

Workplace Bullying

Why is workplace bullying a problem?

Bullying should be recognised as a potential hazard in all workplaces, because it can occur in any workplace and under certain conditions most people are capable of bullying. Bullying can be harmful to organisations as well as individuals, resulting in:

- ~ High levels of absenteeism and staff turnover
- ~ Breakdown of teams and work relationships
- ~ Poor public image in terms of becoming known as a difficult place to work
- ~ Reduced efficiency, productivity and profitability
- ~ Increased costs associated with counselling, mediation and compensation claims, recruitment and re-training of new staff
- ~ Potential litigation
- ~ Each individual will react differently to bullying behaviour, and the effects may include:
 - ~ High levels of distress
 - ~ Anxiety, panic attacks and depression
 - ~ Ill health, insomnia
 - ~ Loss of self esteem and confidence, feelings of social isolation
 - ~ Reduced work performance, incapacity to work
 - ~ Deteriorating relationships with family and friends

Bullying behaviour can be difficult to identify, and it may exist even if there are no reported incidents. There are a number of reasons why employees may not have raised concerns, including:

- ~ Fear of retribution from the perpetrator
- ~ Feeling too intimidated or embarrassed to complain
- ~ Lack of confidence that anything will change if they report a problem
- ~ Feeling powerless due to their position in the organisation
- ~ Thinking it may affect their future prospects
- ~ Accepting workplace bullying as a normal part of the workplace culture.

It is easier to prevent workplace bullying than it is to intervene after an event or mediate during an established pattern of bullying.

What should employers do?

The first step is to establish whether bullying exists in the workplace or whether there is the potential for it to occur. Common warning signs are:

- ~ Sudden increase in absenteeism
- ~ Unexplained requests for transfers
- ~ Behavioural changes such as depression
- ~ Sudden deterioration in work performance

Identify whether there are any factors that could increase the risk of bullying behaviour:

- “ **Significant organisational change** . major internal restructuring or technological change may inadvertently create an environment that increases the risk of bullying.
- “ **Workforce characteristics** . some employees may be at greater risk, such as new workers and those that represent a minority in the workplace due to age, gender, religion, race, etc.
- “ **Workplace relationships** . poor workplace relationships and inadequate communication can contribute to bullying behaviour, e.g. workplaces that tolerate teasing and practical jokes.
- “ **Work systems** . staff shortages, poorly defined jobs, lack of policies and procedures, lack of training and supervision.
- “ **People management practices** . managers who have not had leadership training, poor interpersonal skills, a command and control management style.

The following methods can be used to collect information about potential bullying behaviour:

- “ Monitoring patterns of sick leave and workers compensation data
- “ Feedback from: worker attitude surveys, exit interviews, managers and supervisors, union representatives, employee assistance providers
- “ Consulting with workplace health and safety representatives and committees
- “ Setting up a system to encourage the reporting of incidents (e.g. suggestion boxes to enable staff to raise concerns anonymously)

Anti-bullying strategy:

Develop and implement a plan to reduce the risk of workplace bullying, which should include the following steps:

Develop a culture of support for employees by:

1. Improving the quality of performance feedback, including informal development oriented feedback as well as corrective feedback
2. Improving the availability of flexible working arrangements, and ensuring fair and reasonable treatment of staff
3. Communicating openly at all levels, fostering a more engaging work environment through involvement of staff in decision making processes that impact on their work
4. Increasing accountability of management by setting targets/goals and ensuring effective reporting structures

Write a policy or code of conduct, in consultation with employees

Provide training on the organisation's policies and procedures, and ensure that supervisors and managers have the skills to recognise and deal with inappropriate behaviour. Create awareness about what bullying is, the warning signals and effects, why it is not tolerated and include this information during induction of new employees.

Develop complaint handling and investigation procedures and treat all complaints seriously.

Appoint a contact person for informal enquiries, concerns or complaints, so that actions can be taken early in the process to avoid unacceptable behaviour escalating into workplace bullying. The contact person can be a trained person within the organisation or an employee assistance provider, whose role is to deal with various employee issues and who may be able to provide advice or mediate in bullying cases.

Monitor the effectiveness of any action taken in response to bullying behaviour.

Further information:

For additional information on this and other issues pertaining to employment, training and skills development in the automotive industry please contact the Queensland Automotive Skills Alliance by telephone on 1300 796 644 or by email on info@gasa.com.au .