

What happens when you fail to stop workplace bullying?

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By Karen Gately

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If you have experienced or witnessed workplace bullying, you know the devastating impact any form of abuse can have. But new research shows current systems for dealing with this conduct are failing us. What should leaders be doing instead?

All too often I meet people whose health, wellbeing, engagement or job performance have been impacted by workplace bullying. Just as common is for me to meet people who are able to share stories of family and friends being subjected to extraordinarily unfair and inappropriate treatment at work.

New research from the University of Wollongong presents some sobering figures on what happens when we don't do enough to address workplace bullying. According to researchers, half of all employees surveyed said they experienced [some form of bullying and harassment](#) over the course of their career.

The study, released to coincide with Mental Health Week (9-15 October), also found that [young males, who frequently lack proper support networks](#), and those who work in stressful work environments were most at risk. Beyondblue commissioned the research, and CEO Georgie Harman [had this to say](#) about the link between bullying and mental health: "We know that those who experience and perpetrate workplace bullying have higher rates of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder and health problems such as cardiovascular disease."

Harman says that according to these findings, [current efforts are failing](#) to stop workplace bullying, and I agree. Driving bullying from our workplaces will happen when we all make it a priority. Employers in Australia have a [legal obligation to provide a healthy and safe work environment](#), but creating a bully-free workplace takes everyone doing their part.

However, leaders play an especially important role in setting the standard and holding people accountable. Here are six things every manager needs to know about dealing with workplace bullying.

1. A respectful culture is the key to prevention

Demonstrate and inspire respect, kindness and sensitivity. Expect every member of your team to act with compassion and give reasonable consideration to how other people feel. [Reward and recognise people](#) who demonstrate sincere regard for their colleagues and the desire to support everyone to succeed.

2. Culture starts from the top

How any leader chooses to behave sets the tone for how others are expected and allowed to conduct themselves. Lead by example by behaving respectfully and demonstrating that workplace bullying is never tolerated. Set a high standard and don't just hold others accountable to it – hold yourself accountable as well. Exhibit the behaviours you want from others through the decisions you make and actions you take. Speaking of ...

3. Action is necessary

Meeting your obligation to provide a healthy and safe work environment requires that you take proactive steps to protect not only your team's physical safety but also [their psychological wellbeing](#). Complaints of bullying must be investigated thoroughly and impartially, and appropriate outcomes need to be applied.

4. Consequences are essential

Regardless of any position of power or influence, no one should be allowed to bully other people. It takes discipline and a consistent approach to apply a zero-tolerance policy to drive bullying from an organisation's culture. If an [investigation concludes](#) that a member of your team is guilty of bullying, apply appropriate consequence through disciplinary action.

5. Acting early matters

It can be tempting to [sit back and hope the issue will take care of itself](#). However, unless the bully leaves your business, that is unlikely to happen. Take steps to address the issue as soon as you become aware of it; at times you'll be able to nip brewing issues in the bud. Be responsive and quick to investigate complaints. Avoid the tendency some managers have to dismiss complaints they perceive as coming from 'overly sensitive' people.

6. Tough love can work

Honesty delivered with respect is critical to building awareness and influencing the behaviour of a bully. Expect bullies to demonstrate greater regard for others and the ability to regulate their conduct in order to stay with your business. Ensure they clearly understand what behaviours are required of them and the consequences of conduct that is misaligned. Balance this firm approach with compassion and sensitivity. Express confidence in their ability to change, and inform them of the support with which they will be provided.