

## Low Level Bullying

### Abstract

*This presentation looks at the effects of low level bullying on organisations. Low level bullying often does not attract the same attention of the more serious and usually more readily recognisable bullying. This means that it can often continue for long periods of time and can easily become entrenched in an organisation's culture. Once entrenched, these practices can continue despite turnover in management and staff. By becoming pervasive, low level bullying can represent a constant drain on staff morale and can have very serious effects on productivity and staff wellbeing.*

*This paper describes some of the low level bullying behaviours, explores their effects on the working environment and the reasons that they can be allowed to continue over long periods of time. It then looks at the ways in which managers and supervisors can determine whether low level bullying behaviours exist in a work environment.*

*Finally the paper examines proactive and reactive steps managers and employees can take to address low level bullying and improve the working environment.*

### 1. Introduction

Many studies have identified bullying as a major cost to Australian businesses. Various studies have examined its cost and prevalence.

In 2010, the Australian Productivity Commission examined the cost to Australian workplaces<sup>1</sup>. The Commission estimated that in the year 2000, bullying cost the Australian economy between \$6 Billion and \$36 Billion per annum. That is between \$500 and \$3000 for each full time, part time and casual employee in Australia – per annum. The range reflects the wide variance on the reported prevalence of bullying, which the Commission acknowledged was due to problems with the definition of bullying and under reporting of the occurrence<sup>2</sup>.

The prevalence of workplace bullying was examined by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Report (2012) *Workplace Bullying: We just want it to stop*. The report found that the bullying incidence figures varied from 6.8% in a six month period to over 33%<sup>3</sup>. The Australian Productivity Commission noted that the Australian Beyond Bullying Association estimated that between 25% and 50% of the workforce would be bullied during their working lives.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Productivity Commission (2010) *Performance Benchmarking of Australian Business Regulation: Occupational Health & Safety* Research Report, Canberra p287

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* pp279-289

<sup>3</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Report (2012) *Workplace Bullying: We just want it to stop* pp 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Productivity Commission (2010) *Performance Benchmarking of Australian Business Regulation: Occupational Health & Safety*, Research Report, Canberra. p 287

The prevalence of and attitudes towards mental illness in the workplace were examined in a survey of workplace mental health conducted by TNS Social Research on behalf of Beyond Blue<sup>5</sup>. The study interviewed 1041 employees and 85 senior managers and found that one in five employees reported having taken time off work over the past year because they had felt mentally unwell. That of course doesn't distinguish between the effects of the workplace and the underlying psychological or psychiatric health of the individuals concerned. The study then asked the employees to rate their workplace as mentally healthy or unhealthy. 52% of respondents rated their workplace as psychologically healthy and 48% as psychologically unhealthy. The rate of absence due to feeling mentally unwell was reported as 13% in workplaces rated as psychologically healthy but was more than three times as high (46%) in those workplaces that the employees themselves rated as psychologically unhealthy. Whilst the cause of those absences wasn't fully explored by the study, the correlation between the psychological health of the workplace and the rate of absenteeism is unmistakable.

The Australian Psychological Society conducts an annual survey on stress and wellbeing in Australia. The 2013 survey examined workplace issues in detail. The survey found that almost half of working Australians (47%) rated issues in the workplace as a source of stress<sup>6</sup>. Only 52% of respondents reported that their employer valued their contribution and cared about their wellbeing.<sup>7</sup> The survey compiled a list of factors that measured employees being positively aligned with their workplace. The study concluded that working Australians who were positively aligned with their workplace reported significantly higher levels of overall wellbeing and significantly lower levels of stress and distress than those who were not positively aligned with their workplace<sup>8</sup>

There is, however, a great deal of discrepancy between the figures cited above and the numbers of bullying investigations that occur even in the companies that are most aware and committed to addressing the problems caused by bullying. For instance, in the Australian Public Service only 0.13% of bullying cases were investigated.<sup>9</sup> The numbers of bullying investigations conducted are considerably smaller than the reported prevalence of bullying. It is the author's experience that much of this discrepancy is explained by the fact that the most persistent and damaging bullying behaviours 'fly below the radar' and are not addressed because they are not apparent.<sup>10</sup> This paper represents a reflection of the author's experience and a review of the literature.

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<sup>5</sup> TNS Social Research (2014) *State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia*

<sup>6</sup> Australian Psychological Society (2013) *Stress and Wellbeing in Australia*  
[www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/Stress%20and%20wellbeing%20in%20Australia%20survey%202013.pdf](http://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/Stress%20and%20wellbeing%20in%20Australia%20survey%202013.pdf)  
p33

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p34

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p40

<sup>9</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Report (2012) *Workplace Bullying: We just want it to stop* p9

<sup>10</sup> Dzurec, L.C., Kennison, M., and Albatineh, R. (2014) Unacknowledged threats proffered "in a manner of speaking": Recognising workplace bullying as shaming *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 46 p282

## 2. What is Low Level Bullying?

So what does low level bullying mean? What is the connexion between low level bullying and difficult workplaces?

This paper uses the term ‘low level bullying’. This is defined as bullying that consists of a set of behaviours that are not identifiable as bullying behaviours when viewed singly but form a set of behaviours that has the effect of damaging the health and safety of the employee or employees being subjected to the bullying.

The concept is referred to in the literature by a wide variety of names. The term ‘toxic workplaces’ deals with many of the same issues. Australian psychologist Martha Knox Haly (2008) uses the term ‘demoralised work environments’.<sup>11</sup> The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Report (2012) *Workplace Bullying: We just want it to stop* devoted a chapter to workplace culture as an area that needs to be addressed in order to prevent bullying<sup>12</sup>. Authors such as Dzurec, Kennison & Albatineh (2014), Karpinski, Dzurec, Fitzgerald, Bromley & Meyers (2013) and Samnani (2013) use the term ‘subtle bullying’.<sup>13</sup>

The overall incidence of low level bullying in Australian workplaces is very difficult to determine because it is hard to describe. Many of the studies into workplace bullying do not differentiate between the low level and high level bullying (overt bullying behaviour). It is argued that this leads to inaccurate understandings of the incidence and effect of bullying overall. Much bullying is not captured as it is not identified as bullying. The emphasis on a high level bullying case can take the focus away from the lower level behaviours thus allowing them to continue. It is postulated that the two issues identified by the Productivity Commission – definition and underreporting – both act to hide the extent of the problem of low level bullying.<sup>14</sup>

Let’s look at some examples of bullying drawn from training courses conducted by the author and from the literature. On the left hand column of the table are a number of examples that are often listed and readily agreed as constituting bullying behaviours. On the right hand column are some mild examples that may occur in any workplace. The reader will doubtless be able think of others.

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<sup>11</sup> Knox Haly, M. (2008) *Managing Bullying at Work* InPsych

<sup>12</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Report (2012) *Workplace bullying: We just want it to stop*

<sup>13</sup> Dzurec, L.C., Kennison, M. & Albatineh, R. (2014) Unacknowledged threats proffered “in a manner of speaking”: Recognising workplace bullying as shaming *Journal of Nursing Scholarship* 46 pp281-291; Karpinski, A.C., Dzurec, L.C., Fitzgerald, S.M., Bromley, G.E. & Meyers, T.W. (2013) Examining the factor structure of the pain catastrophising scale as a measure of victim response to the psychological pain of subtle workplace bullying *Journal of Nursing Measurement* 21 pp264-283; Samnani, A., (2013a) Is this bullying? Understanding target and witness reactions *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 28 pp290-305

<sup>14</sup> Productivity Commission (2010) *Performance Benchmarking of Australian Business Regulation: Occupational Health & Safety* Research Report, Canberra p287

<b>Bullying Behaviour</b>	<b>Mild Examples</b>
Inappropriate and/or invalid criticism, particularly in front of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “There she is – late again”</li> <li>• Questioning a colleague’s work in front of others</li> <li>• Announcing a staff member’s mistakes to other team members</li> <li>• Questioning someone in front of others</li> </ul>
Name calling, particularly in front of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using pet names that the subject has repeatedly said they don’t like</li> <li>• “You’re the oldest here– you wouldn’t understand that”</li> </ul>
Humiliating practical jokes or initiation rituals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hiding the new person’s stapler</li> <li>• The new person inherits the “too hard basket” jobs</li> </ul>
Belittling and humiliation, particularly in front of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Hey Sloppy – tidy that kitchen up!”</li> <li>• Laughing at someone’s contribution</li> <li>• Adverse comments about clothing</li> <li>• Compliment delivered with heavy sarcasm</li> </ul>
Gossip and malicious rumours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Not only is his desk untidy - I hear his house is also untidy”</li> <li>• Repeating gossip back to the subject</li> <li>• “I have had so many complaints about you from other staff” (when that hasn’t happened)</li> </ul>
Inappropriate language, yelling, particularly in front of others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Out of my way - I’m coming through” (said loudly)</li> <li>• Talking loudly near one staff member’s desk</li> </ul>
Abusive or offensive emails or messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Off joke– not necessarily overtly sexual</li> <li>• MESSAGE IN CAPS LOCK</li> </ul>
Inappropriate body language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of personal space</li> <li>• Disinterested body language</li> <li>• Eye rolling</li> <li>• Finger pointing</li> </ul>
Unreasonable demands, unnecessary pressure and impossible deadlines which are targeted at an individual and unrelated to legitimate operational needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I know this isn’t due until the end of the week but I want our team to shine and submit it a day early”</li> <li>• Deadlines unnecessarily too early</li> <li>• Supervisor demanding that a report be completed by that day then not looking at it for a week</li> <li>• Unnecessarily bringing forward the due date for work</li> </ul>
Unfair or unreasonable allocation of tasks and/or working hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “That’s just the way the work allocation turned out”</li> <li>• Some team members have easier tasks so that everyone has the same number of tasks</li> </ul>
Deliberately changing work rosters to inconvenience an employee	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For some reason, Joe has more late shifts even though he has young children</li> </ul>

<b>Bullying Behaviour</b>	<b>Mild Examples</b>
Unreasonably undermining a person's work performance, recognition, or position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "That was a good team effort"</li> <li>• Senior staff member rarely available when requested by one individual</li> <li>• Senior staff member never stops working when talking to one individual</li> </ul>
Deliberately withholding necessary work-related information or resources, or supplying incorrect information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Sorry I forgot to tell you that the meeting had been moved"</li> <li>• "Sorry I forgot to tell you –it just got too busy"</li> <li>• Deliberately giving old information</li> </ul>
Inappropriate surveillance or monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I have noticed that you are spending too long on your personal calls"</li> <li>• Monitoring bathroom breaks</li> </ul>
Inappropriate interference with personal belongings or work equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New pens are nowhere to be found</li> <li>• Borrowing someone's computer without telling them where it is</li> </ul>
Inequitable or unreasonable exclusion from or access to training, conferences or work related travel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I'm sorry but our budget couldn't stretch to sending everyone so unfortunately, you had to miss out this time"</li> </ul>
Inequitable application of work rules and benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "There are no excuses for being late" where others are not pulled up for being late</li> <li>• Some employees always get the leave they want</li> <li>• Different employees have different standards applied to performance feedback</li> </ul>
Unreasonably excluding employees from activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Sorry but someone has to stay behind to answer the phones"</li> <li>• The whole team except Joe having after work drinks but it is not a work function so that's OK</li> </ul>
Unreasonable implementation of organisational restructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "We only had limited openings"</li> <li>• Totally fabricated rumours of changes to the workplace designed to cause concern</li> </ul>

It should be noted that any of the examples in the right hand column could and would normally occur in any workplace. Any one of those examples, taken in isolation, is probably not unreasonable. If you had one here and another one several weeks later, that may be no more than the ordinary reality of work in a busy and productive environment. Anyone complaining of bullying on the basis of only one or a few examples could easily be accused of being overly sensitive.

The problem is that there are many workplaces where those behaviours are not rare events in the normal operation of a busy organisation.

Imagine if your workplace exhibited those behaviours on a daily basis. Or even worse if you or one individual on your team were on the receiving end of those behaviours regularly.

The behaviours would quickly become problematic and most employees' morale and pleasure in coming to work would also be severely compromised. The fact that each of these behaviours is mild would not prevent the workplace from being unpleasant and destructive to employees.

Any one of these behaviours can usually be readily explained away by the bully as being part of normal management. To make matters worse, if anyone complained about what was happening, their giving examples of what was happening could make them sound like they were thin skinned and complaining unreasonably.

Another issue is that what some people find offensive, others don't. This can lead to problems if a manager allows some behaviours to continue which one or some of the team members find offensive. The issue isn't going to be resolved if the manager applies their own standards and doesn't talk through the behaviours with the affected employees.

It is not being suggested that workplaces should not be robust and diverse environments nor is it being suggested that employees should be encouraged to be sensitive to any slight or poorly expressed sentiment. The real damage is done by some employees being subject to frequent and persistent disadvantages even where each instance of itself could be said to be smaller than overt bullying.

Some managers and organisational leaders may think that the phenomenon of bullying through frequent 'low level' damaging behaviours is fairly rare but my experience is that, unfortunately, it is not as rare as we would hope it would be. As noted in the Beyond Blue study (2014)<sup>15</sup> and the Australian Psychological Society annual survey on Stress and Wellbeing in Australia (2013)<sup>16</sup> almost half of Australian workplaces were deemed by those working there as psychologically unhealthy or a source of stress.

### **3. Low Level Bullying is Both Pervasive and More Destructive than the more Overt Bullying**

Unfortunately, once these practices take hold, they can become part of the workplace culture. These behaviours can be very difficult for those responsible within the organisation such as line managers, team leaders, human resource departmental staff and senior management to spot. Employees who exhibit those behaviours are unlikely to do so in front of someone who might pull them up.

As Karpinski et al (2013) noted:

*"Because it flies under the radar, in many organisations, subtle workplace bullying has remained tenacious and problematic<sup>17</sup>.*

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<sup>15</sup> TNS Social Research, (2014), *State of Workplace Mental Health in Australia* p2

<sup>16</sup> Australian Psychological Society (2013) *Stress and Wellbeing in Australia* p33

<sup>17</sup> Karpinski, A. C., Dzurec, L. C., Fitzgerald, S. M., Bromley, G. E., and Meyers, T. W. (2013) Examining the factor structure of the pain catastrophising scale as a measure of victim response to the psychological pain of subtle workplace bullying *Journal of Nursing Measurement* 21 p264

Brendto (2001) noted that ridicule can be worse than physical bullying in part because it is about group rejection and it can be explained away as harmless fun.<sup>18</sup> Dzurec et al (2014) note that the victims themselves often fail to realise that they have been bullied for some time. Their study examined bullying that had extended for six months or more.<sup>19</sup> They also noted that the bullying intent is often communicated through tone and sarcasm.<sup>20</sup> The lack of attention to language serves to perpetuate bullying through imprecise understanding of the nature of subtle or low level bullying.<sup>21</sup> The mismatch between the literal meaning and the tone leads to confusion on the part of the subject, which magnifies the effect of the bullying.<sup>22</sup> It is also easier for the perpetrator to deny any improper intent as the words used could, by themselves, be neutral or even complimentary. Any complaint of bullying would face the same problem.

Karpinski et al (2013) in examining previous research concluded that:

*“workplace environments that do not actively address bullying as it occurs are at risk of becoming toxic and, intentionally or not, abusive to their employees”.*<sup>23</sup>

Samnani (2013a) reviewed the literature and concluded that subtle bullying behaviours may be more harmful to targets than explicit bullying behaviours.<sup>24</sup> He noted that targets of subtle bullying are less likely to react against the bullying and witnesses are more likely to side with the perpetrator. Samnani (2013b) also noted that subtle bullying is difficult to recognise as bullying by both targets and the witnesses and is more easily rationalised.<sup>25</sup> He went on to note that the values which allow bullying to become ingrained in the individuals are transmitted across generations and become a way of life.<sup>26</sup>

Bulutlar & Oz (2009) note that the harm caused by the subtle forms of bullying might be underestimated and in summarising the research describe it as an:

*“extreme form of stress”.*<sup>27</sup>

They go on to outline that the milder forms of bullying, if allowed to continue, can often lead to more serious behaviour.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Brendto, L.K. (2001) Worse than sticks and stones: Lessons from research on ridicule *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 10 pp47-49

<sup>19</sup> Dzurec et al p282

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p282

<sup>21</sup> Ibid p282

<sup>22</sup> Ibid p282

<sup>23</sup> Karpinski, et al p264

<sup>24</sup> Samnani, A., (2013a) Is this bullying? Understanding target and witness reactions *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 28 pp290-305

<sup>25</sup> Samnani (2013b) The early stages of workplace bullying and how it becomes prolonged: The role of culture in predicting target responses. *Journal of Business Ethics* pp121&125

<sup>26</sup> Ibid p 121

<sup>27</sup> Bulutlar, F. & Oz, E.U. (2009) The effects of ethical climates on bullying behaviour in the workplace *Journal of Business Ethics* 86 p273

<sup>28</sup> Ibid p275 Dzurec et al p282

Samnani (2013b) also noted that whilst workplace bullying is often investigated as a single event, it is a process which intensifies and evolves over time<sup>29</sup>. In the Australian context bullying is usually defined as more than one event however it is postulated that Samnani's finding would still be valid if paraphrased as, 'bullying is a process rather than a series of events'.

The House of Representatives report (2012) *Workplace bullying: We just want it to stop* devoted a chapter to the issue of Workplace Culture and the impacts of bullying once it becomes entrenched in the culture.<sup>30</sup> This chapter contrasted abusive working environments with respectful working environments and cited the submission of the Australian Institute of Employment Rights which argues that,

*"the subtle and destructive nature of adverse workplace culture ... can manifest itself in a "death by a thousand cuts"<sup>31</sup>.*

The report also described in detail how workplace culture can be hard to shift and how the lack of intervention by management can allow the culture to flourish.<sup>32</sup>

The report concluded that: "

*"there is a significant case to be made for greater investment in the relationships and cultures that are formed in workplaces"<sup>33</sup>.*

Samnani (2013b) notes that the research in to the relationship between bullying and cultural values is very limited<sup>34</sup>.

It is postulated that low level bullying can be more destructive because it is difficult identify, to complain about and to address. This can make it more pervasive and long lasting.

#### **4. "Why should management be responsible if grown adults can't behave properly?"**

There are several very good reasons why these issues present real challenges for management.

Operating costs or the bottom line are important considerations in any organisation. Employees cost money to hire and then train. Why pay out all of that money and not use the productive capacity that you have paid for? Studies have shown that employees under stress simply cannot produce at their best. Harm can include increased use of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs; increased mental health problems including depression and anxiety; and absenteeism and presenteeism. Price Waterhouse Cooper (2014) concluded

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<sup>29</sup> Samnani (2013b) p129

<sup>30</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Report (2012) *Workplace bullying: We just want it to stop* pp104-121

<sup>31</sup> *ibid* p106

<sup>32</sup> *ibid* pp114-115

<sup>33</sup> *ibid* p120

<sup>34</sup> Samnani (2013b) p122



that every dollar spent on creating a mentally healthy workplace averaged a return on the investment of \$2.30 in benefits.<sup>35</sup> The report conceded that the analysis was conservative and did not consider turnover and intangible benefits such as morale.<sup>36</sup>

Employee assistance programs have shown that even private issues affecting employees will impact the productive capacity of an organisation.

The quality of employees' work improves as the workplace culture improves.<sup>37</sup> Cooper-Thomas, Gardner, O'Driscoll, Catley & Bentley (2013) found that the bullying target's perception of organisational support helped to counter the effects of the bullying in the short term.<sup>38</sup>

The requirement to provide a psychologically safe workplace is also mandated by the Health and Safety Laws and Antibullying Laws such as the Fair Work Act 2009.

### **5. "So two employees are having a go at each other – that is their issue!"**

One of the most common factors in workplace bullying situations is that managers and co-workers typically 'turn a blind eye' to the bullying. The reasons for this vary enormously according to where the work occurs, the type of social environment that exists in the workplace, and the awareness of bullying and its implications, just to name a few! However studies have identified that those who frequently witness bullying can experience similar psychological effects as the victims of the bullying.<sup>39</sup> Buchanan & Preston (2014) found that stress can be contagiously caught from targets to observers. The effect was increased when observers had interacted with the target.<sup>40</sup> Observers rely on a variety of multimodal cues e.g., speech pitch, frequency, and content; facial expressions and posture.<sup>41</sup> These observations apply equally where the bullying is low level.<sup>42</sup> The co-workers will notice and will have the same reactions as with the more serious examples of bullying.

Social psychologists Bibb Latane and John Darley first identified the 'bystander effect' (originally called 'bystander apathy') in 1968. Four of their experiments looked at the effects of people's behaviour when hearing distressing sounds in various conditions, such as

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<sup>35</sup> Price Waterhouse Coopers (2014) *Creating a Mentally Healthy Workplace Return on Investment Analysis* Final Report p17

<sup>36</sup> Ibid p viii

<sup>37</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Report (2012) *Workplace bullying: We just want it to stop* pp112-113 cites the Australian Institute of Employment Rights (AIER) submission

<sup>38</sup> Cooper-Thomas, H., Gardner, D., O'Driscoll, M., Catley, B. & Bentley, T. (2013) Neutralizing workplace bullying: The buffering effects of contextual factors *Journal of Managerial Psychology* 28 pp384-407

<sup>39</sup> See for example Hansen, A.M., Høgh, A., Garde, A.H. & Persson, R. (2014) Workplace bullying and sleep difficulties: A 2 year follow up study *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health* 87 pp285-294; Emdad, R., Alipour, A., Hagberg, J. & Jensen, I.B. (2013) The impact of bystanding to workplace bullying on the symptoms of depression among women and men in industry in Sweden: An empirical and longitudinal study *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health* 86. pp709-716

<sup>40</sup> Buchanan, T.W. & Preston, S.D. (2014) Stress leads to prosocial action in immediate need situations *Frontiers in Behavioural Neuroscience.*; 8 p5

<sup>41</sup> Ibid p10

<sup>42</sup> See for example Karpinski et al p264; Samnani (2013a) p291

being alone, with a friend, with someone playing a passive role in collaboration with the experimenter, or with a stranger. They found that people were much more likely to act if alone or with a friend than when with someone acting passively or a stranger.<sup>43</sup> Other experiments showed that the more observers, the less helping occurs because of what is known as ‘the diffusion of responsibility’ with workers using self-talk such as ‘someone else will help’ or ‘it’s not my business’. Additionally, bystanders can be slow to respond because they are looking to see what the others in the group will do.<sup>44</sup>

Linstead (2013) cites studies which find that 22% of respondents reported leaving their jobs due to the workplace climate associated with bullying, while 70% reported experiencing stress as witnesses to bullying incidents. Other studies found that bystanding also had negative effects on bystanders’ health.<sup>45</sup>

Psychologically, people often fear that if they step in this will make them a new target for the bully, or make things worse in terms of splitting teams or taking sides. Fear of being a ‘dobber’ can also make staff reluctant to speak up about what they see. Often bullying is behind the back of management, so they may not be aware unless someone does report it. Fear of reporting can also be related to not being clear about what will happen with the information and whether the reporter will be protected. Most bullying occurs with peers around (over 80% of the time) as bullies gain power from having an audience and frequently try to involve others with their bullying behaviour. According to the Canadian Red Cross, 57% of the time bullying stops within ten seconds when a bystander steps in.<sup>46</sup> D’Cruz & Noronha (2011) found that bystander intervention is an important solution to workplace bullying and advocated effective bystander intervention training programmes.<sup>47</sup>

Guilt is another common emotion associated with being a bystander of bullying, as often workers feel bad about what happened to the victim and that they didn’t intervene. Again, education about the steps to intervene can support those staff and minimise productivity impacts as they agonise about whether they should have done something. This can also be helpful for those who are ambivalent and sometimes step in and sometimes avoid action, or feel they should act but may want to avoid conflict.

These factors contribute to making low level bullying a difficult problem to deal with. Bullying that is more subtle and more easily explained away will make it harder for co-workers to raise the issue with the bully, the target and with management. This then allows the behaviours to become established before they escalate.

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<sup>43</sup> Darley, J.M., & Latané, B. (1968) Bystander intervention in emergencies: Diffusion of responsibility. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 8 pp377–383

<sup>44</sup> Field, T (2001) Bystanders and Bullying <http://bullyonline.org/workbully/bystand.htm>; Latane, B., & Nida, S. (1981) Ten years of research on group size and helping *Psychological Bulletin* 89 pp308-324

<sup>45</sup> Linstead, S. (2013) Organizational bystanding: Whistleblowing, watching the work go by or aiding and abetting? *M@n@gement* 16 p689

<sup>46</sup> Wolfe, D.A. & Chiodo, D. (2000). *Sexual harassment and related behaviors reported among youth from Grade 9 to Grade 11* Toronto: CAMH Centre for Prevention Science, cited in *Beyond The Hurt: Prevent bullying to create a safe environment for children and youth* Canadian Red Cross

<sup>47</sup> D’Cruz, P. and Noronha, E. (2011) *The limits to workplace friendship* *Employee Relations* 33 pp269-288

## 6. How can Managers determine if these behaviours are an issue at their workplace?

- Walk the floor. There is nothing that replaces managers simply walking around and spending time with employees in an unstructured setting. It is surprising how often an employee will pluck up the courage to have a quiet word with a more senior manager if they get the chance.
- Model acceptable behaviour. Employees will imitate what they perceive to be the actions of their immediate and senior managers. Equally, managers should be very careful not to participate in bullying behaviours themselves. Nothing encourages inappropriate behaviour as much as employees believing that their managers do the same as they are doing.<sup>48</sup>
- Conduct staff surveys. Many of the standard organisational climate or opinion surveys will be responsive to these issues as often employees are seeking a means of expressing their unhappiness. Management's challenge in running a survey is to convince employees that it is safe to be forthright and that the responses will be actioned. A useful scale designed to measure low level bullying behaviours is the Albrecht Toxic-Nourishing Scale.<sup>49</sup>

A few of the many other red flags or signs that something is wrong include:

- Disputes that make no sense or employees are unhappy but can't tell you why. Often, when a problem occurs and no-one can adequately explain why the problem has occurred, it is a sign that there is a problem that employees feel they can't talk about. Hence they will complain excessively about the air-conditioning (assuming that the air-conditioning is actually working!) or some other aspect of the workplace.
- There is a discrepancy between the overall rating and the detail of staff satisfaction surveys. Either if the overall rating is high despite many issues being listed or the opposite, a low rating where no specifics problems are listed, may also be a sign that people aren't confident to openly identify their issues.
- Workers' compensation claims, staff turnover or absenteeism are either too high or are increasing without a rational explanation.
- Job satisfaction, productivity and efficiency are too low or are decreasing without a rational explanation.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Knox Haly (2008) p2

<sup>49</sup> Albrecht, K. *Toxic-Nourishing Scale Self Assessment Quiz* Karl Albrecht International  
<http://www.KarlAlbrecht.com>

<sup>50</sup> Bulutlar & Oz (2009) p273

- Exit interviews becoming nonsensical or meaningless.
  - Q Why did you leave?
  - A It was time to go
  - Q Why was it time to go?
  - A It just was

## 7. What can Organisations do to address Low Level Bullying?

### **Training**

- Train Managers and Supervisors

Managers are usually well trained in the technical aspects of their role but often not trained in people management skills and communication. The House of Representatives Standing Committee (2012) cited the need for managers to understand and detect subtle bullying to take it seriously and to know how to respond<sup>51</sup>. It cannot be assumed that managers, particularly those promoted on their technical expertise, intrinsically have this understanding. The report also noted that allowing inappropriate bullying behaviour to continue will entrench it into the organisational culture.<sup>52</sup> This is particularly true where managers are aware that there is a problem but don't intervene. To quote Lieutenant General David Morrison:

*"The standard you walk past is the standard you accept."*<sup>53</sup>

This statement includes the standards that are not addressed because the organisation was not aware that they are an issue. Knox Haly (2008) argues that strengthening the line management function is the first challenge in resolving bullying. Whether the bullying comes from the supervisor's behaviour or from the team members, the lack of training and/or support will allow it to continue whereas training the supervisors will often be a key response in addressing the bullying.<sup>54</sup>

Training is particularly needed in cases of low level bullying as Managers may be unaware that what is occurring is in fact bullying. The subtle nature of low level bullying also requires that managers are trained in appropriate intervention strategies.

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<sup>51</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment Report, (2012) *Workplace Bullying: We just want it to stop* p110

<sup>52</sup> Ibid pp106-109

<sup>53</sup> Morrison, D., *Chief of Army message regarding unacceptable behaviour* (2013)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QaqpoeVgr8U>

<sup>54</sup> Knox Haly (2008) p2; Harvey, D.B., Joyce, S., Tan, L., Johnson, A., Hguyen, H., Modini, M. & Groth, M. (2014) *Developing a Mentally Healthy Workplace: A Review of the Literature*. A Report prepared for the National Mental Health Commission and Mentally Healthy Workplace Alliance p35

- Train Employees.

Employees and teams need to be trained in the benefits to the organisation and to themselves of a positive workplace culture. Simple bullying awareness education can help a workplace combat this and lower risk of harm to staff. Just the message that these behaviours are not acceptable in the organisation can by itself lead to their ceasing. Once employees are trained to understand what bullying is and that it is not considered acceptable, they will often cease those behaviours.<sup>55</sup>

Again, training is particularly needed in cases of low level bullying to assist employees in identifying it.

It should be noted that a new manager or supervisor who is perceived as reasonable can lead to an increase in reports as employees gain confidence to address the past issues or start realising the effects of the past behaviour.<sup>56</sup>

- Educating all employees about ways to intervene

All employees will benefit from being trained in appropriate intervention strategies. Training is also likely to lower the risk of harm from simply witnessing the bullying. Employees can be taught that they have a key role in preventing, minimising or stopping bullying. They can directly intervene by discouraging the bully, defending the victim or redirecting the situation away from bullying. Alternately, they can get help by rallying support from peers to stand up against bullying or by reporting the bullying to appropriate personnel. Training will give them both the strategies and confidence to take action where it is required

### ***Other Measures***

- Clear policy and procedures around antibullying

Clear policies are essential as part of any organisational approach to health and safety in the workplace.<sup>57</sup> This equally applies to low level workplace bullying. A significant measure to address low level bullying is to clearly set out acceptable and unacceptable interactions between employees. This approach was strongly supported in the study by Bulutlar & Oz (2009) which found that organisations need to encourage principle led or rules based ethical decision making to address bullying. A caring climate had the strongest effect on employee commitment.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> E.g. D’Cruz & Noronha (2011)

<sup>56</sup> e.g. Knox Haly (2008) p3

<sup>57</sup> Harvey, et al p34

<sup>58</sup> Balutlar & Oz p291

- Treat complaints seriously

Nothing sends a message to staff as strongly as a manager taking steps to address a situation. Conversely, if these behaviours are ignored or condoned, they will become entrenched as employees will take their cues from what a manager does if that behaviour is different to what they say. Samnani (2013b) found that the lack of response to complaints by management is likely to prolong the bullying and increase the likelihood of reprisals against a complainant.<sup>59</sup>

- Organisations need to ensure that employees perceive that senior managers are implementing the training and/or policies themselves

The TNS Report (2014) found that 75% of employees believe their workplace is mentally healthy when they perceive the CEO as valuing mental health whereas only 8% believe their workplace is mentally healthy where they perceive that the CEO does not value mental health.<sup>60</sup>

Wegge, Shemla & Haslam (2014) found that leader behaviour had five key effects on the psychological health of employees. They identified the five key effects as the leaders being the:

- (i) initiators of direct person focused action
- (ii) the designers of work systems
- (iii) the buffers against stressors
- (iv) the creators of group climate, and
- (v) the models of their subordinates "health behaviour".<sup>61</sup>

- Change the Culture

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment (2012) concluded that changing workplace culture is the greatest investment in eliminating workplace bullying. The report found that:

*"4.69 The evidence received throughout this inquiry would indicate a clear need for improvement of workplace culture in Australia.*

*4.70 The Committee believes there is value in having KPIs for managers and supervisors that include targets for encouraging positive workplace behaviour.*

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<sup>59</sup> Samnani (2013b) p127

<sup>60</sup> TNS p4

<sup>61</sup> Wegge, J., Shemla, M., & Haslam, S.A. (2014) Leader behaviour as a determinant of health at work: Specification and evidence of five key pathways. *German Journal of Research in Human Resource Management* 28 pp6-23

*4.71 The greatest investment Australia can make with respect to eliminating workplace bullying is to improve workplace culture. Developing better cultures requires the contributors to that culture to act. The Committee hopes that its report will contribute to the ongoing national discussion about workplace culture and the detriment that can result from instances of workplace bullying”<sup>62</sup> (pp120-121)*

Harvey, Joyce, Tan, Johnson, Hguyen, Modini & Groth (2014) referred to the concept of ‘organisational justice’ and found that low levels of perceived organisational justice were associated with lower levels of mental health and higher levels of absenteeism.<sup>63</sup> Gilbert, Raffo & Sutarso (2013) advocate a workplace ‘Civility Policy’ as a means of countering workplace bullying.<sup>64</sup>

- Team Based Intervention

As noted earlier in the paper, the other employees or bystanders will be involved simply through observing what is happening. Any intervention needs to be at a team level. This is particularly true of low level bullying where some employees will need to be educated about the actual impact of the bullying.<sup>65</sup>

## Conclusion

Studies examining the prevalence of bullying consistently describe the incidence as being between 6.8% and 50% of the workforce but workplaces are not responding with equivalent levels of intervention. One of the reasons is that low level bullying in Australian workplaces is very difficult to identify and describe. This leads to a lack of understanding of the nature and effect of the low level bullying and to employees being subjected to it over a long period of time.

Organisations need to take active steps to ensure that their policies and training adequately describe the low level bullying behaviours so that they can be detected and addressed. Managers, supervisors and employees need to be trained to ensure that they are equipped to respond to bullying if it occurs to them or to their colleagues. As with any hidden behaviours, they are best dealt with by bringing them out in to the open and taking the action that is required to prevent them.

Further research is required to better describe and identify the nature of and causes of psychologically unhealthy workplaces and the extent to which low level bullying contributes to the damage caused by workplace bullying and psychologically unhealthy workplaces.

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<sup>62</sup> House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment (2012) report pp120-121

<sup>63</sup> Harvey et al (2014) p35

<sup>64</sup> Gilbert, J. A., Raffo, D. A. & Sutarso T. (2013) Gender, conflict and workplace bullying: Is civility policy the silver bullet? *Journal of Managerial Issues* 25 pp79-98

<sup>65</sup> Harvey et al (2014) p35

Organisations stand to substantially benefit through taking active steps to address these issues through increased productivity. Employees and their families will benefit if a major cause of workplace injury is addressed.

Nerio Baldini  
0401-995-802  
[nerio@enableworkplace.com.au](mailto:nerio@enableworkplace.com.au)



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