



UK GUIDE TO SKILLS & LEARNING 09



PREVENTING AND MANAGING BULLYING AND HARASSMENT

By JOHN CRAWLEY, Conflict Management Plus

BULLYING and harassment is bad for business at the best of times. Most companies and public sector bodies now realise this and have policies and processes to develop an anti-bullying culture and to deal with bullying and harassment effectively when it does happen. Bullying destroys working relationships, impairs productivity and when unchecked leaves companies susceptible to grievances, discrimination claims and the risk of tribunal.

Although people are now more aware of what constitutes bullying and how to prevent and manage it, policies and statements of intent have not stopped the perception amongst the workforce, in many staff surveys, that bullying is on the increase. As credit crunches and the recession bites more pressure often brings out the worst in people. With redundancies and restructuring there are also many opportunities for employees to feel like victims, unfairly treated and needing redress.

Bullying originates from a one-dimensional perception of fairness in which the inappropriate use of power becomes a means to getting things done and feeling better about one's self at the expense of others. It leaves a victim feeling de-skilled and demotivated. It is a leadership, learning and development issue.

Bridging the trust gap – Critical friends and stakeholder groups

Mistrust and misbehaviour flourish in an environment characterised by a gap in understanding and communication between senior management, staff and their representatives. Many organisations are cleverly establishing stakeholder groups containing critical friends who keep them in touch with feelings on the ground, gauge reactions to significant changes and guide on how to communicate and manage difficult decisions fairly and fully.

Managing without bullying – Building lasting skills

All recent research suggests that managers' behaviour is pivotal in the effectiveness of anti-bullying initiatives. Senior staff commitment can be gained through executive coaching, master classes and briefings on how to model effective respectful communication, have difficult conversations and demonstrate a degree of empathy. Many organisations are also arranging other L&D activities for all managers such as one-to-one coaching, on line learning materials, telephone Just in Time Training (JITT) and drama-based workshops on handling difficult conversations about performance and perceptions

of inequality. They are worth prioritising even in a time of downturn, as these skills will have a lasting effect on managers' confidence and performance and help your organisation ride out the hard times.

Supporting the support staff

Staff such as HR, Occupational Health, Diversity and Equality Specialists are often expected to manage bullying and harassment when it does occur. It is wrong to assume that they can all respond effectively to expressions of discontent and the strong emotions generated by allegations of bullying and harassment. They too need tailored support around active listening, problem-solving, negotiation and mediation skills. Process maps, case studies and briefings will give support staff greater clarity when talking people through the options. Contact and advice staff also benefit from reflective forums (increasingly web-based) in which discussions of casework enable practical learning and networking of skills.

Internal specialists

Increasingly many organisations are investing in recruiting and training internal volunteer specialists in the following roles:

- **'Support officers'** – who listen to people's concerns, give confidential, impartial support and encourage people to raise issues early and handle them informally whenever appropriate.

- **Mediators** – who get people together to resolve issues and negotiate changes in behaviour and ways of working.
- **Investigators** – who conduct a structured, rigorous formal investigation into allegations of bullying and harassment, and compile a detailed impartial report on which a decision will be based.

The benefit of training these specialists is that the skills they learn are all practised in the other roles within the organisation, adding to the pool of resources, and building towards a non-bullying culture. The risk of internal specialists is that they may be perceived as lacking in independence, so their practice needs to be excellent and consistently seen as fair.

Build a better future now

Step one – be really clear about what you need now and for the long term. Make sure you can get someone with a track record who will be in partnership with you for the long term.

Step two – do not just go for the lowest risk, lowest cost solution. Doing something different and investing to save will invariably take you to a better place.

Step three – retain empathy with the people in your organisation and balance their needs with the commercial needs of your organisation. Remember compassion costs nothing.

Step four – evaluate the cost, reaction and impact of what you do.

Step five – don't do it alone. Managing bullying and harassment is challenging. Keep in touch with others who are on the same road.

• **John Crawley is the Founder of Conflict Management Plus Ltd which has 20 years experience of providing solutions for workplace bullying and harassment.**

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