Whose responsibility is it anyway?

Bullying has long been seen as a human resources issue – but the same risk management techniques should be applied to workplace bullies that you would to any inanimate hazard. We consider the issues most pertinent to health and safety practitioners.

Health and safety managers face many challenges. For some of these challenges, well established best practice and interventions are available. But for issues such as bullying there is relatively little guidance out there, and health and safety practitioners must first spend considerable time collating and evaluating the information available – which can often be disjointed or inconsistent.

The term ‘workplace bullying’ refers to negative behaviours targeted at an employee. A wide range of behaviours may therefore constitute bullying – such as personal insults, withholding information, asking a person to complete low status work, allocating unfair workloads and social exclusion. There is no single definition of workplace bullying, but there is widespread agreement that behaviour must occur more than once in order to be classified as bullying. Researchers often describe the frequency and duration of the negative behaviours experienced. Demonstrating the complexity (and often disjointed nature) of the area, despite agreement that the behaviour must occur repeatedly, researchers differ with regard to the timeframe adopted, with studies measuring the number of acts experienced weekly, monthly, or during the entire career. Furthermore, many researchers and practitioners do not use the term ‘workplace bullying’ and instead refer to mobbing, aggression, emotional abuse, harassment or inappropriate behaviour. The lack of consistency has undermined our understanding – for example impeded comparisons between prevalence rates across sectors.

The behaviours which constitute workplace bullying are often subtle and confusing. For example, the perpetrator may roll their eyes or smirk when the victim speaks, fail to include them in discussions about an important project, or deny the

Findings suggest that those adopting passive, autocratic, authoritarian, laissez-faire styles are more likely to perpetrate or accept workplace bullying.”
References


Workplace bullying

Protecting the vulnerable

Those experiencing workplace bullying may suffer a range of physical and psychological consequences. These include anxiety and depression, sleep disorders, cardiovascular disease, chronic pain and post-traumatic stress disorder. Victims also doubt their own competence, leading to low self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness. These feelings reduce the likelihood that the victim will challenge the perpetrator, retaliate, or inform the appropriate authority.

Research studies investigating the consequences of workplace bullying are often cross-sectional, with employees reporting their experiences of workplace bullying and physical health at one time only. While suggestive, this research cannot establish whether poor physical and mental health precedes or follows workplace bullying. Prospective studies suggest that while workplace bullying does lead to fatigue and anxiety, those suffering from anxiety and depression are more likely to be exposed to workplace bullying. These findings highlight the importance of protecting the most vulnerable employees.

Understandably, workplace bullying impacts on the manner in which the victims experienced the workplace. These workers typically report low levels of job satisfaction, commitment to the organisation, poor productivity, and intentions to leave the organisation or sector. Consequently, workplace bullying is associated with absenteeism, presenteeism, and staff turnover. It is therefore important for organisations that do not recognise their moral or legal obligation to address workplace bullying to acknowledge the financial implications of this. Indeed, damage to the organisation (such as low productivity and staff turnover) may be exacerbated by reputational damage which compromises the recruitment of new staff and costs associated with investigation, litigation, and compensation.

It is also important for health and safety practitioners to recognise that the impact of workplace bullying is not restricted to those directly victimised. Employees witnessing workplace bullying also display stress, poor physical and psychological health, low productivity and intentions to leave. The experiences of those witnessing workplace bullying (though not directly targeted) may reflect distress while observing these interactions, fear that they themselves may be victimised, or dissatisfaction with the response of the organisation. Interventions should therefore address the impact of workplace bullying beyond the initial victim.

References


