A Special Report

‘Taking The Lid Off Workplace Bullying’

An Isolating Experience

by

Carole Spiers MIHPE MISMA
Leading International Authority on Corporate Stress

Carole Spiers Group
International Stress Management & Employee Wellbeing Consultancy

www.carolespiersgroup.co.uk
An Isolating Experience

The new £1.8 million initiative by the DTI and AMICUS (launched in April) to help stamp out workplace bullying, should give organisations the impetus they need to tackle a problem that is one of the last great workplace taboos, says Carole Spiers.

What Is Bullying?

According to ACAS, bullying is ‘regular intimidation that undermines the confidence and capability of the victim’. Such attacks may be irrational, unpredictable and demonstrably unfair, but despite this, bullying behaviour is still perceived in many organisations to be an acceptable part of a ‘tough’ management culture that delivers the required results.

Being bullied is an isolating experience. It tends not to be openly discussed, in case this increases the risk of further ill treatment. Those who are the prime targets often feel ashamed to discuss bullying with colleagues in case their professional credibility is called into question. Even the mildest form of intimidation may be very disturbing for the target, and as bullying or intimidation intensifies over a period of time, the effect on the victim can be severe – in extreme cases leading to suicide or significant mental breakdown.

The wider effects of bullying can also extend well beyond the people who are directly involved. The consequences of bullying at work can include low morale and motivation, a tense and apprehensive workforce, staff feeling devalued and demoralised, reduced creativity, ineffective management, increased costs, declining productivity and profitability, absenteeism and high staff turnover, and loss of investment in training.

The Problem Of Bullying In UK Workplaces

A large UK study on bullying at work published in 2000 by the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) and supported by the TUC shows that:

- One in 10 workers has been bullied in the past six months
- One in four workers has been bullied in the last five years
- 47% of workers have witnessed bullying at work

According to AMICUS in their publication ‘Bullying at work :How to tackle it’, the type of workplaces where bullying is more prevalent are those characterised by one or more of the following:

- An extremely competitive environment
- Fear of redundancy or downsizing
- Fear for one’s position of employment
- A culture of promoting oneself by putting colleagues down
- Envy among colleagues
- An authoritarian style of management and supervision
- Frequent organisational change and uncertainty
- Little or no participation in issues affecting the workplace
- Lack of training
- De-skilling
- No respect for others and/or appreciation of their views
- Poor working relationships in general
- No clear published and accepted codes of conduct
- Excessive workloads and demands on people
- Impossible targets or deadlines
- No procedures or policies for resolving problems
What Are Bullying Behaviours?

Bullying behaviours can include a wide range of overt and covert actions, including attacks on professionalism, personal attacks, isolation, overwork and destabilisation. It is not unusual, for example, for individuals to complain that their professional competence has been called into question as a result of disparaging remarks or criticism from colleagues or managers, who they find to be undermining their efforts.

These attacks might include overt actions such as a public ‘dressing down’ for work errors; or covert behaviour such as circulating rumours or gossip that appear to question an individual’s ability. This can also include ‘non-action’ - for example, not giving acknowledgement and/or approval for a good piece of work, or not asking for an opinion from the person who is clearly best qualified to provide that input.

Bullies will typically:

- Make life constantly difficult for their targets
- 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 bonus awards
- Exclude the victim from meetings or other legitimate business activities
- Constantly make attacks on the professionalism or personal qualities of their targets

Being ‘sent to Coventry’ is a well-known phrase describing the enforced social isolation of an individual within a group. When applied in a workplace setting, it requires enormous courage for any one group member to break ranks with their ‘bullying’ colleagues and risk the consequent ridicule and rejection. Once these situations happen, for whatever reason, they are very hard to stop.

‘Overwork’ involves the imposition of highly unrealistic deadlines where people are effectively deliberately ‘set up to fail. This may also appear as ‘micro management’, where every dot and comma, bolt, nut and screw is checked so often that incompetence or inability is deliberately implied.

Finally, people who are deliberately ‘destabilised’ feel that they have lost control over their work environment and, as a result, have ceased to be able to carry out their duties in a relaxed manner without being threatened. Instead they live from day-to-day as they fight to regain a position of normality, often unsuccessfully.
What Can Individuals, Managers And Organisations Do?

Actions available to individuals who are being bullied include confronting the bully; approaching the bully’s immediate superior; contacting human resources and/or occupational health; involving a trade union; speaking to a colleague; staying and doing nothing; or leaving their job – the route taken by 25% of people who have been bullied (and also a further 20% of workers who witness repeated bullying).

A UNISON (2000) survey of police section members asked those who had successfully combated bullying what they had done. A wide range of actions were reported, ranging from reacting with hostility, to taking the ‘bully’ aside and gently explaining the effect of their actions. What was common to these ‘success stories’ was that all actions were taken quickly, i.e. on the first or second occasion. It appears that once bullying has become established and entrenched as an ‘acceptable’ pattern of behaviour, it is extremely difficult to stop or modify.

Most targets of bullying have two main aims – to keep their jobs and for the situation to return to ‘normal’. These apparently simple goals can get lost in the distractions of defensive positioning regarding possible legal claims and worries about future action to remedy the situation.

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.

It is 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 and procedures should be in place to deal with issues of workplace bullying and/or harassment - as this will indicate that the organisation takes the issue seriously, and provide a mechanism for dealing with complaints, both informally and formally.

There is frequently less clear evidence related to bullying than might be found in other cases of discrimination such as sexual or racial harassment. Investigators therefore need to look at situations where a large number of small and, taken on their own, insignificant actions are the basis of a reported incident, but which when taken together may reveal consistent bullying behaviour – an area where specially trained internal or external investigators can have an important role to play.

Bullying is unacceptable in the modern workplace, and an organisation’s action (or inaction) in relation to bullying will often be judged by staff - with inaction being seen as condoning bullying at work. As the DTI and AMICUS have rightly pointed out, this is something that no responsible employer should want to be found guilty of.
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Carole Spiers is a weekly columnist for Gulf News (Dubai) on managing corporate stress and human resources issues and is the author of Tolley’s ‘Managing Stress in the Workplace’ – industry’s bible on stress management published by LexisNexis UK.

She is an Expert Witness before the UK Courts and launched National Stress Awareness Day on behalf of the International Stress Management Association UK of which is she is a Vice-President. Carole is also the President of the London Chapter of the Professional Speakers Association.
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Carole Spiers Group
International Stress Management & Employee Wellbeing Consultancy
Gordon House, 83-85 Gordon Ave, Stanmore, Middx. HA7 3QR. UK
Tel: + 44 (0) 20 8954 1593  Fax: + 44 (0) 20 8907 9290
Email: info@carolespiersgroup.co.uk  Website: www.carolespiersgroup.co.uk