

Bullying Training in Practice: Issues and Approaches

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Abstract

There has been an increasing acceptance that bullying training is an essential component of addressing the incidence of bullying in Australian workplaces. It is the author's experience that some of the training courses being introduced fail to adequately change organisations' response to bullying.

This paper looks at the necessary components of bullying training and some of the factors that reduce the effectiveness and impact of that training "at the coalface".

Most bullying training covers the nature of bullying and includes a brief summary of its effects and an exhortation to employees to report if they have been bullied. The training, however, often does not cover how to report in a safe manner or strategies to ensure personal health and safety. There is also often no material encouraging bystanders to report. Some organisations' emphasis on privacy and confidentiality can act as a considerable obstacle to reporting bystander involvement. Organisational culture is consistently cited as a major factor in bullying however few cover this issue or consider the organisational culture in the advice contained within the training.

Whilst many organisations have specific bullying training for all staff, bullying can be merely mentioned in passing in supervisor and management training. Adequately training supervisors and managers in how to detect bullying, the actual costs to the organisation and how to respond is vital in ensuring that an organisation's response is appropriate.

Training techniques will be discussed. Simply providing information is not effective in modifying behaviour.

The paper examines some of the factors that act as impediments to the effectiveness of bullying training. These include cultural issues such as employee trust in management and contextual factors.

Bullying Training is gradually gaining acceptance as an important part of organisational training.

In the United States, both California and Tennessee have passed laws requiring training¹. In Australia, state Worksafe policies also encourage training as a part of keeping the workplace safe. For Instance the Victorian Worksafe² publication recommends that the following be covered in training:

¹ Yamada, D. C. (2015) Workplace Bullying and the Law: U.S. Legislative Developments 2013-2015, *Employee Rights And Employment Policy Journal* 19: 49-59

² Worksafe Victoria (2012) Workplace bullying - prevention and response.
http://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/42893/WS_Bullying_Guide_Web2.pdf

- the workplace policy and how to comply with it
- the workplace procedure and how to report
- how to deal with workplace bullying
- technology and workplace bullying.

Unfortunately, there is no more information on how these topics should be covered.

Human Resource magazines can provide even less detail. HR Weekly for instance advocates covering the Definition, Zero Tolerance and the Reporting Process.³

It is the author's experience that some of the training programs being offered do not meet the stated aims of addressing and reducing workplace bullying. There also appears to be very little literature that discusses what should or should not be in workplace bullying training and how it should be delivered. The aim of this paper is to generate some discussion around this important topic.

The paper looks at the principles that underlie adult learning as applied to bullying training, what should be in training that often isn't and what part training should have in an organisation's overall strategy for dealing with the issue.

Principles of Adult Learning

There is much literature on the Principles of Adult Learning that goes beyond the scope of the current paper. What is not contested is that learning must be tailored to the way that adults learn. This paper uses Vella's 12 principles of adult learning⁴ as a framework for discussing some of the issues relating to bullying training.

1. Needs Assessment: Training is far more effective if it is tailored to what the adult wants and needs to learn and what really fits their current knowledge. Adults learn best when topics are relevant to them there and then, whereas children are used to learning for the sake of learning. The issue for organisations in devising their bullying training is ensuring that the training provided fits what the employees want and need to learn. We will examine these issues in more detail below.

2. Safety: Learning needs to occur in a safe and inviting setting. The environment should be non judgmental. Learning should use applied examples, but should maintain safety for the learner - using I not You. Thompson⁵ reported on a program where facilitated discussions were used to create a safe environment to overcome previous hostility and resistance to discussing bullying issues. A bullying training program has to consider the workplace culture to ensure that employees feel safe in participating in the training.

3. Sound Relationships: Learning occurs by an open communication process involving respect, safety and listening. It has to be interactive. Adult Learners also have more diverse learning styles and preferences, especially different generations. Extensive efforts to provide bullying

³ HR Weekly (2014), *Stop workplace bullying by training your staff*, Volume 2: 43 27 October 2014 pp 1 – 2.

⁴ Vella, J. (1994). *Learning To Listen, Learning To Teach. The Power of Dialogue in Educating Adults. Jossey-Bass Higher Adult Education Series.* Jossey-Bass, San Francisco

⁵ Thompson, C. (2003). Part II: Busting 101: workplace bullying between men. *The Diversity Factor*, 11(3), 24-29

training can be derailed by the failure to take the relationships in to account. Beirne and Hunter⁶ examined anti bullying initiatives in a public sector and a private sector organisation. In each case they found that programs failed because of the dysfunctions in the relationships between managers and between managers and their staff. The training was ineffectual because these dysfunctions were not considered in designing and delivering the training.

4. Sequence and Reinforcement: Reinforcement means the repetition of facts, skills, and attitudes in diverse, engaging, and interesting ways. Adults learn better through frequent smaller sessions and mentoring than big blocks of training. Adults are not as practiced at learning as children, and often need some repetition, especially with new skills, rather than developing existing skills.

Lansbury⁷ cites the literature that finds that for a sustained effect, training must be repeated regularly.

It is the author's experience that many organisations provide bullying training infrequently. This leaves new employees untrained and recedes in the memory of longer serving employees. It is not responsive to recent changes to the workplace culture. It also has the potential to lead to the view that it is not an important issue in the organisation's culture.

Glendinning⁸ points out that training new managers and supervisors is an important strategy in ensuring that any bullies who have been recruited are advised of their new employer's culture.

The Review of Defence Culture⁹ gave in principle agreement to the following recommendations;

“cradle-to-grave” program of professional socialisation and for education in leadership, followership and ethics, from pre-enlistment through to senior career level Professional Military Education, and with significant reinforcement by local leaders in ships and units; and

a revised approach to the delivery of annual mandatory training that emphasises the importance of ADF culture, articulates our purpose, and places our response beyond mere compliance in order to reinforce culture and build capability;

5. Praxis: Action with Reflection. Adults learn better by practicing principles or skills. They need to interact with their learning tools. This is illustrated by the quote attributed to Confucius “I see and I forget, I hear and I remember, I do and I understand”.

Often little attention is paid to the need for interactivity in some bullying training.

This is related to the first principle. If the training is relevant to the learner's knowledge and current situation, it will be more effective. The employer can only ensure the relevance through interactivity.

⁶ see for example Beirne, M., & Hunter, P. (2013). Workplace bullying and the challenge of pre-emptive management. *Personnel Review*, 42(5), 595-612

⁷ Lansbury, Lynn (2014) *The development, measurement and implementation of a bystander intervention strategy: A field study on workplace verbal bullying in a large UK organisation*. PhD thesis, University of Portsmouth. <http://eprints.port.ac.uk/16990/> p 62

⁸ Glendinning, P. M., (2001) Workplace bullying: Curing the cancer of the American workplace, *Public Personnel Management* 30(3) pp 284- 285

⁹ Department of Defence (2012) *Pathway to change: Evolving Defence Culture* p 32

Altman¹⁰ notes that little attention has been paid to how individuals come to a cognitive understanding of bullying and how that understanding leads to behaviour. He notes that in order to result in changed behaviours, it is not enough to simply impart information. The training must address the meaning that is held by the learners and thereby enable them to construct new meaning. If the training is not related to each employee's current understandings, it will not result in changed behaviours. Altman further notes that if someone views certain bullying behaviours in a positive light, they are unlikely to change their behaviour or engage in meaningful learning simply by being given a list of bullying behaviours¹¹.

Altman goes on to note that evaluation of the training received should include an assessment of the conceptual meaning of the topic. If, however, they can conceptualise the harmful consequences of bullying on both the individuals and on the organisation, they are more likely to change their long term behaviours.¹² He advocates including the harmful consequences of workplace bullying in the training¹³. Thompson reports one example of very effective behavioural change in a factory. Rather than conducting a training session, the employees were assigned to small groups for facilitated discussions¹⁴. This enabled the employees to engage with the issues where they had not done so in the past.

Interactivity can also identify issues with the application of the training to the workplace.

Vickers¹⁵ makes the point that a predatory or psychopathic bully will not change their behaviour because it is often not a lack of understanding that is leading to the behaviour. They are invested in bullying techniques as a means of furthering their agendas. Vickers also notes that training in conflict resolution and communication skills also leads to the implication that the bullying can be attributed in part to a deficiency on the part of the victim. Clarke¹⁶ notes that training and therapy can make psychopaths worse as they can learn new techniques to bully their victims.

Crawshaw¹⁷ notes that traditional training programs do not call for the development of insight and therefore are ineffective in assisting abrasive leaders. Any improvements from such training are short lived.

A combination of interactive training and assessment provides an employer with the potential means of identifying some of these issues including any mismatch between the organisation's bullying policies and the reality of the workplace culture. If unaddressed these issues may, at best,

¹⁰ Altman, B.A. (2010) Workplace bullying: Application of Novak's (1998) learning theory and implications for training. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal* 22: p 24

¹¹ Altman p28

¹² Altman p29

¹³ Altman p30

¹⁴ Thompson, C. pp 24-29.

¹⁵ Vickers, M. H. (2006). Towards employee wellness: Rethinking bullying paradoxes and masks. *Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal*, 18(4), pp 277-278.

¹⁶ Clarke, J. (2005), *Working with Monsters* Random House Australia pp217-218.

¹⁷ Crawshaw, L (2008) Rehabilitating abrasive leaders through executive coaching & organizational intervention *Sixth International Conference on Workplace Bullying. Book of Abstracts*, p44-45

Crawshaw, L. (2010). Coaching abrasive leaders: using action research to reduce suffering and increase productivity in organizations. *International Journal of Coaching in Organizations*, 29(8), 59-77.

render the training ineffectual. At worst they can make the bullying more intractable and reinforce a perception amongst staff that the organisation tacitly condones bullying.

6. Respecting learners as decision makers. All adults already have a considerable knowledge base. The training needs to establish whether the knowledge is accurate and help them contextualise and incorporate the learning. O'Moore¹⁸ argues that bullying training should include the development of a policy to counter bullying. The exercise of developing the policy reinforces the relevance of the policy to the learners.

7. Ideas, Feelings, and Actions. Every learning experience should use a mixture of presentation modes requiring varied learning styles. Adults learn best through a mix of stories, metaphors activities and content. As Benjes-Small and Archer observe¹⁹, Edgar Dale's often misquoted Cone of Experience²⁰ – That is People remember 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see, 50% of what they hear and see, 70% of what they say and write and 90% of what they do – has no basis in research but survives because it reflects what we intuitively know.

8. Immediacy: Teaching What is Really Useful. Learning has to be current and immediate to the learner's situation and able to be applied as soon as possible after the training.

9. Clear Roles for Dialogue. Dialogue, discussion, questioning and challenging are essential part of adult learning and should be encouraged wherever possible. Again, interactivity provides the opportunity for dialogue.

10. Teamwork: How People Learn Together. Teams provide a rich environment for sharing ideas. When working with a group, the knowledge and skills don't have to always come from the learner – rather they can come from other group members. Adults are (hopefully) more mature than children enabling the use of the group dynamic for learning. Competition between groups enhances the creative process. Thompson²¹ found that facilitated group discussions were successful whereas individual training was not.

11. Engagement: Adults will not learn if they are not engaged. Without engagement there is no learning. Keeping the learning interesting with case examples close to the learner's experience helps engagement.

12. Accountability: Learners must be able to demonstrate that they have learned. This includes knowledge, skills, attitudes and new reasoning.

Kasworm and Marienau²² set out principles for assessment of adult learning. These include the need to assess the extent to which previous learning has been transformed by the new learning²³. In the

¹⁸ O'Moore, M. (2000) Critical Issues for Teacher Training to Counter Bullying and Victimisation in Ireland, *Aggressive Behavior* 26: 99-111

¹⁹ Benjes-Small, C. and Archer A (2014) *Tales of the undead...learning theories: The learning pyramid* <http://acrlog.org/2014/01/13/tales-of-the-undead-learning-theories-the-learning-pyramid>

²⁰ Edgar, D. (1954). *Audio-visual methods in teaching* cited in Benjes-Small, C. and Archer

²¹ Thompson p24-29

²² Kasworm, C.E. and Marienau, C. A., (1997) Principles for assessment of adult learning, *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. 75: pp 5-17

²³ Kasworm and Marienau pp 8-9

context of bullying, this requires training participants to relate the training to their experiences. For example in learning about bullying behaviour, participants should be able to relate bullying behaviours to their previous experiences and observations.

Another principle is that adults should be actively involved in their own assessment including engagement in self assessment²⁴. The implication for bullying training is that the participants should be able to discuss their assessment of their learning.

A further principle is that assessment should validate the application of the learning to their lives²⁵. Practically, assessment of training participants should include the identification of changes to practices and policies that will strengthen the organisation's ability to address bullying behaviours. Clearly this last principle will have greater impact in an organisation that has more bullying issues.

Ineffectual Training

Ineffectual training can exacerbate a bullying problem if it is perceived by employees as indicating that management doesn't see the subject area as being important and the training is a quick and convenient means of doing what has to be done. Bullies can see this as a lack of commitment to addressing bullying which they can view as a green light to continue bullying behaviours. The victims of the bullying can also perceive that there is no point in raising concerns as it is not something that management views as important

On Line Learning

On Line education provides a quick and effective means of reaching all employees in a large organisation. As such it has a potentially important role in bullying training and education. There are, however, serious limitations to the role that on line learning can play. The sections above outline some of the challenges that training has in modifying behaviour. By itself, on line learning in particular needs to be well structured and to be delivered in conjunction with other training. It otherwise fails to provide the mechanism that will sufficiently engage with the training participants to ensure that it modifies behaviour. On line learning does have a role to play if used in conjunction with other strategies if it is targeted at adult learning.

Another concern with on line training is that it can be perceived by employees similarly to ineffectual training and can have the effects outlined in the previous section.

Who Should be Trained?

There is clear acceptance that Supervisors and Managers need additional training to give them appropriate skills to respond to cases of bullying. As they have the immediate responsibility for dealing with bullying, they require a higher level of skills to enable an effective initial response. As some managers and supervisors are not aware of the impact of bullying on employees and some engage in bullying behaviours themselves, training for managers and supervisors should include

²⁴ Kasworm and Marienau p 11

²⁵ Kasworm and Marienau p 12

information on the damage caused by bullying and on the costs and adverse effects on an organisation.²⁶

It has been noted above that new employees should receive bullying training to ensure that they are aware of the organisation's requirements.

Harrington, Rayner and Warren²⁷ argue that Human Resource professionals also need specialised training as they have the responsibility for effectively delivering the organisation's Human Resource policies without risking their relationship with managers.

What Should be Trained?

Much of this paper has been devoted to the way that training should be delivered. This is based on the need to train employees to recognise bullying, why it is a problem, how to respond appropriately and how to stop it i.e. what should not occur in employees' relationships with each other. These are fundamental areas of training and should be covered in all bullying training.

There are however other skills and subject areas that provide training in what should occur in employees' relationships with each other as positive measures to enable organisations to reduce bullying and its consequences. Training needs to cover what is acceptable behaviour and behaviour that enhances productivity - not simply what is not acceptable.

Employees should be empowered to provide as much of the solution as possible²⁸.

Bystander intervention is gaining acceptance as an important means of addressing bullying behaviours. For example, D'Cruz & Noronha²⁹ found that bystander intervention is an important solution to workplace bullying and advocated effective bystander intervention training programmes. Lansbury³⁰ reviewed the literature regarding bystander intervention which found that bystander intervention decreased bullying behaviours. She devised an empirical test and determined that training bystanders increased the likelihood that they would successfully intervene³¹.

Whilst confidentiality is vital in the process of addressing complaints of bullying, some organisations place a strong emphasis on privacy and confidentiality to the point where they direct their staff that they should never discuss any aspect of bullying at the workplace. This can act as a considerable obstacle to reporting bystander involvement and can allow bullies greater scope to continue their behaviour.

²⁶ see for example Fevre, R., & Lewis, D. (2012). Why ill-treatment at work is so hard to change. *People Management*, 2012, 30-35. Beirne, M., & Hunter, P. (2013). Workplace bullying and the challenge of pre-emptive management. *Personnel Review*, 42(5), 595-612. Shuttleworth, A. (2004). Managing workplace stress: how training can help. *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 36(2), 61-65. Rayner, C., Hoel, H., & Cooper, C. (2002). *Workplace bullying: What we know, who is to blame, and what can we do?* London: Taylor & Francis

²⁷ Harrington, S., Rayner, C. and Warren, S. (2012) 'Too hot to handle? Trust and human resource practitioners' implementation of anti-bullying policy'. *Human Resource Management Journal* 22: 4, pp 404-405.

²⁸ for example Shuttleworth, A. (2004). Managing workplace stress: how training can help. *Industrial and commercial Training*, 36(2), 61-65

²⁹ D'Cruz, P. and Noronha, E. (2011) The limits to workplace friendship *Employee Relations* 33 pp269-288

³⁰ Lansbury pp 76-135.

³¹ Lansbury pp 294, 300

Civility training is gaining wider acceptance. Gilbert, Raffo & Sutarso³² conducted a study of civility in a US educational institution. They advocate a workplace 'Civility Policy' as a means of countering workplace bullying arguing that civility is a necessary first step in influencing employee behaviour.

Avey, Luthans and Jensen³³ note that training often underemphasises positive attributes including efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience and the core construct of psychological capital. They also recommend workplace stress management programs and focussing on working conditions, such as flexible employment

Culture

Much of the research has found that bullying prevention requires a cultural response. Hoel et al³⁴ examined the effectiveness of various types of training used in management interventions across a range of public sector employers and found that no type of training provided a clearly better result. The study concluded that cultural change is the key to addressing bullying behaviour.

Glendinning³⁵ similarly found that training is likely to fail if it simply focuses on one person's behaviour without changing the culture. He advocates changing the culture to ensure that acceptable behaviours are well known and that managers do not feel safe if they bully.

Similarly the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment (2012) report³⁶ concluded:

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." (pp120-121)

Expressed another way – It doesn't matter how well structured and comprehensive workplace training is, the training will not achieve its desired aims if it is incongruent with the workplace culture.

Training is an essential part of changing and maintaining a workplace culture that addresses bullying however it must be a part of the change rather than its sole driver. If the organisation does not effectively train its employees, it relies on their current knowledge which may not be sufficient to deal with bullying at work.

³² 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

³³ Avey, J.B. Luthans, F. and Jensen S. M. (2009) Psychological capital: A positive resource for combating employee stress and turnover. *Human Resource Management*, 48 (5), Pp. 686

³⁴ Hoel, H., Giga, S. I., & Faragher, B. (2006). *Destructive interpersonal conflict in the workplace: The effectiveness of management interventions*. British Occupational Health Research Foundation and Manchester Business School, The University of Manchester

³⁵ Glendinning, P. M., (2001) Workplace bullying: Curing the cancer of the American workplace, *Public Personnel Management* 30(3) pp 284- 286

³⁶ House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment (2012) report pp120-121

Several authors have noted that if targets of the bullying do not perceive the organisation to be supportive or willing to deal with the bullying behaviours, the training will be ineffectual³⁷. The culture has to provide the employee with both the belief that they will be safe to report improper behaviour and the confidence that the organisation will take their complaint seriously.

One reason that Bystander training is effective is that bystanders are explicitly empowered by the culture to intervene and are therefore both provided with a belief that their actions will be safe and their point of view accepted.

Conclusion

Training is an essential part of dealing with workplace bullying. It must, however, be of sufficient quality to achieve its aims of educating and empowering employees to address bullying.

Interactivity is key to ensuring that the training is effective in providing employees with the knowledge and experience which will enable them to counter bullying or inappropriate behaviour that they encounter. Training should result in employees being able to discuss their learning and demonstrate that they understand the concepts. Interactivity will also assist in identifying any mismatch between the organisation's policies and the reality of the culture.

The training has to engender a sense of safety for the participants to enable them to participate. Learning is compromised without participation.

The delivery should engage with employees in a manner that will enable them to recognise and modify what happens at the workplace. It should cover what behaviour is expected as well as what is not permitted. The training needs to have sufficient content to enable employees to understand and modify their own behaviour and to intervene when their colleagues are subjected to bullying.

Finally the training has to provide employees with a believable assurance that the organisation will support them if they address bullying in their workplace.

Unless the organisation's culture is addressed, training will not achieve its objectives.

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³⁷ Altman p 29, Beirne, M., & Hunter, P. (2013). Workplace bullying and the challenge of pre-emptive management. *Personnel Review*, 42(5), 595-612, Cooper-Thomas, H., Gardner, D., O'Driscoll, M., Catley, B., Bentley, T., & Trenberth, L. (2013). Neutralizing workplace bullying: The buffering effects of contextual factors. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 28(4), 384-407

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HR Weekly (2014), Stop workplace bullying by training your staff, 2:43, 27 October 2014 pp 1 – 2.

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