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Bullying in the workplace

By Carole Spiers (Pressure Gauge)

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WHAT CAN YOU do if you're being bullied at work? Earlier in the year I wrote on the subject of email overload, but it seems that for an increasing number of people, the volume of emails they receive is only the start of the problem.



New research in the UK found that one-fifth of workers surveyed had been bullied via email, while others reported receiving bullying messages via their cell phones and PDAs.

Workplace bullying is a complex issue, so how can you tell if it's happening to you - and what can you do if it is?

How can you tell if you're being bullied? Being bullied is an isolating experience that tends not to be openly discussed in case this increases the risk of further ill-treatment, and because the 'target' often feels ashamed to discuss it with colleagues in case their professional credibility is called into question.

Even the mildest form of intimidation may be very disturbing, and, as this intensifies over time, the effect on the victim can be severe.

Early warning signs include: "My work is forever being criticised, even though I know my standards haven't slipped" ... "I'm beginning to question my own ability" ... "I wonder if all these mistakes are really my own fault" ... "I don't want to go into work anymore. It's making me ill".

Bullies will typically:

- Make life at work constantly difficult for their targets/ victims
- Make unreasonable demands: constantly criticising
- Insist that their way of carrying out tasks is the only way
- Shout at victims, publicly, in order to get things done
- Give instructions and then change them for no apparent reason
- Allocate tasks which they know the person is incapable of achieving
- Refuse to delegate when appropriate
- Humiliate their targets in front of others
- Block promotion, refuse to give fair appraisals or refuse to endorse pay increases or block bonus awards
- Exclude the victim from meetings or other legitimate business activities
- Constantly make attacks on the professionalism or personal qualities of their targets So what can you do?

Most targets of bullying have two main aims - to keep their jobs and for the situation to return to 'normal'.

If you're being bullied at work, the actions you can take include confronting the bully; approaching their immediate superior; contacting your Human Resources department; speaking to a colleague; staying and doing nothing; or leaving your job.

Research suggests that if you're prepared to confront the bully, it's important to take action quickly, i.e. on the first or second occasion, as it appears that once bullying has become established as an 'acceptable' pattern of behaviour it's extremely difficult to stop.

You should also do so in a direct but low key way that does not escalate the situation, i.e. so that the bully is not insulted and does not wish to exact revenge.

IF YOU'RE in a situation where you believe you are being subject to an 'established' pattern of bullying, the very real difficulty of bringing about substantial change should not be underestimated.

Staff often report that informal complaints are met with no response. And it's been estimated that 25 per cent of people who have been bullied eventually leave their jobs and seek work elsewhere - an enormous drain on any organisation.

Employers need to know how to deal with the problem

If an allegation of bullying is made to the organisation, the possible results of management interventions include:

- Nothing (this is often the most likely result)
- Complainant labelled as a troublemaker
- Allegations overruled

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- Dismissal threat to complainant

- Bullying worsens
- Complainant offered a sideways job move

- Bully disciplined
- Bullying stopped

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As people are often reluctant to discuss their experience of bullying, managers need to be sensitive to the telltale signs, and know what to do when they see them.

Many people are unwilling to take formal action, and this might be a contributory factor in the high exit rates associated with bullying at work. Undoubtedly the most effective intervention is therefore the training of managers to help them ensure the fast and effective resolution of disputes between their staff. Quite often, managers do nothing simply because they do not know what to do to rectify the situation.

It's also clearly important that employers recognise the impact that bullying can have on the organisation as a whole, as well as on individual employees. In particular, a formal policy should be in place to deal with issues of workplace bullying and/or harassment, as an organisation's action (or inaction) in relation to this will often be judged by staff - with inaction being seen as condoning bullying at work.

Key learning points

- Being bullied is an isolating experience that tends not to be openly discussed in case this increases the risk of further ill-treatment.
- Employers need to recognise the impact that bullying can have on the organisation as a whole, as well as on individual employees.

Carole Spiers, the UK's leading Guru on corporate stress-management and organisational change, is also a regular BBC broadcaster and international author on these major, business issues. She is also a regular motivational speaker at UAE conferences. Your questions and input on this article or any related topic, is welcomed. Each Friday, we will discuss a selection of your letters or case studies. Please write to Carole Spiers at: ktwkd@emirates.net.ae. Website: www.carolespiersgroup.com

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