Prevention of bullying in the public sector
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What is it?

Workplace bullying is repeated and unreasonable behavior directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety. (WorksafeNZ)

Can include

**Work related** – e.g. work overload, refusing leave, setting up to fail, unfair criticism

**Personal** – ignoring, isolation, gossip, false undermining, belittling, negative eye contact/staring, threats

**Physical threatening**

Sustained, but subtle and potent, hard to discern/separate from tough management?
Impact

Seems slightly more common in NZ than other countries. Why?

Organisational

- Productivity – absenteeism, lower performance, errors
- Cost - recruiting, turnover, compensation claims
- Culture – ineffective relationships, collaboration, teamwork, commitment, work environment, ‘displaced deviance’
- Legal & reputational

Individual – cardio, body mass, alcohol/drugs, lost sleep, work, depression, performance, confidence
High bullying/misconduct organisation (Agervold, 2009)

- Work demands
- Time pressure of work
- Autocratic management style
- Un-clarity of duties
- Social work climate (cliques, conflicts amongst peers)
- Total organisations – compliance & discipline
- Informality – too people oriented, tolerant
- Competition and rewards – making omelettes
NZ research (PSA members) Organisations split between high and low bullying (Plimmer et al., 2013)

High bullying organisations were rated worse at…..

All included

- Organisational processes
- Cross - unit co-operation
- Managem’t responsvn’s
- Social climate (trust and support)
- Autonomy
- Rewards
- Knowledge
- Job goal specificity

Non-bullied respondents agreed about the following

- Cross unit co-operation
- Managem’t responsvn’s
- Commitment
- Social climate
Other aspects

• Learning is social
• Both fear and unrealistic expectations about coming forward
• Contagion effects
• Retaliation
• Bullies are high in social intelligence narcissism (?) – good at BEI interviews?
• Targets – low affect, career trapped and vulnerable -
Prevention: Organisational factors
Let’s focus on what predicts or drives it, and then possible responses:

Sectors at risk
Government, health, defence, hospitality

Why government?
Whingers? Poor job clarity? Intense and complex social interaction that creates desire and opportunity? Performance management by other means? Weak managers?
How to prevent it?

Policies – as statement of intent AND to guide stakeholders thru informal & formal processes

• Broad or updateable definitions - advised
• Organisation owned risk – health and safety
• Bring “variability” issue into open
• Focus on bystander action and prevention
• High involvement in design - “our problem”
• Leadership team support
• Implementation, communicating, embedding, protocols on confidentiality
• Anti bullying? With discrimination and harassment? Or positive “dignity at work”
Implications for functional HR

- Recruitment and selection
- Rewards
- Training and development
- Performance appraisal / management
- Diversity
Training?

• Do the people who need it turn up?

• Vartia (2009) discussion, antecedents, consequences, various sessions and improv theatre – slight decrease, more awareness

• Kowalksi (2003) – action research – modelled desirable behaviours, poor ones as learning opportunities – v effective
Management of environment

• *Do managers earn their pay?*
  • Laissez faire leadership – feedback, rewards, involvement absent, lack of intervention in interpersonal conflict
    ↓
  • Satisfaction, performance, role conflict, ambiguity, co-worker conflict (Skogstad, 2007)
    ↓
  • Bullying between peers etc
Tertiary interventions

• Support, counseling seem desirable
• Mediation seems risky because of power imbalance
• Right to be wrong – even in cases where used as response to performance management
The primary reference for this presentation is:


Further references are available from the presenter.