

Strong-arm tactics

Business psychologist **Aryanne Oade** explains what constitutes bullying behaviour in the workplace, how to recognise it, and what can be done about it.

INCIDENTS OF BULLYING BEHAVIOUR are still all too common in UK workplaces, and, as a health and safety professional, you are likely to be involved in responding to them. Your actions play a role in determining how those adversely affected by bullying behaviour recover from the experience. Your personal attitude, and the actions you take both immediately after an incident and in the longer term, will, to some extent, set the tone for how your organisation is seen by its workforce to handle bullying behaviour, and could play a vital role in helping those who suffer psychological harm in this way recover their confidence and perform better as a result.

Doing too little might send the message to those using bullying behaviour that they can get away with it, and so encourage them to continue with their campaign. There is also the risk that those adversely affected by bullying behaviour will think their employer, by allowing that behaviour to continue unchallenged, doesn't care what happens to them while they are at work.

Should an incident of workplace bullying occur without decisive action being taken your organisation could lose the goodwill, endeavour and commitment of at least some, and possibly many, of its employees. As many as one in four people subject to workplace bullying elect to leave their employer following an incident of workplace bullying, and as many as one in five who witness bullying at work decide to leave and work elsewhere. These people feel that their employer has broken faith with them by exposing them to a destructive colleague's bullying methods. They therefore choose to work elsewhere rather than continue to work in a toxic environment.

What is workplace bullying?

Workplace bullying is about power. It involves one colleague trying to remove power from another in a personalised and often sustained campaign. The aim of the bully's campaign is to remove personal and organisational power from their colleague and place it with themselves. To achieve this, the bully tries to limit the behavioural choices available to their colleague at the time of an attack, ignores or disregards the usual workplace boundaries around that colleague's role and responsibilities, and tries to introduce a bullying dynamic into their relationship. They want the bullying dynamic to become the established way in which the two parties handle one another: the bully will use coercive force and their colleague will comply with their wishes, at least outwardly.

The person using bullying behaviour will override their colleague's normal workplace boundaries and choices, while also attempting to secure their outward compliance to their will. This combination of factors can result in the person subject to repeated bullying behaviour feeling like they are being treated like an object rather than as a person – a situation that can quickly lead to a feeling of powerlessness in the target's own working life.

Unsurprisingly, many people struggle to cope under such circumstances. Their well-being suffers and their performance levels drop as they work less efficiently, less effectively, and less ably. Their work standards diminish because their energy goes towards coping with the assaults orchestrated by the bully on their character and competence. They miss deadlines, they get less done during the working day, and their credibility and reputation among their

colleagues and customer base starts to be adversely affected.

People who are subject to bullying behaviour can also sleep less well, experience a drop in appetite, and lose interest in their usual hobbies and pastimes. Worse of all, their self-esteem and self-confidence often plummet, as they doubt themselves, their abilities and their competencies.

How do you recognise bullying behaviour?

Employers have a duty of care to provide, as far as is reasonably practicable, a working environment that is safe and without risks to the health and safety of those operating within it. By its very nature, workplace bullying challenges the safety of those subject to it and causes those who witness it to worry that they might be targeted next.

However, recognising bullying behaviour is not always straightforward. Different bullies use widely different behaviour, some of which can be hard to identify. Some workplace bullies use raw aggression, so the incidents they initiate are relatively easy to recognise as examples of workplace bullying. Others misuse power at work more subtly and with greater degrees of cunning. Their actions can be open to misinterpretation, with a more benign, if misguided, motive being ascribed to them than is actually the case.

Consider the example of a manager who employs a forceful and energetic work style giving their low-key and understated but competent team member feedback on performance. This 'feedback' takes the form of criticism only, is delivered in a robust and vigorous fashion, and ignores all the positive and praiseworthy aspects of the team member's work. The manager's opinion that their

colleague's performance is below par is presented as proven fact rather than a pejorative and deliberately undermining perception.

Throughout the entire 'feedback' meeting the manager talks over their colleague, denying them the right to defend their performance, dominating and interrupting them whenever they try to speak. The manager ends the meeting abruptly and walks out, leaving their shocked team member with the task of deciding how to handle the fact that his competent and effective performance has been characterised by his manager as well below par in an aggressive and destructive manner.

Some may interpret this situation simply as a manager giving feedback in a way that lacks both sensitivity and skill. Or it could be interpreted as a manager mistakenly and foolishly allowing their preference for a spirited and enthusiastic work style to colour their perceptions of their more toned-down but competent team member's performance. But both of these interpretations run the risk of ascribing more benign motives to the manager than are actually warranted.

What if this 'feedback' meeting is actually a signal that the manager is commencing a campaign to bully their team member with a calculated attempt to undermine their colleague's self-worth, self-confidence and sense of their own competence by giving them exaggeratedly negative feedback? It is the motive to bully and thereby injure their team member's well-being that is the key factor here, and that motive could be missed by those who think the 'feedback' or 'management style' were just clumsy and poorly executed rather than evidence of a deliberate attempt to disable and which was a first attempt to inculcate a bullying dynamic into a managerial relationship.

What constitutes workplace bullying?

Bullying behaviour can take many forms. Each bully has their own unique reasons for the decision to bully, and each uses their own range of behaviour – for example:

- **Behaviours that are intended to undermine a colleague's capacity to perform their role effectively.** These include allocating an excessive amount of work to a colleague with the intention of setting them up to fail; making



undeserved criticisms about them, their work, the standards they work towards, or their workplace conduct; and knowingly withholding information from a colleague so they cannot do their job effectively;

- **Verbal behaviours that convey hostility and undermine their target.** These include employing verbal aggression when speaking with their colleague; over-emphasising the importance of a mistake or misjudgement they have made in order to discredit them; calling their colleague by insulting names, either to their face or behind their back; and discussing a mistake they have made with other colleagues to injure their reputation and call their judgement or commitment into question;
- **Non-verbal tactics that convey aggression or threat.** These include staring at their colleague to

Workplace bullies systematically chip away at their targets' self-esteem so that the latter begins to doubt themselves, their abilities and their competencies
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unsettle them; snorting scornfully when talking with their colleague, or when speaking about them in the presence of other colleagues; adopting an intimidating stance when in their presence; and glaring angrily at them, with or without clenched fists, when speaking with them, or looking in their direction;

- **Practical behaviours that intimidate and invade the personal space of the target.** These include hiding their colleague's work files to undermine their ability to carry out their work; using their computer without permission; hiding or moving the personal items on their desk to invade their space; or sending nasty messages to them to create offence. These categories of behaviour are not exhaustive¹ but are presented here to illustrate the range of tactics workplace bullies employ against their target.

Bullying or just occasional anger?

You might ask where the line is between an angry outburst at work and an incident of workplace bullying. At times, anyone can overstep the mark and get cross at work. The key distinction here is intention: bullies want to remove personal and organisational power from the colleague they are targeting and place it with themselves.

Most non-bullying colleagues who cross the line from time to time at work will recognise that they have done so. They self-monitor. They recognise they have got it wrong, go back to the colleague with whom they over-stepped the mark, say they had a bad day, were tired, over-worked or stressed and were unnecessarily forceful in their dealings with them. They apologise and ask 'can we start again?'

But workplace bullies don't do that. Instead, they use unwarranted aggression in their dealings with the colleague they are targeting, go about their day after the attack as if nothing had happened, and repeat their aggression the next time they are minded to do so – again, without demur.

The exception to this pattern is when the person using bullying behaviour is manipulative enough to be friendly and warm to their target on an occasional or consistent basis while also bullying them on other occasions. This confusing mixture of warmth and threat is designed to throw their target off guard, thus disarming them and enabling the bully to more easily introduce a bullying dynamic in the relationship during subsequent attacks.

What action can be taken?

Whenever there is an incident of workplace bullying it would be in the best interests of your organisation and its employees if you commit to taking action. Most bullies make the decision to bully within an organisational context.² Before they commence a campaign they consider questions like "am I likely to get away with this?" and "how has the organisation responded to previous incidents of bullying?" or "what action will be taken against me if I am caught and confronted?"

Taking clear and decisive action against bullying behaviour each time it comes to light can prevent future attacks. It also sends the message to other colleagues tempted to, or already

using bullying behaviour that they will be held accountable. It will help the targets of bullying behaviour realise that they are not alone, that their organisation is stepping in, and that they do have effective sources of support available to them.

The steps you decide to take need to be taken promptly and place full responsibility where it belongs: with the person employing the bullying behaviour. Since these people cannot make the distinction between what is acceptable conduct at work and what is not, you could make it your business to do so on their behalf. You could draw this line for them in a meeting with their manager, making it clear that their bullying behaviour has to stop immediately, and that if they continue to use overly aggressive, counter-productive methods then they will be held accountable.

You could talk to the person who has been subject to bullying behaviour, to reassure them that you are aware of what has been going on and that you are taking steps to address it. You may also consider facilitating a meeting at which to re-establish a productive dialogue between the bully and their target, or targets. This might involve the bullying colleague listening to feedback about the consequences of their aggression from those they have targeted, and then verbalising that feedback in their own words so that the people who have been targeted know they have been heard.

As a SHE professional you can also play a role in influencing your employer to place measures designed to reduce and confront bullying behaviour at the top of the organisational agenda. You could encourage your employer to offer coaching both to those who use bullying behaviour and those adversely affected by it. An effective coaching programme can help bullying colleagues develop the self-awareness and empathy they need to replace their counter-productive and aggressive methods with effective people-handling skills, while those targeted by bullying can detoxify from their experiences, regain their self-confidence and move towards effective performance once more.

Other steps² organisations can take include:

- training a cadre of volunteers as 'dignity at work' advisors, who will have knowledge of the relevant employment law and be able to

counsel colleagues who have experienced or witnessed workplace bullying;

- employing managers who have already developed effective people-handling, influencing and leadership skills;
- continually developing the level of influencing, managing and leading skills displayed by managers;
- writing and distributing simply-worded and effective anti-bullying policies;
- collecting and analysing data around reported incidents of workplace bullying to identify trends and address them;
- raising awareness among employees about what does and does not constitute workplace bullying;
- training occupational-health advisors and SHE/HR professionals in how to identify and handle bullying behaviour at work;
- designing and publicising simple and straightforward complaints procedures for employees to access when they witness or experience incidents of bullying behaviour; and
- training employees whose role involves investigating complaints of workplace bullying so they know what to look for and how to handle it.

Summary

Responding effectively to incidents of workplace bullying makes sense if you want to keep your staff, ensure their well-being while they are at work, and benefit from the highest levels of commitment and performance they can offer. As a SHE practitioner you can play a leading role in reducing the toxic effects of bullying behaviour in the workplace by confronting the methods and motives of those who use such behaviour, and by supporting those adversely affected by unwarranted aggression at work. ■

References

- 1 Oade, A (2009): *Managing Workplace Bullying*, Palgrave Macmillan
- 2 Raynor, C and McIvor, K (2008): *Research Report on the Dignity at Work Project*, Portsmouth University

Aryanne Oade has published several books on and around the theme of managing adversarial relationships in the workplace – see page 4 for more information