

# Bullying in the Workplace: Control It Before It Controls You



**B**ullying is becoming a high profile business problem, with cases now in the media on a regular basis. By the time bullying hits the headlines, it is usually already endemic in a business.

Bullying is any behaviour which isolates an individual so that they are no longer part of a main social group. Bullies seek power and control, and rather than achieve that overtly through ambition, hard work and promotion, they seek it covertly by building their own 'empires'.

## Subtle bullying is the most dangerous

The most subtle forms of bullying in the workplace are the most dangerous because they're difficult to monitor, almost impossible to prove and they're at such a level that victims feel reluctant to speak up for fear of being wrong.

For example, a bully might 'borrow' items from a colleague's desk, 'forget' to pass on important messages or even hide paperwork, only to be the most active person in helping to look for it.

A manager might poll his or her team for an important decision on a day when a particular member of staff is absent, so that they are made to feel excluded. If you question them, they will have a perfect reason as to why the decision couldn't wait.

An even more subtle form of bullying is when a manager singles someone out as their 'favourite' so that other staff alienate that person.

Subtle bullying is almost never detected because the bully will move their attention to a different victim if there is any danger of being caught. They will always have perfect reasons for their actions, it will be someone else's fault, and they will portray themselves as the victim. This is difficult for HR teams to tackle directly, so the focus should instead be on supporting managers who are prepared to act on their instincts in tackling or removing bullies. Another strategy would be to incorporate awareness of bullying and its consequences into induction training within the organisation.

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## The cost of bullying

Bullying leads to stress in its victims which results in employee disengagement, absenteeism and when unresolved, this often leads to the resignation of the individual from the organisation. When the victims of bullying feel trapped by their need for the job, they will seek control in other ways, perhaps by reducing productivity or taking office supplies, and they can often appear as the cause of a problem rather than the victim of it. Bullying can be part of a culture, where managers ignore it as long as targets are met.

When managers fail to take action, they encourage bullying, because the bully knows that they can get away with it. Recently, a major fast-food restaurant was found to have "implicitly authorised" a manager's sexual harassment of an employee because it failed to enforce its published HR policies.

A culture where bullying is tolerated leads to high staff turnover which results in extra costs for the business. In this case, a bigger problem than bullying is staff feeling that they have no support from their managers. When staff feel powerless, their only means of truly regaining control is to remove themselves from the situation.

## How to tackle bullying

- Secrecy is the bully's source of power, and the only reliable way to deal with bullying is to take this away. While open communication allows victims to speak up, more importantly it denies the bully their means of control.
- HR managers must specify behaviours that constitute bullying so that line managers know what to look out for.
- While organisations can implement 'zero tolerance' policies on bullying, the onus is firmly on line managers to act quickly and decisively.
- Managers fear acting on instinct because of HR legislation, so having a performance management system in place which measures tangible, objective results is the manager's best means of removing a bully.

When managers are prepared to speak openly about these most subtle forms of bullying, they show their teams that they will not tolerate it, they highlight the behaviours to look out for and they prove that they are supporting their staff. Open communication is the manager's best hope for promoting a safe working environment and stopping bullying for good. ●

### Question:

How much can bullying in the workplace cost you?

### Answer:

Bullying leads to increases in absenteeism and staff turnover which have a direct cost to an organisation. When bullying reaches the level where the victims can make a formal case, you lose not only the court penalties but also your reputation as an employer. Recent cases which have made the headlines include:

- A Victoria cafe owner and three employees were prosecuted following the suicide of an 18-year-old waitress who was repeatedly criticised and insulted at work. The business owner was personally fined \$220,000 for failure to maintain a safe working environment, with total fines reaching \$335,000.
- Two company Directors were fined \$27,000 after a 16 year old labourer was 'initiated' at a company in New South Wales.
- A sales woman in the UK was awarded £180,000 by a court following a harassment claim.

Under the new national Occupational Health and Safety framework, due to be introduced in January 2012, Australian HR managers could be held personally liable in cases of bullying and harassment at work, adding a personal cost to the financial penalties imposed by the courts.

