

Executives need "tough love" to eliminate bullying

09 October 2019 2:02pm

Stamping out workplace bullying has to be a leader-led initiative, but executives are largely escaping HR's attention.

HR plays a critical cultural champion role, and is responsible for "constantly reinforcing that our culture really defines our competitive advantage because the way our people choose to behave defines the standard of outcome that's created", [Corporate Dojo](#) founder **Karen Gately** tells HR Daily.

Bullying is defined as repeated and targeted behaviour that can leave the victim feeling intimidated, humiliated or embarrassed, but Gately notes that "when people think about bullying, they think about the extreme end of the equation".

This means many individuals who are engaging in bullying "in the eyes of the law" don't actually perceive themselves that way.

A culture that's rooted in banter, for example, can over time shift in a way that becomes more sinister and harmful to employees' mental health, Gately says.

"The victim ends up feeling humiliated or embarrassed, and the group usually doesn't pick up on the fact that it's now targeted, repeated, and impacting wellbeing. This is a classic example where the team says it's just part of culture."

Turning a bullying culture around

"As HR people, we've got to get our leaders to recognise the boundaries that they need to set. For example, a CEO who is comfortable with inappropriate jokes, therefore creates an environment where people really push those boundaries and start to step way over those boundaries," Gately says.

But, she warns, "you can't start in the trenches with the team who are behaving badly".

"I see a lot of HR departments focusing on managers and staff, and really struggling to influence that executive layer of conduct. We've got to be having these conversations with the CEO. If they are the problem, then we've got some really tough love coaching that's got to go on. Often, it's actually members of their executive [team] that they themselves are struggling to pull in line from a behaviour perspective."

When the bully is someone at a lower level, Gately says she frequently sees leaders who are intimidated by them, and therefore avoid dealing with the issue.

"I still have leaders saying 'it's not my job to be their parent and manage their behaviour'. [But] your whole job is to influence how people are thinking, feeling, behaving and leveraging talent to get their job done. If you don't have an opinion when their behaviours are destructive, then you're so far away from doing your job that it's ridiculous!"

When managing potentially harmful behaviours it's important to be clear about expectations, and why those expectations are in place. "We don't want to make people feel like they can't have some fun and be themselves, but we do, at the same time, need to be very clear that the boundary is actually respect."

Enforcing accountability and having "tough love conversations" when individuals exhibit unkind and thoughtless behaviour is therefore critical, Gately says.

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