Bullying at work

Bullying can involve both verbal and physical attacks, as well as more subtle acts like devaluation of a colleague's work or social isolation. Bullying may encompass both physical and psychological violence. This fact sheet focuses on the use of intimidation in relationships between colleagues. Violence from people outside the work environment is covered in fact sheet 24.

How big a problem is bullying and who is affected?

Anyone in any organisation can be the victim of bullying. Results from an EU survey ([2]) show that 9% of workers in Europe, or 12 million people, report being subject to bullying over a 12-month period in 2000. There is, however, wide variation in the reported prevalence of bullying in different EU Member States. These differences might not be related solely to differences in the occurrence of the problem, but to cultural differences in the attention paid to, and reporting of, bullying.

The prevalence of bullying is highest in jobs with high demands and low degree of individual control, resulting in high anxiety levels.

Why does bullying occur?

Two types of bullying can be distinguished:

1) as a consequence of an escalated inter-personal conflict;

2) where the victim has not been involved in a conflict, but is accidentally in a situation where the perpetrator exerts his or her acts of aggression. 'Scape-goating' is an example of this type of bullying.

Some factors increasing the probability of bullying include:

- Organisational culture that condones bullying behaviour or fails to recognise it as a problem;
- Abrupt organisational change;
- Insecure employment;
- Poor relationships between staff and management, and low levels of satisfaction with leadership;
- Poor relationships between colleagues;
- Extreme levels of work demands;
- Shortcomings in staff policy and insufficient common values;
- Generally increased levels of WRS;
- Role conflicts.

Furthermore, bullying can escalate due to individual and situational factors such as discrimination, intolerance, personal problems and use of drugs or alcohol.

What are the consequences?

For victims of bullying, the consequences may be significant. Physical, mental and psychosomatic health symptoms are well established, e.g. stress, depression, reduced self-esteem, self-blame, phobias, sleep disturbances, digestive and musculoskeletal problems. Post traumatic stress disorder, similar to symptoms exhibited after other traumatic experiences such as disasters and

Introduction

The Agency is producing a series of fact sheets to help tackle work-related stress (WRS) and some of its key triggers. Bullying is highly associated with WRS. This fact sheet gives information and suggestions for those wanting to take practical action to tackle bullying at work. The further information section at the end gives detail on Agency sources of assistance, including other fact sheets in this series.

Bullying at work constitutes a significant problem in the European work force. The costs are considerable for both the worker and the organisation. Moreover, bullying should be regarded as unethical, oppressive behaviour and therefore unacceptable in the work environment. Prevention of bullying at work is one of the objectives in the Communication from the European Commission ([1]) on the new strategy on health and safety at work.

What is bullying?

There is no single definition of bullying agreed upon internationally. An example of a definition is:

> *Workplace bullying* is repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed towards an employee, or group of employees, that creates a risk to health and safety.
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> Within this definition:
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> 'unreasonable behaviour' means behaviour that a reasonable person, having regard to all the circumstances, would expect to victimise, humiliate, undermine or threaten;
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> 'behaviour' includes actions of individuals or a group. A system of work may be used as a means of victimising, humiliating, undermining or threatening;
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> 'risk to health and safety' includes risk to the mental or physical health of the employee.
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> Bullying often involves a misuse or abuse of power, where the targets can experience difficulties in defending themselves.

assaults, is also common among victims of bullying. These symptoms might persist years after the incidents. Other consequences might be social isolation, family problems and financial problems due to absence or discharge from work.

At the organisational level, the costs of bullying can result in higher absenteeism and staff turnover, reduced effectiveness and productivity, not only for the victims of bullying but also for other colleagues who suffer from the negative psychosocial climate in the work environment. Legal damages arising from bullying cases can also be high.

Legislation

The European Commission has introduced measures to ensure the safety and health of workers. The 1989 Council Directive (89/391) contains the basic provisions for health and safety at work and it makes employers responsible for making sure employees do not suffer harm through work, including as a result of bullying. Member States have all implemented this Directive through legislation and some in addition have developed guidance on preventing bullying. Following the approach in the Directive, to eliminate or reduce bullying, employers in consultation with workers and their representatives should:

• Aim to prevent bullying
• Assess the risks of bullying
• Take adequate action to prevent the harm.

Guidance on applying risk assessment and prevention to WRS is given in Fact Sheet 22; this will help with bullying too.

Bullying is mentioned in the European Commission's guidance on WRS [3]. Furthermore, the European Parliament has passed a motion for a resolution on harassment at the workplace.

> **The EU Parliament:**
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> "Calls on the Member States, with a view to counteracting bullying and sexual harassment [4] at work, to review and, if appropriate, to supplement their existing legislation and to review and standardise the definition of bullying."
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> It recommends that:
> • Member States ensure that private and public organisations and social partners put in place effective prevention policies;
> • A system is established for exchanging experience;
> • Procedures are specified to solve the problem of harassment for victims and prevent any recurrence; and
> • That information and training of employees, managers, social partners and workplace doctors be developed, in both the private and public sectors.

At present, few European countries have adopted special legislation regarding bullying at work. In a number of countries, however, legislation is under consideration or preparation, and some countries have taken regulatory steps by means of charters, guidelines, and resolutions.

How to prevent bullying at the workplace?

The prevention of bullying is a key element in the improvement of working life and the avoidance of social exclusion. It is important to take early action against a destructive work environment; employers should not wait for victims to complain. Sometimes, however, it may be difficult to distinguish between bullying and inter-personal conflicts. A two level strategy might be the most effective, comprising both specific efforts against bullying and improvements in the psychosocial work environment. Involving workers and their representatives in the strategy will be crucial to its success.

General improvement in the psychosocial work environment (see also Fact Sheet 22 on work-related stress prevention and 13 on successful management to prevent accidents):

• Give individual workers' choice on how to carry out their work;
• Decrease the amount of monotonous and repetitive work;
• Increase information about goals;
• Develop the leadership style; and
• Avoid unclear role and task specifications.

Development of an organisational culture with standards and values against bullying:

• Awareness for all on what is bullying;
• Investigation of the extent and nature of the problem;
• Formulation of a policy [see box];
• Effective distribution of organisational standards and values to all levels in the organisation. eg through staff manuals, information meetings, newsletters;
• Ensuring that the organisational standards and values are known and observed by all employees;
• Improving management responsibility and competence in handling conflicts and communication;
• Establishing an independent contact for employees; and
• Involving employees and their representatives in risk assessment and prevention of bullying.

> **Formulation of a policy** with clear guidelines for positive social interactions, including:
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> • Ethical commitment from employer and employees to foster an environment free from bullying;
> • Outlining which kinds of actions are acceptable and which are not;
> • Stating the consequences of breaking the organisational standards and values, and the sanctions involved;
> • Indicating where and how victims can get help;
> • Commitment to ensure "reprisal-free" complaining;
> • Explaining procedure for making a complaint;
> • Clarifying the role of manager, supervisor, contact / support colleague, trade union representatives;
> • Details of counselling and support services available for victim and perpetrator; and
> • Maintaining confidentiality.

Further information

Further information on work-related psychosocial issues, including stress and bullying, is available at http://osha.eu.int/ew2002/ This source is being continually updated and developed. Other fact sheets in this series are available here.

The Agency's website is http://agency.osha.eu.int

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[3] Guidance on work-related stress "Spice of Life – or Kiss of Death?", Employment & Social Affairs. Health and safety at work, European Commission, 1999
http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/h&s/publicat/pubintro_en.htm
[4] There is now a new Directive which defines sexual harassment and employers will be required to introduce preventive measures against sexual harassment.

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