Protecting Your Organisation Against Workplace Bullying and Harassment: How prepared are you?

By Rachel Clements

Workplace bullying and harassment has the potential to turn people who are thriving and flourishing in their careers to being demotivated, distressed and disgruntled at work.

Symptoms of workplace bullying include:

- High turnover
- High absenteeism
- Poor performance
- Customer complaints
- Low team morale, discontent and negative team environment
- Workplace conflict
- Complaints about bullying and harassment
- Grievances and other complaints
- Increase in accidents and physical injuries
- Workers’ compensation claims for psychological injury

We know that being in a toxic work environment where bullying and harassment is allowed to occur poses a significant risk to any organisation. Workplace bullying impacts people and their ability to undertake their jobs efficiently and effectively, as well as having a detrimental impact on their psychological health and well-being. These negative effects come at a significant financial and personal cost, not only to the business but to its employees as well.

**Workplace Bullying and Harassment – It’s Cost and Prevalence**

Workplace bullying can be subtle in its form by engaging in repetitive behaviours that purposefully seek to marginalise, exclude and isolate; or they can be more extreme ranging in acts of physical violence or aggression often resulting in serious injury or death. It is estimated that workplace bullying in Australia can range in cost from $6 Billion to $36 Billion per year, making it a psychosocial risk that we cannot afford to ignore.

Statistics taken from the ACTU National Health and Safety Campaign highlight that bullying and harassment in Australian organisations is rife. Survey results from both public and private industry sectors such as education, health, finance, administration and manufacturing reveal that:

- 60% of respondents report that workplace bullying is affecting their home and personal life.
- 44% report having taken time off work due to bullying.
- 39% have taken sick leave due to bullying.
• 53% report an unhappy and oppressive workplace and 54% say that shouting, ordering and belittling occurs in their workplace.
• 44% report being too afraid to speak up about the bullying.
• 70% report the bullying is occurring from their manager and less than 30% report colleagues as undertaking the bullying.
• Only 18% report that organisational action is being taken to prevent the bullying.

New Legislation

In order to proactively address this important issue of workplace bullying, from January 2014, The Fair Work Commission (FWC) will have the power to manage bullying and harassment complaints directly from workers and have the capacity to hear their complaints within 14 days of them being listed. The FWC can give a ‘stop bullying’ order, whereby failure to do so can result in significant financial penalties for an organisation.

This is a radically different approach for employers. Currently, complaints of bullying and harassment are internally managed through organisational policies or procedures, or through more formal means such as workers’ compensation, unfair dismissal or workplace health and safety legislation.

It is predicted that this new reform will result in an avalanche of claims for bullying and harassment in the range of 3500 per year (Rachel Nickless, 12 June 13, Australian Financial Review). Whilst its intentions are good, some critics of this new reform report that employers may face increased incidents of ‘reverse bullying’ whereby workers may target employers for performing legitimate management tasks such as performance management.

As a result of these new reforms it is more important than ever for employers to get better at managing the psychological risk of bullying and harassment claims.

In order to do this we must focus on three main factors that can, if managed well, protect an organisation against claims of bullying and harassment. If these three factors are not managed well, an organisation can be highly vulnerable. The three measures of corporate health are:

• Organisational culture
• Leadership and managerial competency
• Quality of workplace relationships

All three components are integral and fundamentally necessary to maximise organisational effectiveness.

Improving Organisational Culture

One of the first steps in addressing bullying and harassment in a workplace is to improve organisational culture. Organisational culture is defined as the collective behaviour of all employees, which influences how we behave and how we feel at work.

We know that reactive cultures which are either aggressive (competitive or negative and destructive) or passive (not making important decisions, being negative behind others’ backs, avoiding confronting issues or concerned with being liked and popular) lead to a range of bullying and harassing behaviours. On the other hand, organisations that have creative cultures whereby people operate from a position of confidence, tend to be leaders in their field, have employees
who build effective relationships with each other, achieve and perform well, and are well encouraged, supported and developed at work.

**Strategies**

- Analyse your workplace culture to identify what areas are at risk. This can be done by undertaking a culture or climate audit, of either your whole organisation, or specific teams to diagnose where bullying and harassment might feature.
- Once you are aware of what is working well and what is not working well, hold workshops with staff to develop a new organisational culture, where there is a zero tolerance of bullying and harassment. Define what the new culture will look like and the types of behaviours that are acceptable or not acceptable in this culture. Defining the negative repercussions for those engaging in unacceptable behaviour related to bullying is also important.
- The success of any culture change project is dependent on senior management’s active involvement, commitment to and demonstrated behaviours related to developing a zero tolerance for workplace bullying. Managers require training on the micro “how to” skills required to effectively enact relevant policies and procedures so that appropriate care and ‘reasonable’ management action is undertaken in sensitive people management situations.
- Ensure all organisational policies and procedures are consistent with a constructive culture, such as bullying and harassment, grievance resolution, performance management, occupational health and safety, recruitment and selection.
- Appoint specific roles such as Human Resource Manager, Grievance Manager, Equal Employment Opportunity Manager or Workplace Health and Safety Manager to effectively and proactively manage complaints of bullying and harassment is important.

**Improving Leadership and Managerial Competency**

Turning around a workplace where bullying and harassment occurs requires managers at all levels to continually improve their leadership and management skills to ensure they are consistent with a culture of zero tolerance for bullying and harassment. How executive, senior and middle management behave has a dramatic impact on the performance and behaviour of staff throughout the whole organisation.

**Strategies**

- Undertake a management development program, which includes the use of a 360 management development tool so that managers can gain independent feedback about their management and leadership behaviour to ensure it is consistent with organisational values.
- Conduct specific skills based workshops to address important behavioural competencies such as performance management, managing conflict, bullying and harassment, organizational change.
- Conduct follow up coaching for specific management competencies for more targeted development.
- Encourage managers to become more proactive in holding honest and authentic conversations when they identify staff behaviour that is not in line with developing a zero tolerance for bullying and harassment. In this way, a truly proactive mindset is developed to prevent bullying and harassment.
- Support managers to develop strong relationships with their staff so that they can address any potential issues or concerns raised by staff early on.

**Building Quality Workplace Relationships**

Open communication, effective team-work and supportive workplace relationships are very important for preventing workplace bullying and harassment. To achieve this, organisations must have high quality workplace relationships.
Strategies

- Ensure that all staff at induction, are educated about acceptable and unacceptable workplace behaviour, as well as relevant policies and procedures in this regard.
- Have regular opportunities for teams to come together both formally and informally for social, networking and professional development.
- Conduct skills based workshops to address important team competencies such as managing conflict, working with individual differences, mental health awareness and emotional resilience.
- Facilitate regular team meetings to ensure that open communication is maintained and any issues are addressed and “nipped in the bud”.
- Celebrate or reward team success to maintain morale and motivation, making bullying and harassment less likely if a positive workplace culture exists.

Turning around a culture of workplace bullying and harassment is no easy task, but with commitment and effort, it is possible to ensure a happier and healthier workplace for all staff to enjoy.

To discuss how your organisation can create a culture free from bullying and harassment call us on 02 8243 1500 Or email on admin@cfch.com.au