

## **Title: Regaining Productivity Lost to Workplace Bullying & Abuse**

### **Introduction**

In times of economic downturn when organisations are forced to restructure in order to survive and grow into the future, it is easy to lose sight of the human side of change. Imposed change can lead to a dramatic increase in workplace bullying & abuse as employees become fearful of job security and changes to their position descriptions. When organisations are looking for cost savings in all sectors of their organisations, it would be disappointing to see those cost savings lost to the costly negative effects of workplace bullying & abuse.

A study by the U.S. Bureau of National Affairs concluded that the loss in productivity due to workplace bullying is five to **6 Billion** dollars a year in the U.S., and a study in the UK put the number in that country at **1.3 Billion** pounds. And these estimates appear modest.

This article offers some insight into this form of dysfunctional behaviour and proposes the development of respectful workplaces as a remedy to the negative effects associated with workplace bullying and abuse. The remedy is described as an organisational change process focused on increasing productivity and generating competitive edge by encompassing five key principles of workplace respect.

### **Problem**

Workplace bullying and abuse is identified as a key issue for management because it can cost organisations **Millions** of dollars in lost productivity, unnecessary staff turnover, and competitive edge. The victims and bystanders of workplace bullying suffer both physical and emotional symptoms, including depression, anxiety, pain, digestive problems, and low self esteem. And their work suffers as a consequence.

In addition, organisations expose themselves to claimant payouts in the **Millions** of dollars if they allow these negative behaviours to infiltrate and proliferate in their organisations.

Recent research by Kusy & Holloway found "64 percent of the respondents were currently working with a toxic personality, and a whopping 94 percent have worked with someone toxic in their career" (p.5, 2009). In another example a UK Deutsche Bank employee was awarded **800,000 Pounds** as a result of workplace bullying (BBC News, 2006). And with the massive uptake of cyber-bullying organisations need to be on the alert for this most insidious form of bullying.

Bullying has been around ever since an imbalance of power existed between two or more people or groups of people or countries. So, on the one hand there is nothing new about workplace bullying & abuse. On the other hand, what appears to be new about workplace bullying & abuse is the increasing awareness of the serious damage it can cause to individuals and organisations. And now there is a desire by organisations to find solutions to this serious issue.

Definitions of bullying, also known as hazing and mobbing, abound. But the key elements that make up these definitions can be characterized by:

- Imbalance and misuse of power.
- Repetition
- Deliberate
- Intention to change power status
- Lack of empathy

Bullying involves the following four key character groups:

- Bullies
- Targets
- Victims, and
- Bystanders

It is important to note that targets of workplace bullying and abuse need not become victims of workplace bullying and abuse. Rather they can choose to assert themselves and remain targets that deflect these unwarranted and unwanted attacks. For example, a customer in the retail sector uses toxic behaviours and words with a shop assistant. The shop assistant can choose to agree with the bully and accept the bullying and abuse or decide that the customer is exhibiting inappropriate behaviour, deflect the inappropriate behaviours and concentrate on the job of being a professional shop assistant.

However, workplace bullying and abuse often takes place as a sequence of non-dramatic small events. They are hard for targets to spot, hard to complain about and sometimes hard to believe or see as a problem. In this article workplace bullying and abuse behaviours can be identified as:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Withholding information</li> <li>• Use of sarcasm, humiliating and/or belittling remarks</li> <li>• Persistent criticism</li> <li>• Setting of unrealistic goals</li> <li>• Intimidation to prevent spreading malicious rumours</li> <li>• Shouting and verbal abuse</li> <li>• Physical threats</li> <li>• Undermining authority</li> <li>• Pattern of intimidation to prevent taking vacation or sick leave</li> <li>• Pattern of assigning meaningless tasks</li> <li>• Excessive Monitoring of work</li> <li>• Systematic ignoring</li> <li>• Persistent use of biting criticism and sarcasm</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isolation from other workers</li> <li>• Public criticism and/or humiliation</li> <li>• Blocking promotion</li> <li>• Refusing reasonable requests</li> <li>• Takes undeserved credit and/or improperly shifts blame</li> <li>• Displays uncontrolled anger, shouting and/or using vulgar language</li> <li>• Discounting or denial of accomplishments</li> <li>• Invading privacy, such as by reading mail or inspecting computer hard drive</li> <li>• Demanding perfection in trivial matters</li> <li>• Setting objectives that cannot be achieved</li> <li>• Sending memos that are designed to intimidate</li> </ul> |
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There are very serious consequences of workplace bullying & abuse:

For the organisation:

- Reduces productivity
- Stifles creativity
- Increases turnover
- Increases absenteeism
- Reduces satisfaction, and
- Increases the chances for costly lawsuits

For the target:

Targets suffer with both physical and emotional symptoms such as:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Pain
- Digestive problems, and
- Many more

For the bystanders:

Bystanders suffer many of the same symptoms as the targets due to the fear that they may be the next targets and due to the abusive atmosphere in which the bullying takes place.

### **Workplace bullying and school based bullying**

One way of understanding workplace bullying is by comparing and contrasting it with school based bullying. Bullying differs significantly from schools to workplaces in the following ways (Franklin 2008)

True or False?

If a target of bullying in school stands up for her rights in a non-violent way, she runs a significant risk of being expelled from school or demoted to a lower grade.

**Schools: False.**

**Workplace: True.** About 75% of bullying situations in the workplace are resolved by the target of bullying resigning, being fired, being transferred to another department, or being demoted. Almost 25% result in the termination of the target. Targets who stay often experience a reduction or elimination of promotion prospects, diminution of office size and location, and/or a reduction in challenging and interesting work.

True or False?

In school the bully and the target may have different social status and power, but their formal power and position are always equal, except of course when a coach or teacher bullies a student.

**Schools: True.**

**Workplace: False.** Over 75% of the time the bully is the target's supervisor. This fact, alone makes it much more difficult for the target and well-meaning bystanders to end the bullying.

True or False?

Bullying in a school almost never helps it to achieve even short-term organisational objectives.

**School: True**

**Workplace: False.** Bullying subordinates can help a supervisor achieve short-term objectives, such as making a deadline. However, the long run effects of bullying are always negative, including reduced productivity, teamwork, and especially creativity.

True or False?

There are some simple strategies that targets and bystanders can use at school that are often effective.

**School: True.** For example, the target can go to a guidance counselor with the problem. A competent guidance counselor will call the bully into his or her office, explain that the

bullying must stop, what the consequences are for continuing, and warn the bully that any retaliation against the target for telling about the bullying will result in even more severe consequences. No strategy works all the time, but this strategy has a good chance of success.

**Workplace: False.** When translating the above example to the workplace, the target goes to the HR department. The HR person, unlike the school counselor, does not have authority over the bully, and is often powerless to help the target. It is often very difficult for staff personnel, such as in the HR department, to exert power over line managers. Chances of ending the bullying are minimal.

True or False?

Top management intervention in a school is, with rare exceptions, always in support of the target.

**School: True.** It is hard to imagine the principal (or head) of a school taking the side of the bully. The exception would be where the target responds violently to non-violent bullying.

**Workplace: False.** The bully presents him/herself often as a firm, but fair supervisor, who has to hold the feet of laggards to the fire in order to do his/her job effectively. It is not the bully's problem if some employees can't take the heat. The bully is just striving for the success of his/her department and the organisation. Having heard the bully's convincing side of the story, management dismisses the target's complaint, which is in essence siding with the bully.

True or False?

In school a bystander who stands up to a bully risks becoming a target, but does not risk being expelled from school or demoted to a lower grade.

**Schools: True.**

**Workplace: False.** Bystanders who stand up to the bully risk being the next target and experiencing the same consequences as the original target, including dismissal and demotion.

True or False?

When bullying occurs at school, organisations that explicitly support students (such as PTAs) align themselves against the school administration. As a result, the administration feels pressure to support the bully in order to prove itself blameless.

**School: False.** PTA's or other parent organisations generally do not take up issues involving conflicts between students. On very rare occasions, parents will sue the school, such as in the case of a suicide or suicide attempt by the target.

**Workplace: True.** If the target goes to the shop steward or other union representative, management's tendency is to fight the accusations, regardless of their merits. If outside organisations, such as those who represent the rights of women or a specific ethnic group, get involved, management calls the lawyers and prepares for battle. The same is true if a government organisation representing workers' rights takes the side of the target.

### **Why does bully start and thrive in organisations?**

Bullying and abuse starts and thrives in organisations for many reasons, some of which are:

- There are often benefits for the bully, including feelings of dominance, revenge, and power
- Bullying behaviour is rewarded in certain organisations as examples of “tough” management
- In most organisations there is usually no cost for the bully
- In most cases bullying behaviour is not illegal, and lawsuits are rare at present
- Bystanders are usually powerless to intervene to stop the bullying
- Targets are usually reluctant to take formal action, such as a lawsuit or grievance due to the possible negative consequences (further bullying and dismissal), and
- Management is often reluctant to take action against managers who are bullies, but successful in their positions.

If we see bullying as both covert and overt, it is easy to see covert bullying through tangible inappropriate behaviours such as verbal and physical abuse. But when we see it as covert bullying such as exclusion, it is almost impossible to see and remedy. To make matters worse bullying and abuse has been embedded and legitimated in our cultures for numerous generations through work practices, gender inequalities, the media, religion, sport, parenting, and leadership styles.

When bullying is likened to an Iceberg, overt bullying would be above the surface and easy to see and remedy. And covert bullying would be below the surface, difficult to see and almost impossible to remedy. And it is below the surface that the bulk of workplace bullying and abuse would be found.

Sadly, leadership and management through bullying & abuse has been a dominant model in many workplaces. While this model may help organisations achieve short-term goals, it is usually at the expense of organisational health and long-term goals.

One effective way of thwarting bullying & abuse in the workplace is by developing respectful workplaces where employees feel safe and unhindered to perform the duties of the jobs they have been employed to perform. A respectful work place is one where members are continually vigilant in insuring that they act in a respectful way and do not bully or harass other members. Members work to support, not put down other members.

In respectful workplaces employees can be more productive because they are more focused on their work. In non-respectful workplaces employee's productivity is likely to suffer as they become distracted by job insecurity, personal financial issues, and the physical and emotional symptoms associated with bullying & abuse (Kingsley 1998).

Accordingly, organisations could look to increasing productivity and generating competitive edge by developing respectful workplaces. Workplaces where employees look forward to coming to work and performing the duties they are being paid to perform.

### **Principles of respectful workplaces**

The principals of respectful workplaces involve communication skills that will give organisational members the ability to deal with difficult and tricky situations without bullying and without the chance that someone could misconstrue the communication as bullying.

In their educational game, Rubenstein & Kingsley (2009) identify the following five principles applicable to developing respectful workplaces:

1. Maintain the self-respect and motivation of others (even when criticizing);
2. Criticize actions and ideas, not people. (Criticize behaviour, not the character or capabilities of individuals);
3. Support others, rather than undermine them. (Keep the focus on improvement, not punishment);

4. Set realistic and attainable goals. (Requests and expectations should meet a standard of attainability and reasonableness. This is true when setting goals for self and others); and
5. Act assertively, not passively or aggressively. (Avoid the pitfall of taking aggressive action while thinking that it is assertive).

### **Organisational change**

Organisational change is an excellent vehicle for developing respectful workplaces because it is a management process typically utilised for increasing productivity and developing competitive edge. Essentially, organisational change is a learning paradigm because change leads to learning. Change and learning are inextricably interwoven. This means that change leads to learning and learning leads to change. For example, the introduction of new technology and equipment in the workplace is a change process requiring employees to learn new skills and ways of working. As a consequence of learning new skills and ways of working the need for more change usually arises.

Like Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S), bullying & abuse can be classified as a subset of risk management and addressed in a similar way and as an ongoing change process. A process focused on developing respectful relationships and minimising incidences of bullying & abuse.

The Respectful Workplace Game is an excellent starting point for organisations wanting to minimise workplace bullying and abuse because it focuses on teaching healthy pro-social behaviours. Success in developing these skills automatically leads to a reduction in the anti-social and toxic behaviours associated with workplace bullying and abuse. Rather than penalising the negative behaviours, participants learn respectful behaviours that can lead to increased levels of organisational health and well-being. The principles of the game can also be utilized as the basis for organisations wanting to develop their own policy in relation to minimizing workplace bullying.

### **Why game-play?**

The combination of entertainment and education date back to traditions of oral story telling, that passed on the values and traditions of ancient civilizations from one generation to the next. Board games, like other *Entertainment Education Strategies*, "combine entertainment and education in order to promote pro-social values, beliefs and practices, and achieve educational goals." (Brown & Phraser 1977).

Counsellors and child psychologists have used board games to diagnose and teach cooperation, good sportsmanship, and other pro-social skills. A new generation of board games has been designed by Franklin Learning Systems to teach specific skills and knowledge that are not easily taught using more traditional methods. These skills are more targeted than skills that can be learned from traditional board games that were designed for entertainment only. For example, Monopoly ® can be used to teach how to be a gracious winner, a good loser, and the importance of honesty. However, Monopoly ® and other games designed purely for fun are not effective at teaching anger control or strategies for preventing bullying. Board games, in contrast to computer games, also offer the unique advantage of involving significant interpersonal communication and interaction as well as all human senses.

Games have been used at all levels from kindergarten to graduate schools of business. The military has used "war games" for centuries as learning devices to improve both tactics and strategy. Even organisational change, as a leadership intervention can be explained as a game with its own rules (Kingsley, 1998).

Learning through game-play can be understood using Bandura's (1976) social learning theory. Similarly:

*"each time students master a board game on social-cognitive issues, they gradually develop higher levels of self-efficacy. As players watch others play or observe the choices and consequences of others, the level of self-efficacy, again, is affected (King, 2008)."*

Players also observe other players making decisions and the consequences. Players practice (rehearse) positive behaviours and experience the positive results. Both of these processes improve skill level, knowledge, and self-efficacy. Finally, players have the requisite skills to deal effectively with real world challenges. Positive results further reinforce the skills that are learned.

Educational games have important advantages over other educational strategies. These include:

- Active involvement of players and all their senses,
- Reducing the teacher's role as "judge and jury",
- Increased attention through the intrinsic interest in the game and the desire to win,
- Less threatening through the utilization of third party characters and scenarios,
- The ability to involve layers with mixed initial skill levels without the problem of boredom for advanced players and confusion for the less advanced players,
- The creation of a very low risk environment where players can try out new pro-social behaviours in a safe setting. There are no fears of negative consequences, since "it is only a game," and
- Exceptional learning transfer to the real world.

### **The respectful workplace game**

The Respectful workplace game evolved from Franklin Rubenstein's work developing bully minimisation educational board games for schools and Hugh Kingsley's passion to develop such a resource for the workplace where many bullying and abuse behaviours are learnt and wrongly legitimated. For any meaningful culture change to be effective in this area of human behaviour it seems important to address bullying & abuse in the workplace because children look to adults as role models.

The overall objective of The Respectful Workplace Game is to promote respectful workplaces and positive relationships by reducing current harassment and preventing future harassment.

Specifically players:

- Learn the principles of respectful relationships and help create a respectful workplace.
- Learn to avoid unintentional bullying and/or harassment,
- Learn how to handle delicate problems with out even the appearance of bullying or lack of respect,
- Learn how to recognize workplace bullying, even its subtle forms,
- Learning how to deal with bullying if it occurs and try to end it before it becomes a major problem,
- Learn ways to disagree and compete with others in ways that preserves respect,

- Learn about workplace bullying, its prevalence, and the negative consequences for targets, bystanders, and the organisation, and
- Play a vital role in reducing the incidence of litigation against their employer that is related to workplace bullying and harassment issues.

## **Conclusion**

This article has identified workplace bullying & abuse as a major issue for management, which can be addressed by developing and nurturing respectful workplaces through an organisational change process focused on five key principals of respectful workplaces. These are workplaces where employees look forward to coming to work and performing the duties they are being paid to perform.

Like Occupational Health & Safety (OH&S), bullying & abuse can be identified, bench marked, and minimized.

In conclusion, and as a result of identifying bullying and abuse in the workplace as a major issue, an opportunity has surfaced as bright as a shining beacon. A beacon of direction, which could lead to increased productivity, and organisational growth while developing respectful human relationships.

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Information about The Respectful Workplace Game can be found at <http://thebrainary.com/shop/product.php?productid=1672&cat=0&page=1>

## **Notes**

### **1. Sexual harassment and bullying**

There has been a great deal of attention paid to the issue of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is a grave problem that can have dire consequences for victims and the organisation as a whole. However, for every instance of sexual harassment, there are probably 20 additional cases of bullying and harassment. These cases, which are the subject of The Respectful Workplace Game, have not received the attention they deserve although they are extraordinarily damaging to the victims and the organisation. In most cases there are no laws against these instances of bullying and harassment. Victims find it almost impossible to defend them, and the only course of redress is through the courts. Payments in the Millions have been received more and more frequently, and legislatures are moving in the direction of making workplace bullying and bullying illegal.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that not all sex or racial discrimination cases maybe valid, and the same may apply to complaints about bullying and harassment. The challenge is to learn to understand the fine line between healthy, fun, and productive workplace relationships, which can lead to increased organisational performance and organisational growth and valid cases of inappropriate behaviour such as those identified in this article. Although The Respectful Workplace Game does not deal specifically with discrimination due to sex, race, or disabilities, the principles and skills in the game are just as effective in combating these serious problems.

### **2. Organisational change**

Organisational change is a complex process and not all organisational members are able to make prescribed changes. Adequate time and resources need to be made available. Organisational change is more successful when it emanates from the coalface and employees are involved in the process from its grass roots.



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