Interventions for managing workplace bullying

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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 with 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

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
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