

Interventions for managing workplace bullying



Michael O'Driscoll

Tim Bentley (AUT), Bevan Catley (Massey U), Helena Cooper-Thomas (Auckland U), Dianne Gardner (Massey U), Linda Trenberth (Birkbeck College, London)



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Prevalence of workplace bullying?

- **Nielsen et al (2010) review [JOOP]**
 - 102 prevalence estimates, 86 independent samples
 - Average 14.6% of people report being bullied
 - 11.3% self-labelled victimization with definition provided
 - 18.1% self-labelled without definition
 - 14.8% behavioural measures (e.g. NAQ)
- **In NZ, Bentley et al (2009)**
 - NAQ (2 negative acts weekly for 6 months): 17.8%
 - Self-labelled (with definition): 4% (weekly or more), 12.6% (now and then)

Perceived effectiveness of organisational efforts (Bentley et al., 2009)

Response scale: 1 = very ineffective 6 = very effective

- **Mean effectiveness** = 3.9 (*somewhat effective*)
 - N of responses ranged from 977-1388 (i.e. missing responses)
- **Most effective efforts** (*somewhat effective*)
 - Encouraging open and respectful communication (mean = 4.2)
 - Encouraging appropriate ways to interact (4.0)
 - Developing a workplace bullying policy (3.9)
 - Developing procedures for handling complaints about bullying (3.9)
- **Least effective efforts** (*somewhat ineffective*)
 - Establishing clear consequences for bullying behaviour (3.3)
 - Identifying factors which foster bullying (3.4)
 - Monitoring and reviewing staff relationships, especially fair treatment (3.4)

Potential solutions

Bullying not explicit in OSH legislation (implicit in hazard management)

Some court cases in favour of targets

Individual strategies are often ineffective

Active efforts by targets (confronting, complaining) *can* make it worse

- Frequently observed trajectory: ineffective attempts at active coping → increasingly passive strategies → leaving the organisation.

Organisational strategies: e.g. role models of respect; consultation; effective performance management; policies on bullying, discrimination and harassment, supported by systems which are responsive to complaints and confidential.

Approaches to dealing wth bullying

- **Three levels**

- **Societal**: legislation, collective guidelines, codes of practice
- **Organisational**: health and safety policies, harassment policies, anti-bullying policies
- **Individual**: conflict management, task design, behaviour change, personal coping

Potential approaches [1]

- **Training (individual)**
 - Coach/mentor people to behave in appropriate ways, i.e. behavioural training
 - Effectiveness? Little research on whether this works
- **Training (team/group)**
 - Develop team climate and encourage collegiality
 - Effectiveness? Is helpful, reduces conflict, but bullying per se?
- **Policies (organisational)**
 - Becoming more prominent
 - Effectiveness? A necessary starting point, but not sufficient per se
 - Managers/leaders need to implement (“walk the talk”)
- **Organisational culture**
 - Change values and priorities → focus on employee well-being
 - Effectiveness? Emerging evidence

Potential approaches [2]

- **Conflict management**
 - ‘escalation of conflict’ but is this all it is?
 - Mediation (e.g. manager-employee): power differential
 - **Stress management (individual)**
 - Help people cope better
 - ‘RESPECT’ (Lindberg, 2013)
 - R = recognize the situation
 - E = collect relevant evidence
 - S = get support
 - P = plan goals and strategy
 - E = educate yourself and others
 - C = control the story & your public image
 - T = implement (tackle) your strategy, launch actions
- Lindberg, Barbara (2013). Mindmap for victims of bullying. *IAWBH Newsletter*, 6(2), 14-15

Some general observations about approaches to managing bullying in the workplace

- Few systematic efforts to address persistent bullying problems.
- **Interventions :**
 - Typically focused on the individual, either the target of bullying or the perpetrator.
 - Bullying typically treated as an ‘individual’ problem rather than a system problem
 - Lack of constructive leadership perceived to be a significant contributor to inaction
- **Implications from research on interventions :**
 - Need systemic approach – focus on organisational factors which may contribute to bullying culture/climate, especially leadership
 - Personal coping efforts seem to have little direct effect on bullying
 - Differentiate bullying behaviours from accepted practices
 - More proactive approaches needed, focus on leadership

Risk management approach to bullying prevention

As for all OHS risks:

- **Identify the risk** (e.g. through observations and surveys; complaints; exits and absenteeism)
- **Assess the risk** (the extent or probability of the problem; costs to the organisation)
- **Control the risk**: eliminate, isolate, minimise (policy; complaints procedure; informal/low key resolution process; anti-bullying programme; training for managers; etc.)
- **Review** ... all aspects of control, and continue to monitor the problem