

# TIP SHEET

## BULLYING - WORKPLACE

### Dealing with bullying at work

Bullying is hurtful and threatening behaviour, such as teasing, physical aggression (e.g. fighting, pushing, throwing items), standover tactics, gossiping about another maliciously, attempting to stop another person from going somewhere, exclusion, intimidation and cyber-bullying (a culmination of all of these via the net). Bullying in the workplace can occur whenever there is an imbalance of power. But this is not limited to a supervisor and subordinate. It can occur in many situations, such as when someone has more expertise than another, when there is a perceived advantage of age, sex or ethnicity, or even when someone is more comfortable than another in their workplace. The variations of the source of the power imbalance are endless.

#### ***What the Organisation can do to prevent and deal with bullying at work***

From an organisational level, bullying in the workplace tends to stem from a poor organisational culture. The requirement for organisations is to provide employees with a channel to voice their concerns around bullying and to have them dealt with through management disciplinary processes. Organisations with good organisational culture tend to have interventions in place to deal with and prevent bullying issues from arising. Some of these include: 360 degree feedback, organisational culture surveys, policies around grievances and bullying, no tolerance for bullying behaviour by management, transparent performance management and disciplinary procedures, and organisational training in interpersonal skills such as giving and receiving feedback, being assertive not aggressive and increasing resilience at work.

#### ***What Teams can do to prevent and deal with bullying at work***

At the team level, bullying usually stems from dysfunctional leadership. For instance, a manager may resort to standover tactics if he is failing at motivating his/her team through other constructive ways. If a team is bullying their manager, it is usually attributed to a perception of poor leadership (e.g., lack of confidence, respect, ability, likeable temperament) which is further exacerbated by lack of support from higher levels of management. The challenge to deal with the bully normally arises when the manager or team are considered high performers. Managers who resolve bullying issues quickly and effectively have a no tolerance approach to bullying behaviour. They tend to implement counselling and coaching immediately and follow through on consequences if behaviour does not change, even if that means letting go of a high performer.

#### ***What individuals can do to prevent and deal with bullying at work?***

At the individual level, there are three perspectives to take into consideration – the bully, the victim and the observer who can all contribute in a positive way to prevent and eradicate bullying in the workplace.

##### ***The Bully***

Bullies in the workplace firstly need to be made aware that they are being a bully. This is usually the job of their manager but can be given as feedback from the victim if they have assertive skills. If they are the Managing Director or CEO, then it is obviously trickier. This is when 360 degree feedback becomes invaluable. Our starting point then is that the bully is aware that their bullying behaviour is impacting negatively on others around them at work. The first step is to pinpoint the cause of his bullying behaviour so that he/she can make the appropriate changes. Is the bully overworked and stressed, frustrated as work isn't being done, insecure about his/her own job and the only way he/she knows how to feel more secure is to belittle others, has developed this type of behaviour from childhood and is entrenched, lacks the skills to manage anger, and so forth. The second step is to identify ways to behave appropriately towards people at work and this may involve regular coaching/counselling from the manager or with a coach/counsellor/therapist, attendance on an anger management course, performance management programs, self esteem sessions, etc. The final step for the bully is to embark on a commitment to make changes to his/her behaviour at work and for it to be monitored by their manager.

##### ***The Victim***

Bullying can occur and affect in varying degrees. Some victims can continue to work and deal with the issue simultaneously. Others need to take time off to deal with the emotional trauma of bullying as there is psychological injury. Many victims have coped with abusive behaviour for years before they get help. The psychological impact of bullying over a long time can have very serious consequences, such as depression and anxiety and this should be dealt with by a health care professional. Most organisations have an Employee Assistance Program for employees who seek counselling or therapy.

***BULLYING - WORKPLACE... cont'd******But what can you do to prevent being bullied in the first place?***

If there could be one universal truth, it would have to be that all people like to be respected. This can be challenging for people at work when there are a plethora of reasons why work is not being done or the person who is responsible for the job isn't doing it to the expected level, time, with limited resources, etc. Regardless of the dynamics of the workplace, it is never ok to be bullied and you have a right to assert yourself and request to be treated respectfully. By being assertive about issues when they arise, you deal with it immediately and set boundaries about your current and future interactions, especially in not allowing someone else to bully you. An effective model for assertive communication is the feedback model and typically it is - *When you.....I feel...The impact on me/the team is.....In future, I would like you to.....How do you feel about this?*

***What can you do to cope with bullying that has already taken place?***

It is important to deal with the bullying and some people find it helpful to talk to someone about it whom they trust. Others find writing it down to get it off your chest helpful. Some people find it therapeutic processing it themselves in their own minds. Others will go straight to the source to sort it out. The important thing is that you deal with it and move on, otherwise it can stay in the emotional file and come back to haunt you when you least expect it to. Some people find it useful to reframe what they say to themselves, or in other words, manage their self talk. If they are constantly thinking about the bullying interactions, to use an analogy, they are photocopying it every time they do, which only exacerbates the problem. If you place in your mind how you would like it to be, then you will be photocopying a positive outcome instead of a negative one.

***The Observer***

If you witness bullying at work, what is your role? If it was in the playground at school, you would look out for your mates. Research shows that in school situations having a mate makes all the difference to prevention of bullying as someone is caring for your well being. Team members, work colleagues, managers can play a similar role by being assertive and saying NO to bullying in the workplace.