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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vii

PART 1. WHAT IS WORKPLACE BULLYING?

CHAPTER 1. What is workplace bullying? 1
CHAPTER 2. What is not workplace bullying? 14
CHAPTER 3. How common is bullying and what does it cost? 32
CASE STUDY: Evan, Part 1 47
CHAPTER 4. Who is involved and why does it happen? 48

PART 2. RIGHTS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

CASE STUDY: Evan, Part 2 69
CHAPTER 5. The legal context 71

PART 3. TAKING ACTION

CASE STUDY: Evan, Part 3 83
CHAPTER 6. Planning and implementing controls 85
CHAPTER 7. Designing and implementing complaints procedures 100
CASE STUDY: Evan, Part 4 124
CHAPTER 8. The target's perspective 126

PART 4. MOVING BEYOND WORKPLACE BULLYING

CASE STUDY: Evan, Part 5 137
CHAPTER 9. Moving beyond workplace bullying 139
RESOURCES 145
APPENDIX 146
ENDNOTES 151
INDEX 153

http://www.workpsychologyarena.com/preventing-workplace-bullying-9780415668811
Chapter 3. How common is bullying, and what does it cost?

One of the first steps in trying to prevent and manage workplace bullying is understanding how frequently it occurs. This chapter reviews the data on the prevalence of bullying in the working population, and some of the reasons why it is difficult to know exactly how common bullying is in a particular workplace. Despite variations in prevalence, we know that bullying is very costly for individual targets, organisations, and the community.

How big is the problem?

There are no definitive statistics on the prevalence of workplace bullying, and obtaining reliable data is complicated by several issues. Prevalence figures depend to a large extent on how bullying is measured and defined (see Hoel et al. 1999). Measurement and definition of bullying varies across studies (for example, from using self-reported ‘bullying’ with supplied definitions of bullying, to using indices of bullying behaviours with different scoring methods, see Salin 2001). There is a lack of widespread national surveillance systems, and we know that people under- and over-report being bullied. Cultural differences in how bullying is viewed, and how it is reported (for example, influenced by legislative frameworks, the role of unions, or social conventions) also affect observed differences in prevalence figures. Accordingly, it is difficult to compare the various figures available from

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academic or industry research, and across jurisdictions. Rather than go into the detail of how the studies differ, and attempt comparison, we will give an indication of the types of prevalence figures that are available.

Looking across several European studies, severe bullying is thought to be experienced by 1–4 per cent of the working population, while less severe bullying is experienced by 8–10 per cent (Zapf et al. 2003). Norwegian studies have placed the prevalence of bullying at 6 per cent, using different methodologies, although Norway is thought to be different to many other jurisdictions due to cultural and economic factors (Nielsen et al. 2009).

In a national survey of 1518 people by Australian job search website CareerOne in 2007, 74 per cent of respondents said they had been bullied in the workplace at some time and 22 per cent of the survey respondents had ‘just quit’ their job rather than doing anything else about it (CareerOne 2007). A survey by recruitment firm Drake International of 850 Australian workers indicated that 25 per cent had been bullied in the previous six months (Drake International 2009), while more than 50 per cent said they had witnessed bullying.

Public sector authorities in Australia have started to monitor workplace bullying as part of their regular staff surveys, though bullying and harassment are often confused with one another in these data. The Victorian public sector People Matter Surveys of 2006 (over 13,000 responses) and 2007 (just under 16,000 responses) both indicated that 21 per cent of the workforce claimed to have been targeted by ‘harassment or bullying behaviours’ in the previous twelve months (State Services Authority of Victoria 2006, 2007). It is not clear from these data what proportion of the behaviours would have constituted bullying and what proportion would have constituted harassment. The Tasmanian State Service Employee Survey Report 2005 (nearly 11,000 respondents) revealed that 26 per cent of Tasmanian public-service workers reported being subject to ‘harassment or bullying’ in the previous twelve months (Tasmanian State Services Commissioner 2005). Forty per cent said they had witnessed bullying and harassment. In the 2006–2007 Tasmanian report, 15 per cent claimed to have been harassed or bullied (Tasmanian State Services Commissioner 2007). Australian federal public
service figures place the prevalence at 15 per cent of the workforce being ‘bullied’ in the last twelve months (Australian Public Service Commission 2007).

In the 2006 Victorian survey, more than 40 per cent of respondents were concerned about reprisals for lodging a grievance (State Services Authority Victoria 2006). This was echoed in the Drake International survey (2009), where only 50 per cent of targets sought assistance. The reasons most frequently cited for not seeking help were the beliefs that nothing would be done, or that reporting the behaviour would make it worse.

Taking these figures together, despite methodological differences, it seems reasonably conservative to conclude that bullying is occurring to about 10 per cent of the working population. This means that one in ten people are experiencing bullying. Even if the real figure was closer to 5 per cent (one in twenty), this would still constitute a very large sector of the workforce. Reliable, valid and comparable data which distinguish between bullying and other unacceptable behaviours still present an important research priority. These data would help make the case that prevention is of utmost importance.

Why don’t people report workplace bullying?

As mentioned previously, the available statistics on how often bullying occurs probably underestimate the true incidence of bullying, because people do not always report it. In the health system, nurses have described reporting workplace bullying as ‘professional suicide’ (Garling 2008, section 12.26). Let’s consider some of the other reasons why people don’t report workplace bullying.

Subtlety of the behaviours

Some of the behaviours that are considered to be bullying, if they meet the other criteria discussed in Chapter 1, can be enacted with great subtlety. For example, not including someone in an email list (Rayner 2007) could mean that person is unable to adequately prepare for a meeting, and thus their credibility and opportunity to contribute is undermined. Regularly moving or rearranging items in someone’s workspace can cause extreme frustration, and interfere with their work performance and progress. These behaviours can be
quite hard to detect and to assign responsibility for because they sometimes involve omissions, or occur in secret. If they were reported, these behaviours could be dismissed as forgetfulness, misunderstanding, miscommunication, ‘technical problems’, or as though nothing at all has happened. Subtle actions such as these may lead the target of the behaviour to question if anything is really happening to them, or wonder if the problems may actually be their own fault. As targets quietly suffer and ask, ‘Is it just me?’, the behaviour goes unreported.

**Embarrassment**

Related to the subtlety of the behaviours, people may feel embarrassed about reporting some of the behaviours that are considered to be bullying. The behaviour itself may have caused some personal embarrassment (like a school prank of putting glue on someone’s chair), or the act of reporting it to a manager may be embarrassing. Imagine having to report to your supervisor or human relations officer that someone keeps leaving rotten food in your desk drawer. For many people, doing this would be like ‘telling the teacher’, and the implication that they couldn't handle it themselves could also cause embarrassment and shame. Their perception of the likely response from management, which might include laughter or being told to ‘learn to take a joke’, may compound this problem.

**Fear**

In the United Kingdom, 95 per cent of a large sample of public sector trade unionists supported the idea that workers are too scared to report workplace bullying (Rayner 1998, 1999). There are several things that people may fear if they report bullying. Firstly, they may fear that they will lose their job. This is an extremely potent fear, especially in times of economic uncertainty. Alternatively, people may not have a lot of confidence in their superior’s attitude to the problem, and fear that they will not be taken seriously. They might think that they will be told to ‘toughen up’ or ‘roll with the punches’. The target may also fear how they will be perceived for having reported bullying—for example, as a troublemaker, or as untrustworthy.
A real fear may exist regarding retribution or ‘payback’. If bullying is reported and not dealt with appropriately, the behaviours may continue in a more subtle, covert manner. We know that almost 40 per cent of people who have experienced bullying or harassment are concerned with the negative consequences of making a complaint (State Services Authority of Victoria 2006).

**Not knowing what to do**

In some situations, targets have no real means for taking action and thus reporting does not occur. Targets may not know what constitutes inappropriate behaviour or to what type of behaviour they have been exposed—for example, bullying as opposed to harassment or just poor/unfair management practices. They may not know what to do should they encounter bullying behaviour because they have not been trained to recognise it, nor been made aware of the internal complaint or grievance procedures. Sometimes there are no procedures in place.

**The role of the person using bullying behaviours**

In some cases, the position of the person using the bullying behaviours can make bullying more difficult for targets and witnesses to report. Many organisations, understandably, want to resolve any kind of workplace dispute or complaint as locally as possible (see Parker 2008). This means that immediate supervisors often have a role in dealing with complaints of workplace bullying and other unacceptable behaviours.

In addition to all the reasons people don’t report workplace bullying, reporting to your immediate supervisor is a particular problem if that supervisor is the person using the unacceptable behaviours. Many organisations recognise this problem and advise targets to report to the next highest supervisor if this is the case. An issue often overlooked, however, is conflicts of interest in the reporting lines. Supervisors can have all sorts of conflicts of interest which make them inappropriate for dealing with workplace bullying claims; for example, the supervisor is best friends with the accused, or married to them, or the accused is their sports coach. Conflicts of interests must be engineered out.
of reporting lines for workplace bullying and other unacceptable behaviours if the reporting process is to be fair. We examine the conflicts of interest issue further in Chapters 6 and 7.

The role of immediate supervisors as the first port of call when reporting workplace bullying also raises the issue of training and experience. Line managers/supervisors are often not trained to deal with unacceptable behaviours. Despite being highly skilled in their jobs, many have little formal management training. The problems of requiring line managers to deal with complex situations involving conflict, bullying and unacceptable behaviours, with little management training, were recognised in the findings of the inquiry into the New South Wales Ambulance Service (see Parker 2008). If line managers and supervisors are expected to be the ‘front line’ in workplace bullying reporting, then they need training and support for this function. A lack of training in what bullying is and how it should be dealt with can contribute to less than adequate outcomes for targets and for those accused of workplace bullying. While centralised reporting procedures would seem an obvious remedy, these can also have significant problems (for example, in terms of timeliness, confidentiality, and independence), as we discuss in Chapter 7.

If a high performer is the person using bullying behaviours, then the problem can be particularly difficult. This person may be a key player in terms of financial gain for the organisation, or they may be ‘protected’ because they have special skills or knowledge (Rayner 2007). Organisations sometimes turn a blind eye to unacceptable behaviours in order to retain the individual(s) and the benefits they contribute. The challenge of doing something about bullying can cost the organisation money. In the long run, however, managing it can also significantly save the organisation, increase its performance and staff commitment, and improve its reputation. There are several ways to help avoid individuals becoming so singularly important to the organisation, such as succession planning, training and mentoring, and professional development. These can avoid the difficulties of bullying should it occur, and avoiding dependence on a few individuals makes good business sense.
Nature of the industry
In many cases, factors related to the type of industry or industry sector create barriers to reporting the extent of workplace bullying. For example, bullying is known to be a problem in many hierarchical or paramilitary organisations, which emphasise discipline in order to achieve a particular outcome (for example, Parker 2008; Archer 1999).

When bullying occurs in small business, it may be difficult for the targeted person to do anything about it. In small businesses, often the only people to whom the targeted person can report are either the perpetrator(s) of the bullying behaviour, or someone with some form of conflict of interest (for example, a relative of the alleged perpetrator). This is why it may appear that the only course of action for employees in this situation is to leave their job. This set of circumstances is often compounded if bullying occurs in a small family business and employees are subject to bullying behaviours perpetrated by their own relatives. Family businesses are often under-resourced. Unfortunately, other pressures associated with running a small business can make good health and safety management and consultation with employees about their work experiences less of a management priority.

Some of the reasons for not reporting bullying are a consequence of the behaviours themselves, while others are more within the control of the organisation. Organisations can design comprehensive, independent and confidential reporting systems, they can train people in how to report bullying, and can increase awareness of how subtle behaviours can be used to slowly undermine people. Part of the purpose of this book is to help people and organisations to become more aware of workplace bullying, and to challenge them to develop better systems that circumvent the problems highlighted above. More about what organisations should do regarding reporting the hazard of workplace bullying can be found in Chapter 6.

The costs of workplace bullying
Workplace bullying incurs a great cost to targets and organisations. These costs can be expressed in dollars, time, and pain and suffering, and while it can seem crude to reduce a workplace hazard to a dollar cost, this is sometimes the most
effective way of gaining organisational commitment to prevention strategies. Figures from the Australian Productivity Commission (2010) indicate that stress, of which bullying is a part, costs organisations $10.1 billion annually through absenteeism and presenteeism, and costs the economy $14 billion annually. These figures do not include the costs of turnover, retraining, and effects of reduced morale on productivity across the wider work group. While these costs are significant, the problem with large-scale economic models of how much psychological hazards cost is that, due to their scale, they can seem quite remote from everyday business operations. A simple examination of the likely effects of bullying on individual businesses demonstrates how bullying can represent a significant financial cost.

Box 3.1 How much could bullying cost your organisation?

Use the checklist below to start a tally of how much workplace bullying might cost your organisation. You might like to set some assumptions to get more accurate figures (for example, one in ten staff being bullied per year; 40 per cent turnover of those who are bullied per year, etc). Note that many of the costs are not insurable.

**Production losses**

- overhead costs while production is reduced
- time lost due to preoccupation with the negative situation
- production lost due to absenteeism
- production lost due to presenteeism
- time lost due to internal transfer
- time lost when people look for a new job in work time
- time lost when people prepare their case
- loss of skill and experience when a person leaves
- loss of institutional knowledge when a person leaves
- lowered (at least initial) production rates of replacement workers

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Wage losses
• interruption of work due to the negative situation
• person hours spent in ‘damage control’
• costs of people taking full leave entitlements
• costs of redundancy payouts
• costs of replacing staff (for example, administration, advertising, selection costs)

Associated costs
• costs related to investigations (internal and/or external) including the gathering of evidence and the preparation of reports
• costs of implementing report recommendations e.g. costs of external advisors to facilitate the recovery of the organisation, development and implementation of appropriate policies and procedures (for example, relating to dispute resolution and disciplinary action)
• costs of supporting other workers such as bystanders (for example, through provision of counselling)
• costs of training new staff
• legal and other costs associated with prosecution and common law claims
• cost of fines imposed by health and safety authorities
• some medical costs (for example, in relation to diagnosis)

Insurance premiums
• increased insurance premiums due to claims experience

Intangibles
• lowered employee commitment and therefore poorer performance
• lowered employee motivation
• lowered employee morale
• loss of reputation as an employer (for example, through poor publicity)
• loss of goodwill
• cost of various forms of retaliation towards the organisation by aggrieved parties
Costs to the individual

The effects of workplace bullying on targets is one area that has received a great deal of research attention. The nature and extent of these costs depends a lot on the nature of the bullying behaviours, how long they go on for, and the nature and efficacy of the processes that are used to deal with them after they occur (for example, procedures followed within the organisation, investigation, compensation and litigation). The costs are also influenced by factors intrinsic to the target— their coping styles and the resources they have around them (such as family and friends), and their perceptions and reactions to the bullying behaviour.

Given these differences between people, the differences in the types of bullying behaviours that people could be exposed to, and the various organisational contexts in which they work, it is nearly impossible to give a definitive list of all the possible outcomes that bullying behaviour could have for a particular target. We are able to talk in general about what is typically found to happen to targets, however. There is a wealth of evidence from around the world indicating that bullying results in significant negative consequences for an individual’s health. It’s important to remember that health includes wellbeing. The World Health Organization’s definition of health (WHO 2006) states that, ‘Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.’

The inclusiveness of ‘health’ is important because it highlights that psychological symptoms are important health indicators. People who have been exposed to workplace bullying have been found to experience the following:

- post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms
- depression
- anxiety
- sleep disturbances
- lowered self-esteem
- anger
- chronic fatigue
- suicidal thoughts
- irritability

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• feelings of nervousness, insecurity and victimisation
• burnour
• musculoskeletal complaints and muscular tension
• headaches
• nausea
• stomach upset
• social withdrawal

(see review in Einarsen & Mikkelsen 2003; Ashforth 1994; Irish Health and Safety Authority 2001; Namie & Namie 2000; see also Parker 2008). Bullying is appropriately viewed as a stressor—that is, something that causes stress (Rayner 1998; Zapf & Gross 2001; Lewis & Orford 2005). Many of these outcomes are similar to those experienced during or following chronic stress. The repeated and enduring nature of bullying means that significant health problems are more likely to occur following bullying than less frequently experienced workplace stressors (Vartia 2001).

Apart from effects on their health, bullying can result in several other outcomes for targets, including:

• reduced productivity (Ashforth 1994);
• reduced job satisfaction (Einarsen et al. 1998);
• dreading going to work (CareerOne, 2007);
• decreased problem-solving abilities, concentration and rational judgment (Irish Health and Safety Authority 2001);
• reduced self-confidence, self-worth and productivity (Price Spratlen 1995); and
• increased propensity to leave the workplace (Quine 2001), or thoughts of leaving the workplace (State Services Authority of Victoria 2006).

Studies which show that targets of bullying experience particular outcomes are mainly correlational in that they provide information about events that occur together. Just because events occur together does not necessarily mean that one of them has directly, independent of other factors, caused the other. It may have been one of multiple contributing factors. Scientific evidence to suggest causation of negative outcomes by bullying and related issues is growing. A prospective study of 8130 men and 7400 women in

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Finland has shown that those experiencing conflicts at work had a greater risk of developing psychiatric conditions four to six years following the conflicts (Romanov et al. 1996). Also, in a study of 4981 female and 674 male nurses in Finland, the 5 per cent of nurses who reported being bullied had a 26 per cent higher risk of sickness absence compared to non-bullied employees (Kivimaki et al. 2000).

The issue of causation is also relevant to the observation that in some cases, bullying has been argued to have led to people taking their own lives and the lives of others. Cases involving suicide and/or homicide tend to be the ones covered in the media, and to some extent they are extreme cases. There is often a debate (legal or otherwise) in such situations regarding the degree to which being bullied ‘caused’ a person to attempt or complete suicide, or to experience other symptoms mentioned above.

The outcomes that targets experience can be caused by multiple factors combined, and the cumulative effects of stressors are well known (Evans & Coman 1993; McFarlane & Bryant 2007). In leading to a set of outcomes, it is likely that being bullied combines with a host of other experiences including, but not limited to:

- the target’s past experiences;
- the nature and extent of their reactions to the situation;
- the other stressors in their job or workplace independent of bullying;
- the nature and efficacy of their coping strategies; and
- other significant events in their lives.

This does not mean that the symptoms experienced after bullying are the target’s ‘fault’, however. We know that bullying generally results in negative outcomes, as listed above, but we are not able to say in a specific case that particular bullying behaviours uniquely and independently caused a particular negative outcome(s). Assessing the extent to which being bullied causes certain outcomes for a particular person needs to be done with all the contextual factors in mind, as well as considering what we know generally happens following workplace bullying. A final assessment comes down to a question of what is reasonable. We need to ask whether it is reasonable to expect that significant negative psychological outcomes are likely to have occurred for a particular
individual after experiencing particular kinds of workplace bullying, having taken into account individual differences and contextual factors.

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Case study: Evan, Part 1

The following case study is based on real events. We will follow what happened to Evan in instalments throughout the remainder of the book.

Evan, who is 34, works in the emergency services sector. He recently accepted a position based in a regional area. His wife and family have moved from the city so that Evan could take up this job. Evan’s previous role included mentoring younger workers in the city, where he was highly respected, highly skilled and well liked. His boss and co-workers were sorry to see him leave but his new job is a step towards greater responsibility, and living in the country is the fulfilment of a dream, because Evan’s wife grew up on a farm.

Evan’s first few weeks in the new job were great. He had always loved his job but now he started to feel more connected with the community. Evan’s wife and children enjoyed being in the country too—they had started a garden and had lots of new pets, but noticed that Evan was not at home very much. He seemed to often be assigned to night duty and was driving very long distances. When he was home, he was very tired and slept a lot.

There were ten other workers at headquarters, including the manager, Bob. Bob grew up in the local area, knows most of the people in town and has been employed at headquarters for 37 years. The other officers have all been employed for at least three years, and two of them, Bob’s son and niece, also grew up locally. The officers have adopted a nickname for Evan: ‘Slick’, short for ‘city slicker’. Evan doesn’t mind a joke, and he also makes harmless jokes at the expense of other officers, in good-natured fun. It’s an accepted part of the culture, both here and back in the city.

About twelve weeks later, in the tea room at headquarters, Evan is stood over by one of his workmates while being verbally abused. Under the pressure of the situation, Evan broke down.

What happened to make things go so wrong?