

Dealing with workplace bullying



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Recently, I have been involved in 'traffic light' visits from Worksafe New Zealand. It's a new initiative to help Worksafe get to know local industry and business and what they do and how they do it. During the visits, the Worksafe staff mentioned that bullying has become a far greater focus for them in their engagement with New Zealand workplaces. This had me thinking about some of the interpersonal challenges not only for women but also for everyone in the modern workplace.

As I write this, issues relating to employment disputes have suddenly sprung into the national consciousness due to the well-publicised relationship breakdown between MP Todd Barclay and his electorate agent. Obviously, such a scenario is at the extreme end of the spectrum. Nevertheless, it is a salutary lesson in how bad things can get if the appropriate action is not taken to resolve issues as they come up.

When it comes to our industry, the nature of the work means that it is often difficult and stressful. Deadlines are tight, margins are small, and people are often working long hours away from their families.

What exactly is bullying?

According to Worksafe workplace, bullying is:

- Repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker

or a group of workers that can lead to physical or psychological harm.

- 'Repeated behaviour' is persistent (occurs more than once) and can involve a range of actions over time.
- Unreasonable behaviour, somewhat cryptically, is defined as being actions that a reasonable person in the same circumstances would see as unreasonable. It includes victimising, humiliating, intimidating or threatening a person.
- Bullying may also include harassment, discrimination, or violence.

Due to the seriousness by which an accusation of bullying must be treated, it is also important to establish what bullying is not. It is not:

- A one-off instance of rudeness or tactlessness
- The setting of high-performance standards
- Constructive feedback and legitimate advice or peer review
- A manager requiring reasonable verbal or written work instructions to be carried out
- Warning or disciplining workers in line with the business or undertaking's code of conduct
- A single incident of unreasonable behaviour
- Management actions delivered in a reasonable way
- Differences in opinion or personality

clashes that do not escalate into bullying, harassment, or violence.

Bullying leads to poor workplace performance, absenteeism, and health problems. So, health and safety outcomes can suffer because of bullying, which in our industry can lead to some serious results.

If you believe you may be being bullied, it is imperative that you speak up and inform your manager. It is often a good idea to write the incidents down to keep a record of them.

If it is your manager who is the problem, Worksafe's advice is to seek support from a trusted person. You can also go to the HR team if you are in a larger organisation.

Reporting incidents of bullying to others in your organisation is important, as that gives the business an opportunity to deal with it through a proper process.

You can also make a formal written complaint to trigger an investigation. It is important to keep the complaint as specific as possible, including dates, times, and names of witnesses.

Finally, if you see someone being a victim of bullying, you can report that on their behalf, or if you feel confident, you can step in to help.

I encourage you to visit Worksafe New Zealand's website (worksafe.govt.nz) for further guidance on how to minimise the likelihood of bullying at your workplace. ■