</sup> — that was commissioned by the Workplace Bullying Institute —revealed some disturbing data about the prevalence of workplace bullying and its effects.

One of the major findings of the survey—the largest scientific survey of bullying in the US—was that "Bullying is 4 (four) times more prevalent than illegal, discriminatory harassment," which includes such things as discrimination due to race, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, or age.

The Workplace Bullying Institute<sup>2</sup> also stated that around "37 percent of U.S. workers have reported being bullied on the job, while 49 percent say they have witnessed a bully in action". This represents a staggering 86% of the workforce, or 71.5 million Americans being affected by bullying in the workplace.

Further to this, the UK's largest commercial insurer, Royal & Sun Alliance<sup>3</sup>, says that bullying at work costs UK businesses around 18 billion pounds every year...while in 2005, WorkCover<sup>4</sup> estimated the dollar 'cost' of workplace bullying in Australia at somewhere between 6 and 13 billion dollars a year.

### **Bullying in the workplace affects both workplace bully 'targets' and 'non-targets' alike.**

Even as far back as 2001, Drake Personnel<sup>5</sup>, one of Australia's leading employment agencies said in an interview that, "the antics of one serial bully in the workplace had the potential to reduce the performance of their victims by half, and that of other employees by up to 33%." Interestingly, research by the Crisis Prevention Institute<sup>6</sup> in the USA clearly demonstrated that when targets believe someone at work has treated them disrespectfully, half will lose work time worrying about future interactions with the instigator, and half will contemplate changing jobs to avoid a recurrence. Most

will tell friends, family and colleagues about how badly they have been treated, and some targets of bullying will leave the company.

The reality is that people do not contribute their best when they fear harassment, bullying or abuse.

### **The bully 'target' is rarely the 'nerdy wimp'**

Far from the stereotype...the bully 'target' is rarely the spectacled, 'nerdy wimp'. Rather, they tend to be ethical, well-liked, highly personable, intelligent and self-assured people. Which begs the question – why do they become the targets of workplace bullies?



*Photography by Ivar van Bussel, Groningen, Netherlands.*

Increasingly, the literature suggests that workplace bullies 'select' their targets for no other reason than they pose a perceived 'threat' to the bully. The threat can actually be the target's productivity, skills, talent, and popularity with peers and superiors. The bully's primary aims are to reduce the target's performance and self-esteem while simultaneously increasing their own self-importance.

### **What is bullying...and what it isn't**

Workplace bullying is *not* someone simply being critical of your work. Nor, is it someone who simply doesn't like you. After all – not all of us will be liked in our

workplaces.

Workplace bullying is also *not* a form of 'tough management', 'employee motivation', or 'productivity improvement'— far from it. These are the signs of an incompetent, dysfunctional manager or supervisor who believes they must resort to crude threats or intimidation to encourage their staff, or who rationalises their behaviour in these ways.

Workplace bullying occurs when the words or actions of a person or people are designed to – demean, humiliate, intimidate, devalue and generally – harm you professionally.

And for certain behaviours to be classified as 'workplace bullying' – various elements need to be present.

### **The elements of workplace bullying**

There's a strong possibility someone is a 'workplace bully' when their behaviour is:

- *Planned mistreatment* in the form of verbal abuse, conduct that is threatening, intimidating, or humiliating; or sabotage that interferes with work.

Also, a bully's behaviour will have any combination of 5 'aims':

1. threats to professional status,
2. threats to personal standing,
3. isolation
4. overwork, and
5. destabilisation

- The behaviour needs to be '*repeated*' and '*persistent*' and is generally not usually a 'one-off' occurrence.

However, there *have* been rare instances when the behaviour that's been exhibited is so extreme – that there can be no doubt it is essentially 'bullying' behaviour.

- Finally, behaviour that is considered as bullying behaviour with have '*health harming*' effects – either physically, emotionally, or both.

### **Some of the more popular bully 'tactics'**

Of course the types of behaviour and tactics that bullies use to 'bully'...is as varied as the bullies themselves.

However, some of the more popular tactics include: verbal abuse, yelling, swearing, character assassination, constant 'nit-picking', constant criticism of your work/ability to do job, undeserved work evaluations, denial of leave, violence, and physical assault.

Other tactics include such things as being excluded from emails and/or meetings, theft of 'credit' i.e. where the bully takes credit for the work of another...and 'Mobbing', where others are coerced into a bullying 'gang up' on a target.

This list is certainly not exclusive – but it provides an idea just how varied workplace bully tactics can be.

### Setting aside the 'human' cost for a moment – workplace bullying is having a devastating impact around the globe

In the UK 18.9 million working days are lost, while 71.5 million workers are affected in the USA at a cost of \$74 billion annually. And workplace bullying in Australia is said to cost around \$20,000 per employee in the workforce.

Bullying in the workplace can ruin morale, lower productivity, devastate a company's culture, and contribute to employee absenteeism. Further, it results in lost experience, lost productivity, turnover costs, legal fees and damaged organisational reputation.

Royal & Sun Alliance<sup>7</sup> in the UK says that workplace bullying costs "individual companies 8-10% of their annual profits; plus, it leaves them open to "the threat of expensive litigation".

From the Australian legal perspective – if bullying is occurring in a work environment, it is up to the employer to change the culture of the workplace — or face the consequences. And if an employee is too scared to talk to their boss, or their boss' boss about a bullying incident, the employer may be liable.

Further, as indicated by an article in Lawyer's Weekly Online<sup>8</sup>, "The courts do not look favourably on any organisation, regardless of size, that has an incident of bullying, but no policy or procedure in place informing its employees how to deal with and report incidents of bullying or harassment.

Similarly, employers must ensure such poli-

cies are very clearly understood, and enforced."

Smart companies soon realise that workplace bullies are not only too expensive to keep, but *not* dealing with them is a risk that can't be ignored any longer.

Having identified some of the more popular bully tactics, and established that workplace bullies are too expensive to keep, we'll now focus on how to actually deal with bullying in the workplace.

### Dealing with bullying in the workplace

Stop workplace bullying on the spot by *speaking up*. If you're professional and cordial in the workplace...there's no reason why you shouldn't expect to be treated the same. When confronted with behaviour that's humiliating, and professionally harmful – nip it in the bud immediately.

If a workplace bully is in full-on 'tirade mode' —excuse yourself and *walk away*. No one should have to tolerate a workplace screamer. You don't have to make a 'scene'. Use any reason to leave the room i.e. going for a toilet break/drink of water/urgent phone call that needs attending – just leave.

*Confront the bully — calmly*. Providing you can maintain your composure... let the bully know there are certain incidents/events that need to stop. Then address each item one-by-one.

*Document all bullying behaviour*. When you consider reporting a bully's behaviour, you'll require facts and details about events that occurred – accusations alone are not usually sufficient.

A bully's behaviour will often be dismissed as a 'personality clash' by upper management and human resources staff. A workplace bully *may* even suggest that he/she is the one being bullied by you – and then allude to your emotional 'instability'.

Armed with witnesses' names, details about events, dates and other pertinent information adds credibility to your claim, and facts are generally more difficult to refute.

Lastly— if you are a witness to bullying in the workplace — speak up — make a report— draw it to the attention of others. *Don't let your colleagues suffer in silence.*

### Want to know how you can be part of the Workplace Bullying solution?

Just in case you'd like more information or resources for dealing with bullying in the workplace, or you'd like to find out more about Know Bull! Day—just access the following website...[www.know-bull.com](http://www.know-bull.com)<sup>9</sup>

Other items on the site include a couple of free A4 posters for yourself, friends, and colleagues—some interesting bullying facts and stats—and there's a [survey](#) you can participate in...anonymously from the privacy of your home if you like.

And finally, if you know of someone—like a friend, colleague, partner, or spouse that is currently experiencing workplace bullying—do him or her a favour and refer them to the [2008 Know Bull! Day](#)<sup>10</sup> section of the website —and suggest they access the information available for '[individuals](#)<sup>11</sup>'.

### REFERENCES

- [wbi-zogby2007.html](#)
- <http://bullyinginstitute.org>
- <http://www.easier.com>
- [www.workcover](#)
- [Drake Personnel](#)
- [Crisis Prevention Institute](#)
- [Royal & Sun Alliance](#)
- [Lawyer's Weekly Online](#)
- [www.know-bull.com](#)
- [Information about Know Bull! Day 2008](#)
- [Direct 'link' to how individuals can participate in Know Bull! Day, 2008](#)

**Know Bull! Day** is a national day designed to raise awareness of, and highlight the need for eradicating bullying from workplaces.

Both individuals and businesses can show their support for eliminating and banning bullying in the workplace by promoting, and taking part in **Know Bull! Day** on 03 June 2008.

Photo: 'Stress' by Ivar van Bussel, Groningen, Netherlands.

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