

Dealing with bullying at work

A guide for workers



GOVERNMENT OF
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

commission
for occupational
safety and health

What this guidance note is about

This guidance note is to help workers identify and deal with bullying in the workplace.

Bullying can adversely affect the safety and health of employees, it is unlawful under the *Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984* (the Act), and the Occupational Safety and Health Regulations 1996.

This guidance note recommends that workplace bullying be treated like any other safety and health hazard.

Further information about bullying is available in the publication *Violence, Aggression and Bullying at Work: a Code of Practice for Prevention and Management*, which can be purchased from WorkSafe, Westcentre, 1260 Hay Street, West Perth, telephone (08) 9327 8777. It can also be downloaded from the WorkSafe website www.worksafe.wa.gov.au, and copies are held in the WorkSafe library.

Foreign language and special needs assistance

If you require the services of an interpreter contact the Translating and Interpreting Services (TIS) on 131 450 and ask for connection to 1300 307 877.

Disclaimer

Information in this publication is to assist you in meeting your occupational safety and health obligations. While information is correct at the time of publication, readers should check and verify any legislation reproduced in this publication to ensure it is current at the time of use. Changes in law, after this document is published, may impact on the accuracy of information.

The Commission for Occupational Safety and Health provides this information as a service to the community. The information and advice provided is made available in good faith and is derived from sources believed to be reliable and accurate at the time of publication.

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What is workplace bullying?

Bullying at work can be defined as repeated, unreasonable or inappropriate behaviour directed towards a worker, or group of workers, that creates a risk to health and safety.

Because it can adversely affect the safety and health of employees, bullying is unlawful under the *Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984* (the Act), and the Occupational Safety and Health Regulations 1996.

While some workplace bullying may involve verbal abuse and physical violence, bullying can also involve subtle intimidation. Workplace bullying can be carried out indirectly, for example via letters, emails or telephone text messages. Initiation practices are also a form of bullying.

An individual or a group may instigate bullying. The term workplace mobbing is sometimes used to refer to abusive group behaviour that is prolonged or systematic in nature, and may include upward bullying, where a group of workers exhibit bullying behaviour towards a manager or person in authority. The intent is usually to try to drive a worker from the workplace. Workplace bullying can take place between workers and other workers, managers or supervisors, customers or clients, students, contractors, or visitors.

Workplace culture

Any behaviour that has the potential to harm or offend someone should be identified as a hazard and assessed for its risk to safety and health. Even one-off bullying incidents are unacceptable, because unless addressed, they can develop into a repeated pattern that becomes part of the culture at the workplace.

There are bound to be occasional differences of opinion, conflicts and problems in working relationships, these are part of working life. But when treatment of another person is unreasonable or offensive, then workplace bullying exists and should not be tolerated.

Bullying behaviours

All workers and other people at workplaces are potentially at risk of experiencing some form of bullying. Different researchers have found examples of victims who are younger, weaker, smaller, less skilled and those with less social skills, as well as those who are highly skilled, competent and high achievers, who are trusting, creative, and politically inept and have a high degree of loyalty to the organisation.¹

Bullying is defined by the effect of the behaviour, even though there may not be a specific intent to bully.

Bullying may include violence and aggression. Where bullying involves assault or threat of assault it may become a police matter. Some bullying behaviours may also be unlawful under other legislation, for example the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984* covers sexual and racial harassment.

There are two main types of bullying behaviour, overt and covert.

Examples of overt, or obvious, bullying include:

- abusive, insulting or offensive language;
- behaviour or language that frightens, humiliates, belittles or degrades, including criticism that is delivered with yelling and screaming;

¹ *Towards Dignity and Respect: An exploration of Antecedents and Consequences of Bullying Behaviour in the Workplace*, Maryam Omari, 2003, Curtin University, Western Australia

- inappropriate comments about a person's appearance, lifestyle, or their family;
- teasing or regularly making someone the brunt of pranks or practical jokes;
- interfering with a person's personal effects or work equipment;
- harmful or offensive initiation practices; and
- physical assault or threats.

Covert or more subtle behaviour that undermines, treats less favourably or disempowers others is also bullying, for example:

- unreasonably overloading a person with work;
- setting timelines that are difficult to achieve or constantly changing deadlines;
- setting tasks that are beyond a person's skill level;
- ignoring or isolating a person;
- deliberately denying access to information, consultation or resources; or
- unfair treatment in relation to accessing entitlements such as leave or training.

What isn't bullying?

All employers have a legal right to direct and control how work is done, and managers have a responsibility to monitor workflow and give feedback on performance.

If a worker has obvious performance problems, these should be identified and dealt with in a constructive and objective way that does not involve personal insults or derogatory remarks.

In situations where a worker is dissatisfied with management practices, the problems should also be raised in a manner that remains professional and objective.

There should be grievance or complaint procedures that can be utilised to resolve such matters.

What are the possible effects of bullying?

The reactions of individual workers will vary according to the nature of the bullying. It is possible that workers who are bullied will experience some of the following effects:

- stress, anxiety, sleep disturbance;
- panic attacks or impaired ability to make decisions;
- incapacity to work, concentration problems, loss of self-confidence and reduced output and performance;
- depression or a sense of isolation and in extreme cases, risk of suicide;
- physical injury; and/or
- reduced quality of home and family life.

The costs to an organisation may include reduced efficiency, unsafe work environment, increased absenteeism, poor morale, increased workers compensation claims or civil action.

What can you do about it?

Bullying can be stopped. How you handle bullying will depend on your particular work environment and the nature of the bullying.

Every situation is different. If you are being bullied, you could take action informally or follow a more formal approach.

Informal procedures

The following informal steps are recommended as a first approach in dealing with most bullying cases:

Check for a workplace bullying policy and a prevention and management plan

Check whether your employer has a bullying policy and a prevention and management plan/complaint procedure for dealing with bullying at work. It may be available in the organisation's induction package for new workers, or it may be included in in-house newsletters or displayed on notice boards. There may also be grievance/complaint procedures in your industrial award or employment agreement.

Seek advice

Seek advice from your contact or grievance officer, safety and health representative, human resources officer or union official. Generally speaking, contact officers provide information, while grievance officers respond to incidents or complaints. The role of the officers is determined by the complaint procedure.

You should not make allegations about bullying behaviour or harassment to people who are not involved in the handling of complaints in your workplace complaint procedure. All people are entitled to natural justice, are protected by confidentiality provisions in law and may be able to take action if the complaint is not handled properly.

Keep a record

Make a detailed record of what happened - place, date, time, people and what was said or done, date the matter was raised and with whom. Ensure that your records are accurate. This information may be useful later, particularly if more formal steps need to be taken. It may also help you to establish whether the behaviour is actually bullying and to keep things in perspective.

Consider approaching the bully

A decision should be made as to whether to approach the bully. You may want to discuss your approach with a contact or grievance officer before acting. Your records may assist in deciding which approach to take.

An informal approach can be used to attempt to resolve bullying issues with minimal stress to both parties. However, if the bullying continues, formal procedures should be used.

If any form of bullying happens to you, remaining silent allows a person to continue intimidating you. If you don't say something, the harassment may get worse.

Body language is also an effective way to communicate, especially when combined with a clear statement. Make it quite clear to the person involved that the behaviour is unwanted and unacceptable, and that if it doesn't stop you will take further action.

Another alternative to stop the behaviour is to ask someone else, such as a contact officer, a grievance officer or an appropriate support person to approach the person with you.

Use a counselling service

Some workplaces offer counselling services to employees. This may be provided free of charge through your organisation's employee assistance program. Counselling may help you to develop ways of dealing with a bully or the effects of bullying.

Your human resources officer should have information on an employee assistance program if there is one. Your union may also be able to provide information on sources of support, particularly if your workplace is a small organisation where formal procedures for dealing with complaints may not exist.

Formal procedures

Formal procedures may be required if the informal procedures are not successful or in situations where the allegations are more serious. The need for formal procedures would usually be confirmed by preliminary enquiries undertaken before a formal investigation is undertaken.

An independent person, or grievance officer who is not involved in the particular situation, should carry out the investigation and you should be advised of the outcome.

Formal procedures involve lodging a written complaint to your employer. As part of a formal investigation, the grievance officer completing the investigation should document your report and keep a record of information gathered in the course of the investigation.

As part of a formal procedure, the grievance officer may suggest mediated face-to-face discussions to find a resolution that is acceptable to everyone involved.

Safety and health representatives and committees

Where there are safety and health representatives in your workplace they are able to assist you to deal with workplace bullying through the complaint procedure.

The functions of an elected safety and health representative include liaising with workers on safety and health matters, and reporting to the employer any hazard or potential hazard to which workers might be exposed. Where there is a safety and health committee, the safety and health representative may refer the matter to the committee. However, the safety and health representative is not obliged to mediate or resolve bullying issues.

Consultation between the employer, safety and health representatives and committees should be part of the processes used to develop bullying prevention and response strategies. Consultation should also be part of the ongoing monitoring and review of the effectiveness of the strategies put in place.

End results

In situations where the employer concludes that the complaint of workplace bullying is justified, there may be disciplinary action, usually in accordance with workplace policy and with relevant legislation. The employer is also required to make changes to the workplace to ensure that any breach of occupational safety and health legislation is rectified and the bullying ceases. These changes may include counselling for the alleged bully to enable them to recognise and take action to change their behaviour.

Further action

If you are not satisfied with the action taken regarding your complaint, you should consult with the contact officer or grievance officer in your workplace or contact your union for further advice.

The *Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984* requires employers to investigate matters reported to them by employees, determine the action to be taken (if any), and notify the employee who made the report of the action to be taken.

The Act also requires employers to attempt to resolve safety and health issues with the safety and health representative, safety and health committee or workers, according to the relevant procedures for the workplace. If these procedures do not succeed, the Act sets out steps to resolve the issue.

Generally WorkSafe will only investigate when the bullying is still occurring and the aggrieved person has exhausted all avenues to stop the bullying, such as reporting the hazard to the employer and trying to resolve the issue.

It is the inspector's role to investigate and determine whether all parties have met their obligations under the Act. It is not the inspector's role to become involved in the specific details of the alleged bullying activities or to mediate between the aggrieved person and the alleged bully.

An investigation may result in verbal advice from the inspector, and/or improvement or prohibition notices being issued, in accordance with WorkSafe's enforcement policy.

Other legislation

Dealing with bullying at work may involve laws other than the *Occupational Safety and Health Act 1984*. It may be necessary to seek advice to determine an appropriate course of action.

Physical and sexual assault are criminal matters and should be referred to the police.

Where bullying involves sexual or racial harassment or discrimination, the worker may lodge a claim under the *Equal Opportunity Act 1984*.

Should an employee consider he or she has been dismissed as a result of making a complaint in relation to bullying, or is forced to resign due to the effects of bullying, the employee may be entitled to lodge a claim under the unfair dismissal provisions in the *Industrial Relations Act 1979*.

The *Public Sector Management Act 1994* governs the behaviour of public sector employees, and bullying can be a breach of the *Western Australian Public Sector Code of Ethics*.



Appendix - Other sources of information

Occupational Safety and Health Act and Regulations

Copies may be purchased from the State Law Publisher, 10 William Street, Perth.

Electronic versions are available through the website www.slp.wa.gov.au

Occupational Safety and Health Commission publications

Violence, Aggression and Bullying at Work: a code of practice for prevention and management

It may be purchased from WorkSafe, Westcentre, 1260 Hay Street, West Perth

Telephone (08) 9327 8777 or downloaded from the WorkSafe website www.worksafe.wa.gov.au

Copies are held in the WorkSafe library.

WorkSafe information bulletins and publications

May be downloaded from the WorkSafe website www.worksafe.wa.gov.au.

Contacts for further information

WorkSafe

Infoline: 1300 307 877

Telephone: (08) 9282 0777

Facsimile: (08) 9282 0850

Website: www.worksafe.wa.gov.au

Email: safety@docep.wa.gov.au

Equal Opportunity Commission

Telephone: (08) 9216 3900
TTY: (08) 9216 3936
Toll Free: 1800 198 149
Facsimile: (08) 9216 3960
Website: www.eoc.wa.gov.au
Email: eoc@eoc.wa.gov.au

Police Headquarters

Telephone: 131 444
Website: www.police.wa.gov.au

Office of Multicultural Interests

Telephone: (08) 9222 8800
Facsimile: (08) 9222 8801
Website: www.omi.wa.gov.au
Email: harmony@dpc.wa.gov.au

Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Western Australia

Telephone: (08) 9365 7415
Facsimile: (08) 9365 7550
Website: www.cciwa.com
Email: osh@cciwa.com

UnionsWA

Telephone: (08) 9328 7877
Facsimile: (08) 9328 8132
Website: www.tlcwa.org.au
Email: unionswa@tlcwa.org.au

WorkSafe

WestCentre

1260 Hay Street, West Perth WA 6005

PO Box 294 West Perth WA 6872

Infoline: 1300 307 877

Phone: (08) 9327 8777

Facsimile: (08) 9321 8973

National Relay Service: 13 36 77

Email: safety@docep.wa.gov.au

Comprehensive work safety and health information can be found at: www.worksafe.wa.gov.au

This publication is available on request in other formats to assist people with special needs.

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