

Why is HR generally ineffective when it comes to addressing bullying at work?

Question: My Human Resources department refuse to take me seriously. Instead, they are doing everything they can to support the bully whilst getting rid of me. Why is this?

Answer: From dealing with thousands of cases in which this happens - albeit a self-selecting audience which may not scale up nationally - the following reasons have been identified:

1. Human Resources (HR) people are not trained in dealing with bullying - it's not in their textbooks, not in their training, and their professional bodies rarely give the issue the attention it needs.

2. The HR profession seems to attract a number of people who are not people-focused, and therefore not good at dealing with people problems.

3. HR is not 'there' for employees. The role of HR is to keep the employer out of court.

4. The majority of HR people are female, and females seem particularly susceptible to charm, which is one of the bully's main weapons of deception.

5. By the time HR get to hear of the bullying they are faced with an articulate, plausible, convincing, charming "bully" and a gibbering wreck of a "target" who is traumatised and therefore unconvincing, inarticulate, incoherent, obsessed, apparently paranoid, tearful, distressed and highly emotional. By this time the bully has already convinced HR that the target has a "mental health problem", is a liability to the organisation, and needs to be got rid of.

6. When it's one word against another with no witnesses, HR take the word of the senior employee (who is almost always the bully).

7. In some countries there's no law against bullying so there's no case to answer. (Note: National, Anti-Bullying Laws *do* exist in Australia. They came into force on 01 Jan 2014. However, Know Bull! is inclined to believe these laws are predominantly ineffective).

8. The employer doesn't have an anti-bullying policy so it's not a disciplinary issue. (Note: Having an anti-bullying policy, *is* a legal requirement in Australia).

9. The employer does have an anti-bullying policy but it's just words on paper.

10. The bully is a tough dynamic manager who gets the job done and the high turnover of staff in the bully's department is because they're all wimps who can't meet the demanding standards of performance demanded by this exemplary manager. Yawn.

11. If HR recognise they have a bully, they're not going to admit it because to do so is tantamount to admitting liability for this - and previous - cases.

12. HR are not going to admit that they've made a mistake recruiting an incompetent individual who bullies to hide his or her inadequacies.

13. When push comes to shove, HR do what they are told to do by management, regardless of the rights and wrongs.

14. HR are sometimes an outsourced and contracterised profession with little influence.

15. The constant change, reorganisation, restructuring, downsizing, outsourcing, contracterisation etc mean that there is no continuity in treatment of staff and thus the bully is able to hide the fact that he or she has a history of conflict with employees.

16. Over the last few years employers have been burdened with numerous legislative changes (working time, data privacy, parental leave, etc) and have no desire, resources, time or energy to deal with issues for which there may be no legal requirement. (See Note at point 7.)

17. Bullying cases are so long and complex (a situation the bully fosters) that most HR (and most people) don't have the time, energy or resources to unpick the case.

18. There are only a handful of people who are capable of providing HR with the training and insight to undertake a successful investigation.

19. Where HR want to investigate they are sometimes overruled.

20. HR (and management) are frightened of the serial bully too - and sometimes more frightened than the employees.

21. HR people get bullied too.