

# BEATING THE BULLIES

*The government recently launched the world's largest-ever project aimed at tackling bullying in the workplace – a move that should encourage all employers to establish suitable procedures for preventing harassment at work, argues stress management consultant **Carole Spiers**.*

**I**n March 2004, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and the trade union Amicus jointly launched the world's biggest-ever project aimed at tackling bullying in the workplace.

The £1.8 million initiative will see the trade union working with some of the UK's biggest companies to develop practical guidance for employers on dealing with cases of bullying and discrimination at work, and will provide support and training to organisations trying to combat the problem – for example, by training staff to act as workplace counsellors and investigating incidents of harassment. The project is believed to be the largest-ever study of discrimination at work, and should give all organisations the impetus they need to tackle a problem that remains one of the last great workplace taboos.

*The effects of bullying at work can extend beyond the person concerned and lead to low staff morale, reduced productivity and higher absenteeism.*

According to the employment conciliation service ACAS, bullying is defined as '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.

## Low morale

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.

In 2000, the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST) and the TUC jointly published a study on the extent of workplace bullying. This found that one in ten workers had been bullied in the six months prior to the research, and one in four workers had been bullied in the five-year period before the study. At the same time, 47 per cent of workers reported witnessing bullying at work.





According to guidance from Amicus, bullying is more prevalent in workplaces with one or more of the following characteristics:

- an extremely competitive environment;
- fear of redundancy or downsizing, or fear for one's position;
- a culture of promoting oneself by putting colleagues down;
- an authoritarian style of management;
- frequent organisational change and uncertainty;
- little or no participation in workplace issues;
- lack of training or de-skilling;
- no respect for others 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; and
- no procedures or policies for resolving problems.

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 from colleagues or managers, who they find to be undermining their efforts.

### Circulating rumours

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;
- insist that their way of working is the only way;
- shout at victims publicly;
- 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;
- exclude the victim from meetings or other legitimate business activities; and
- constantly attack the professionalism or personal qualities of their targets.

Being 'sent to Coventry' describes the enforced social isolation of an individual in a group. When applied at work, it requires enormous courage for anyone to break ranks with their 'bullying' colleagues and risk the consequent ridicule. 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.

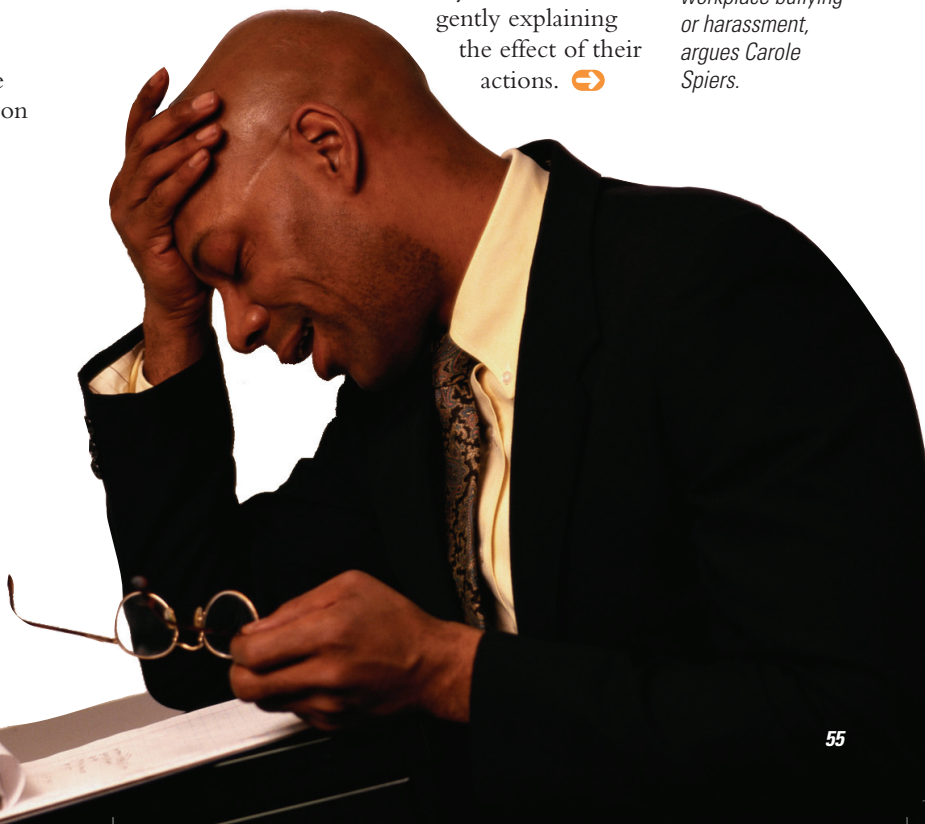
### Confronting the bully

So what can individuals, managers and organisations do to prevent and deal with cases of bullying at work? 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 per cent of people who have been bullied (and also a further 20 per cent of workers who witness repeated bullying).

A recent survey by the trade union Unison of its police section members asked those who had successfully combated workplace 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. ➡

*By establishing a formal policy and procedure for dealing with incidents of bullying or harassment at work, employers can demonstrate to staff that they take the issue seriously.*

*Training managers on how to quickly and effectively resolve disputes between staff is one of the most effective ways of dealing with workplace bullying or harassment, argues Carole Spiers.*







*Carole Spiers  
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has become established and entrenched as an 'acceptable' pattern of behaviour among people at work, it is extremely difficult to stop or modify.

### Tell-tale signs

As people are often reluctant to discuss their experience of bullying, managers need to be sensitive to the tell-tale signs, and know what to do when they see them. Many people are unwilling to take formal action if they are bullied at work, and this might be a contributory factor in the high staff turnover and exit rates associated with bullying.

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 to tackle incidents of bullying simply because they do not know what to do.

➔ What was common to these 'success stories' was that all actions were taken quickly – in other words, on the first or second occasion. It appears that once workplace bullying

It is also 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 procedure 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, as well as providing a mechanism for dealing with complaints.

There is often less clear evidence related to bullying than might be found in other cases of discrimination at work, such as sexual 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 – an area where specially trained 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. **SM**

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**KEE SYSTEMS LIMITED**  
Thornsett Works, Thornsett Rd, London SW18 4EW  
Tel: 020 8874 6566 Fax: 020 8874 5726  
E-mail: [sales@keesystems.com](mailto:sales@keesystems.com) Website: [keesystems.com](http://keesystems.com)

