

Workplace Bullying and the Impact on Organisational Efficiency

Tony Buon¹

"...it is our hope that the people of all countries can live in a world free from war and violence and free from suppression, discrimination and bullying." President Jiang Zemin in 1999

Many managers in China and elsewhere often have the mistaken assumption that bullying, shouting, threatening or getting angry at employees will somehow lead to organisational efficiency and improved performance. They state that a 'lazy' or 'indolent' employee needs to be 'strongly managed'. The same managers are often shocked to have their behaviour described as bullying. They may also be shocked to realise that the impact of their behaviour is not to motivate employees or increase performance, but in fact the opposite. The bullied or threatened employee may work harder in the immediate short-term, but the actual impact will be to avoid or withdraw from the bullying behaviour (sickness, absenteeism, turnover). Further, the employees actual work performance and efficiency will decline through lowered motivation, stress and illness.

This type of behaviour is in fact a form of workplace violence. The International Labour Office (ILO) stated that 'workplace bullying is one of the fastest-growing forms of workplace violence' (Martino, 2000). In fact bullying is far more prevalent than other destructive behaviours covered by legislation, such as sexual harassment and racial discrimination.

Organisational effectiveness is known to be about the effective management of human resources. Workplace bullying is simply poor human resource practice and poor management.

So what is workplace bullying?

Although traditionally applied in school contexts, adult bullying, specifically bullying in the workplace, was first highlighted in Scandinavian countries, and more recently in Australia, the UK and in the USA. There are similarities with bullying as it appears in schools, but the issue of workplace bullying presents particular challenges (Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002).

Workplace bullying is notoriously difficult to define, and there is some danger in simplistic definitions. However, bullying is usually defined in the literature as a type of aggressive behaviour, in which the aggression is repeated, and in which there is an imbalance of power such that it is difficult for the victim to defend themselves (Olweus, 1999). It includes, but is not limited to, behaviours such as intimidation, public humiliation, offensive name-calling, social exclusion, and unwanted physical contact.

Research has demonstrated how bullying brings both physical and/or mental injury on the victims which seriously damages their well being.

In an earlier overview of research, Rayner and Höel (1997) grouped workplace bullying behaviours into the following types:

- **Threat to professional status** (e.g., belittling opinion, public professional humiliation, and accusation regarding lack of effort);
- **Threat to personal standing** (e.g., name-calling, insults, intimidation, and devaluing with reference to age);
- **Isolation** (e.g., preventing access to opportunities, physical or social isolation, and withholding of information);
- **Overwork** (e.g., undue pressure, impossible deadlines, and unnecessary disruptions)

¹ Tony Buon is a workplace psychologist and a lecturer in Human Resource Management at the Robert Gordon University in Scotland. He can be contacted at tonyb@eastburnpartnership.com

- **Destabilisation** (e.g., failure to give credit when due, meaningless tasks, removal of responsibility, repeated reminders of blunders, and setting up to fail).

It is very important however that Managers or HR Professionals do not attempt to use definitions to simply tick a set of behaviour boxes in order to determine whether or not someone has been bullied. Such judgments require you to interpret a definition and apply it fairly and impartially.

Bullying can be seen as systematic aggression and/or violence targeted towards one or more individuals by one individual or by a group (Einarsen, 2000). Workplace bullying is most frequently reported as victimisation of employees by managers. There are also bullying within peer groups and the more overlooked area of managers being bullied by workers.

In defining bullying, we need to also be aware of the concepts of 'relational bullying' (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), in which the bully damages the victim's friendship networks, and 'indirect bullying' (Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994) perpetrated by a third party, such as rumour spreading. Relational bullying and indirect bullying can often go unnoticed by others. It can therefore be particularly difficult for the victims to report on their experiences, or to be believed if they do.

Bullying may go beyond colleague-on-colleague abuse and become an accepted, or even encouraged, aspect of the culture of an organisation. A number of organisations now recognize the need to change an institutionalised culture of workplace bullying and have developed policies and strategies to attempt to change this negative culture.

While some degree of repetition is usually thought to characterize bullying, there is no agreement on the extent of frequency and duration needed to define it. Clearly some serious single episodes, such as serious assault, may be regarded as bullying. Take for example the case of young Bobby. On Bobby's first day at work it was subject to an 'initiation' that involved hanging him upside down from a forklift truck, pulling down his trousers and spray painting him with grease. Bobby, left the job a few weeks later, filed a law suit for a stress related injury and after a large amount of negative publicity against the company and its managers who were seen to effectively condone initiation ceremonies; the case was finally settled out of court.

However, in general, isolated episodes of conflict should not be considered bullying. In short, bullying occurs when one or more individuals, repeatedly over a period of time, are exposed to negative acts (be it sexual harassment, tormenting, social exclusion, offensive remarks, physical abuse or the like) conducted by one or more other individuals.

It is also important to consider the cultural context within which we observe and interpret bullying behaviour.

Organisational culture can at times be a very powerful influence in the institutionalisation of certain types of behaviour that we may see as bullying, but which previously may have been tolerated or even supported as just a part of the 'way things are done'.

For example, one large company had created a culture of aggression, excessive work pressure, insult as a performance strategy and management by the rule of fear. In this organisation bullying of workers by managers and peer bullying was not only accepted, it was expected. This resulted in excessive staff turn-over, low morale, low productivity and eventually very public law suits by victimized employees. Even after a change in most of the senior management team, hugely expensive policy initiatives not much was seen to change. Eventually, the Board agreed that the negative culture could be traced to the CEO and only when this person was eventually replaced, did things start to get better.

So how large is the problem?

Very little scientific research has been conducted in this area due to the contentious nature of the issue, difficulty in researchers gaining workplace entry, and the fact that very few official databases reflect the true figures of workplace bullying and violence. Many companies cover up the true extent of the problem and keep specific cases very secret. At best, probably only 10 per cent or less of actual incidents may be formally reported making it difficult to analyse, uncover causal links, and then implement strategies. Further, the lack of good operational definitions makes research into the area difficult.

However, some good studies have been conducted, particularly in Scandinavia and the UK. In Norway, Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) reported that as many as 8.6 per cent of respondents to 14 different surveys (N = 7986) were bullied at work. Vartiainen (1996) found a slightly higher rate of 10.1 per cent within 949 Finnish municipal employees.

More recently, in the UK, Quine (1999) reported that 38 per cent of a sample of 1100 NHS community trust (Government Health & Community Workers) employees had experienced one or more types of bullying in the previous year.

A survey by British trade union Amicus highlights the costs associated with bullying. Of 265 union members working in the post office, it found that each had taken an average of 51 sick days a year because of bullying -- suggesting that bullying costs the group £15 million a year (Higginbottom, 2003).

In a recent study by two UK researchers (Hoel & Cooper, 2000) involving more than 5,000 employees from over 70 different organisations, in the public, private and NGO sectors suggested that give the UK workforce of approximately 24 Million people, that close to 2.5 Million workers considered themselves as having been bullied during the last six months. These figures can be seen in the table below.

There is very little literature on workplace bullying in China published in International and Western journals, and this is probably an area that is crying out for some good local research. There is some work being done in relation to school bullying.

It was reported in the state press in 2002 that 94 percent of Chinese students feel unsafe in school as the incidence of violence and bullying rise (AFP, 2002). According to the survey results, 10.5 percent of the students polled also said they felt an immediate threat of violence at their schools, the Procuratorial Daily reported. The survey found that 30 percent of middle school students had psychological abnormalities, while 15 percent were diagnosed with psychological diseases, the paper said. A separate survey of 10,000 students in Beijing, found that 40 percent of the students in the Chinese capital had at one time or another been coerced to give money to other students or youths in or around their schools.

One published work was by the Australian Sociologist Professor Chan, and in her recent book, *China's Workers Under Assault*, Chan describes the serious bullying of workers at the factory level in China. She describes incidences of bullying in small factories that even include the use of corporal punishment.

There are many work factors that may increase the likelihood of bullying at work. These include:

- (1) Deficiencies in job design
- (2) Deficiencies in leadership and management behaviour
- (3) Low morale
- (4) A workplace culture of blame and scapegoating
- (5) Excessive competition (tasks, status or advancement)
- (6) Lack of clear policies in relation to workplace dignity

Given the behavioural aspects and these work factors, it would seem reasonable to suggest that bullying in Chinese workplaces would be at least similar to that of other countries.

What is the impact of bullying on the individual?

People who have been bullied report that it affects them physically and mentally. With stress, depression, and lowered self-esteem as the most common complaints. Based on clinical data, it has been observed that many victims suffer from symptoms that are very close to that of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Leymann and Gustafsson, 1996).

Clinical observations have also shown other grave effects of exposure to work harassment, such as social isolation, stigmatizing, social maladjustment, psychosomatic illnesses, depressions, compulsions, helplessness, anger, anxiety, and despair (Leymann, 1990). It has also been claimed that bullying is a major cause of suicide (Leymann and Gustafsson, 1996).

Edelmann and Woodall (1997) found some initial effects of bullying included: a loss of confidence (reported by 44.2 per cent); physical ailments (38.4 per cent); and stress (37.2 per cent). More long-term effects included physical or psychological ill-health (53.5 per cent), inability to cope (21.5 per cent), and low self-esteem (19.8 per cent).

In a recent study of staff in two Finnish hospital districts, Mika Kivimaki and colleagues found that 5% reported bullying and that there was an association between bullying and a 26% increase in the risk of medically certified sickness absence (Kivimaki, Elovainio and Vahtera, 2000).

Though, however poignant the above statistics appear, hearing the words of actual victims of bullying can be a sobering thing. For example:

- *I never took time off, but I felt sick almost every day about the idea of going to work. My wife didn't understand what was going on. I really thought I had a future in the firm, but the Senior Partner made it clear, every chance he had that I was worthless, stupid, and would never make partner.*

I would often leave home and walk around the street building up the courage to go into the office and face my persecutor. My heart would start beating fast and I'll feel physically sick in my stomach. Some days I felt like killing myself, rather than face another day of humiliation

I used to be the highest earner for my firm, now I have trouble keeping clients and often make mistakes. (John, T, An experienced lawyer working in a large commercial practice)

- *I approach the other girls I work with at lunch time. But as I get closer, the others see me and move into a tight circle, their backs to me. I would then go and sit alone and the other girls giggle loudly at my discomfort. This happens every day to me, I hate it – I am going to leave this company as soon as I can.*

I know I am the only one in the organisation who understands the new database. My supervisor says I'm valued by the company, but they allow this to happen. Why? (Sally C, IT Professional in a US owned multinational in Shanghai)

- *My manager would always shout at me in meetings and made sure I never knew what was going on. I spoke to the head of department, but she said I just needed to develop a 'thick skin'. I became very nervous, lost all confidence and took a number of periods of sick leave. I found myself being angry at students and my work was slipping. One day after she shouted at me in front of the whole department, I found myself crying in the ladies toilet and couldn't stop. I went home but my husband didn't understand – he also told me to just ignore her. But I can't.*

I am now on extended sick leave and don't know if I'll ever go back. (Linda, a university lecturer with over 20 years of experience)

What is the impact of bullying on the organisation?

Harassment at work is claimed to be a more crippling and devastating problem for employees than all other work-related stressors together (Wilson, 1991). The negative effects of bullying at work may also be observed at the organisational level. Based on research in Sweden, Leymann (1990) claimed that the combination of productivity loss by victim and work group, and costs regarding interventions by third parties, may amount to between US\$30,000 and \$100,000 per year for each individual case.

The organisational costs of bullying may be lowered productivity, an increase in sick-leave, and increased turnover; as well as increased compensation claims and liability. It is also likely that victims of bullying at work may also have strongly reduced work commitment and may leave the organization prematurely.

Courts worldwide have stated to issue damages against employers and company directors for workplace bullying. In a recent decision in Australia, a company and its directors were fined and convicted for failing to provide a workplace free of bullying. The company was fined \$24,000 plus costs and the two directors were also convicted and fined \$1000 each.

In this case a sixteen year old employee was wrapped from neck to feet in cling-wrap using the company's wrapping machine. He was then secured to a trolley and pushed the edge of an access point which was 4.2 metres above ground. Sawdust and glue were then shoved into his mouth. This "initiation" incident continued for half an hour until a contracted site foreman cut the employee free.

The court heard evidence that no one was disciplined as result of this incident and further, no workplace violence policy was in place at the site. Chief Industrial Magistrate Miller determined that the company was guilty under section 8 of the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000 for failing to ensure a working environment that was safe and without risks to health. Reaching its decision the Court referred to the culture initiation which existed in the

company. It stated: “What occurred on this day is often described as an initiation. It is a polite term for bullying... It is a culture that needs to be stamped out. Bullying has no place in the workplace.”

The true cost of bullying in the workplace goes beyond the direct or indirect costs to the employer, and can have an impact on relationships, family life and community. It is about basic human rights – the rights for all people to live and work in an environment free from the tyranny of the bully.

What can be done?

The first step towards tackling bullying is to admit that it exists. There is growing recognition that in confronting bullying a comprehensive risk management approach is required.

Instead of searching for a single solution good for any situation, the full range of causes which generate bullying need to be analysed and a variety of intervention strategies adopted. We also need to remember that bullying at work may not merely be an episodic, individual problem but a structural, strategic problem rooted in wider corporate cultural factors.

However there are some things that HR Professionals and managers can do to deal with workplace bullying. These include:

- The development of effective policies and procedures
- Disseminating information about workplace bullying and the new policy to all staff
- The encouragement of reporting and prompt resolution of complaints
- The training of managers and other key staff about bullying behaviour
- Early intervention and informal procedures including:
 - Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP)
 - Mediation (more on this below)
 - Conflict resolution methods
- Formal procedures including:
 - Independent and impartial investigation
 - Appropriate grievance handling methods
 - Appropriate punitive measures for those found guilty of bullying behaviour
- The reinforcement of practices and philosophies that are inconsistent with bullying, such as:
 - Workplace dignity
 - Honesty, transparency and consistency in management behaviour
 - Ethical business practices
 - The encouragement of workplace diversity

Workplace Mediation

As part of the risk management strategy, workplace mediation is a powerful intervention tool in some cases. Workplace mediation is the intervention in a negotiation or a conflict of an acceptable third party who has limited or no authoritative decision-making power, who assists the involved parties to voluntarily reach a mutually acceptable settlement of the issues in a dispute (Moore, 1986). In addition to addressing the substantive issues, mediation may also establish, strengthen or terminate the relationships between parties in a manner that minimises psychological harm. Essentially, mediation is a dialogue or negotiation with the involvement of a third party.

Volunteer (often peers) and professional mediators work best in disputes that have a high level of emotional intensity. They provide a procedure to assist parties to voluntarily reach an agreement on the dispute. Some mediators set the stage for bargaining and make minimal suggestions unless there is a deadlock. Other mediators are much more involved in forging the details of the settlement

Mediation, in all its forms, is voluntary. No one is ever forced, nor should they be coerced to participate. No one "sends" participants to mediation and no one enforces any agreement reached. The parties must choose mediation, or it will not happen, and chose to abide by their agreement (if one is reached). Mediators maintain complete confidentiality and parties are asked at the outset not to reveal anything said.

Sometimes people believe that mediation is always a case of arriving at a 'win-win' outcome. This can be distressing to one or more parties as they are of the view that someone needs to 'take the blame' or accept responsibility for what has occurred. Others may feel that they have unjustly been asked to 'take the blame' for one thing or another and are therefore concerned that this will be repeated during the mediation process.

Employees are very often right to feel this way and it is important to understand that mediation is not about glossing over the facts or the truth and that invariably one or more of the parties does need to accept responsibility for some aspect of their behaviour or the problem. However, no one can predict what each person [if anyone] will end up taking responsibility for until the process takes place as again it is stressed that the outcomes are in the hands of the parties to the dispute.

Employees also need to understand that there is no expectation or requirement on them to have to arrive at a resolution if they genuinely do not feel that this is possible and that they can come to this conclusion at any stage of the process without incurring any subsequent reprisals or sanctions by management.

What is key is that there are no preconceived ideas about the outcomes by the mediators or management and that the mediators are impartial at all times. The mediators do not investigate any alleged conduct and do not arrive at findings or conclusions about anyone's conduct; it is rather very much about respecting the dignity and experience of everyone involved and attempting to find a way forward for all concerned if this is at all possible.

Mediation is clearly not suitable for all incidences of bullying, particularly given the issues of power. However, in some cases it can be a very effective strategy.

Conclusions

The research in the field of bullying in schools highlights the importance of identifying bullying for explicit research and scrutiny. At present, workplace bullying is to a great extent a taboo subject and rarely studied.

Before the 1970s, this was also the case of bullying among children, as well as the sexual harassment of working women. However, extensive research and documentation in these areas during the last decades, have given them recognition and attention as important social problems.

Workplace bullying is an issue for all workplaces, irrespective of size. When not addressed, it can harm a person's well-being, becomes a significant drain on resources, reduce productivity and may have legal consequences for the employer.

Organisational effectiveness is the capacity of an organization, institution, or business to produce the desired results with a minimum expenditure of energy, time, money, and human and material resources. Workplace bullying is a waste of time, energy and money. It is a de-motivator and a poor human resource practice.

Managers can take steps to solve the problems of workplace bullying. This involves a range of strategies from the development of appropriate policies and procedures, through to appropriate punitive measures for those found guilty of bullying behaviour. Workplace bullying is exasperated by a social climate where hostility and aggressiveness prevail and the organisational culture is tolerant to bullying behaviours.

References

- Agence France-Presse (AFP) (2002), January 26, *Chinese kids don't feel safe in school*. Beijing, Jan 27 (AFP)
- Björkqvist, K., Österman, K. and Hjelt-Bäck, M., (1994). Aggression among university employees. *Aggressive Behavior*. 20, 173–184
- Crick, N. and Grotpeter, J. (1995). Relational aggression, gender and social-psychological adjustment. *Child Development*. 66, 710–722

- Chan, A. (2001). *China's Workers Under Assault: The Exploitation of Labor in a Globalizing Economy*, Armonk, M.E.Sharpe,
- Edelmann, R.J., & Woodall, L. (1997). Bullying at work. *Occupational Psychologist*, 32, 28–31.
- Einarsen, S (2000). Harassment and bullying at work: A review of the Scandinavian approach, *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 5, 4, 379-401
- Einarsen, S., & Skogstad, A. (1996). Bullying at work: Epidemiological findings in public and private organisations. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 5(2), 185– 201.
- Higginbottom, K. (2003). Sorting out the bullies, *People Management*, 2/20/2003, 9, 4
- Hoel, H. & Cooper, C.L. (2000) *Victims of workplace bullying*. In H. Kemshall & J. Pritchard (Eds) *Good Practice in Working with Victims of Violence*, 101-118. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Kivimaki, M; Elovainio, M & Vahtera, J. (2000) Workplace bullying and sickness absence in hospital staff. *Occup Environ Med*. 57, 656–660
- Leymann, (1990). Mobbing and psychological terror at workplaces. *Violence and Victims*, 5, 119-126.
- Leymann, H., & Gustafsson, A. (1996). Mobbing at work and the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology* , 5(2), 251–275.
- Martino, V. D. (2000) *Violence at the Workplace: the Global Challenge*. Paper presented at the International Conference on Work Trauma, Johannesburg, 8 - 9 November 2000
- Moore, Christopher W. (1986). *The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Olweus, D. (1999). In: Smith, P.K., Morita, Y., Junger-Tas, J., Olweus, D., Catalano, R. and Slee, P., Editors. *The nature of school bullying: a cross-national perspective*, Routledge, London. 7–27
- Quine, L. (1999). Workplace bullying in NHS community trust: Staff questionnaire survey. *British Medical Journal*, 318, 228–232.
- Rayner, C & Hoel, H. (1997). A summary review of literature relating to workplace bullying. *J Appl Soc Psychology* 7 , 181–191
- Rayner, C; Hoel, H & Cooper, C.L (2002). *Workplace Bullying. What we know, who is to blame, and what can we do?* Taylor & Francis. London.
- Vartia, (1996). The sources of bullying – psychological work environment and organizational climate. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 5, 203-14.
- Wilson, C.B. (1991). U.S. businesses suffer from workplace trauma. *Personnel Journal* July, 47–50.