

Executive / Governance Memorandum

To: **Employers and Directors – all Public, Private, NGO, Community organisations**

From: **Andrea W Needham, consultant to management; author 'Workplace Bullying – the Costly Business Secret'**

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Subject: **Address Workplace Bullying - it will save you money**

Employers are choosing to ignore Workplace Bullying – for now. Until they address the issue, their organisations will continue to pay a price.

At presentations and workshops I have given recently, the common cry is 'why is senior management not here?' The problem is that most senior management believe that Workplace Bullying is peer behaviour found in the lower levels of an organisation. When it does occur in those levels, senior management often will issue a strict edict – 'sort it'. However, when it happens at the managerial and professional end of the organisation – where it is just as common and harmful – senior management ignores or hides it. UK and US research indicate that more than 80% of Workplace Bullying is from the top down – it is not primarily peer behaviour.

The silence of senior management has been deafening since the behaviours were labelled in the book 'Workplace Bullying – the Costly Business Secret'; and costly it is. The lack of facts and interest from senior management signals a dangerous situation for New Zealand. Workplace Bullying costs the country productivity and it costs many individuals their emotional health and wellbeing.

In the UK, Tim Field estimates that the cost of workplace stress is around £1,000 (NZ\$3,000) of hidden tax per taxpayer per year. According to a study at the University of Manchester, over 50% of workplace stress is Workplace Bullying. I contend that fair and honest hard work never hurt anyone – however, psychological undermining and terrorising does harm people. Some of the worst is happening in the senior – and mid-level white collar jobs. Talented senior individuals are being targeted and debilitated by chronic Workplace Bullies – positioned at the top. Colleagues, other senior managers and board directors do nothing and therefore (unwittingly?) collude with the Workplace Bully. Bad things happen when good people do nothing.

Is the issue that employers will not or that they cannot deal with Workplace Bullying? Increasing anecdotal evidence is suggesting that employers do not know what to do when they suspect Workplace Bullying or receive such a complaint. The immediate reaction seems to be to protect the management individual towards whom the complaint is lodged and

trivialise the complainant. While innocent until proven guilty is an excellent principle, it should not be at the expense of ignoring or cutting down the messenger. The messenger is the Target who is very brave to come forward and make a complaint or raise the issue. After being trivialised and/or fobbed off, these Targets succumb and leave – emotionally and mentally broken. Research from Europe and the United States indicates that this will not be the first time the Workplace Bully has exhibited his/her addiction to control. Workplace Bullies typically have a succession of Targets at whom they have directed an unrelenting stream of humiliation and psychological harm – and most people know it.

Targets are bewildered – other than their first question 'why me? – I have always been a good performer and team member', they want to know why senior management does nothing when the issue is brought to their attention; or worse, why senior management openly and defiantly (albeit somewhat embarrassed at times) sides with the Workplace Bully and mocks the Target – either directly or indirectly. Senior management, staunch in the face of adversity, will often maintain an ostrich stance and even promote the Workplace Bully. Although I suspect that many of these promotions are primarily prompted and supported to get the Workplace Bully away and to let her/him become some one else's problem.

To current and prospective employees and customers, these avoidance behaviours demonstrated by senior management and directors reinforce the organisation's myths and legends that this is not a good place to work. It becomes harder to attract top talent; it becomes the norm to pay above market as prospective employees demand a premium for working with the organisation; and organisational rumours abound – some true and some exaggerated but all with that tell-tale grain of truth.

Having raised and labelled the issue and talked to hundreds of Targets and their families, I want to assist our executive and governance leaders to address and resolve Workplace Bullying in New Zealand. As an employer all my working life, I am not a great believer in resolving issues like this with more regulations – there is already sufficient legislation to address Workplace Bullying legally. I believe the solution lies in executive and director skills and values, and organisational processes.

Skills

New Zealanders tend not to have good conflict management skills or know how to give and receive feedback well. This lack is increasingly evident when individuals are placed in the limelight of a senior role. Conflict management is a skill set that is critical for a successful leader and critical for that leader to address Workplace Bullying in her/his organisation. A clinical Psychologist who has carried out thousands of psychological assessments of executives says that lack of this skill set can and will cause an executive to fail. Too often, memos and emails are used to confront and resolve issues – rather than good, solid, open dialogue to work through conflict.

Values

'Do We Need Legislation or Morality at the Top' is the last chapter of the book. It begs the very serious question – what are the values of our leaders? A former General Motors executive is quoted as saying 'Every organisation is a shadow of its leader' and so the values of the executives will become the values of the organisation – no matter what words are plastered on the wall and printed prettily in employee handbooks. The decisions, solutions and behaviours of executives and directors set the tone and are the informal, unwritten behaviour standards for the organisation. If they do nothing about Workplace Bullying, it becomes the institutional norm.

Process

It is necessary to implement comprehensive, fair and reasonable processes for receiving complaints and conducting investigations. These will enable executives and directors to analyse the issue properly and protect the parties involved while the analysis is taking place. Get rid of any policy that states that all issues must be raised with the immediate manager first. If the immediate manager is a Workplace Bully, the Target is stymied. The golden rule here is not to trivialise an issue. Listen and set in place processes that enable the best possible exploration and investigation of the situation.

When addressing issues such as Workplace Bullying, information will not always be clear. However, senior roles seldom carry clarity in any responsibility area. If each leader's vision and values about the importance of people are clear, then each leader must ensure that s/he has the ability to address the complex and sensitive issues that arise as part of any leadership role. Executives and Directors need to stop printing and hiding behind policies. They need to start developing dialogue, skills and processes that enable them to ensure their organisation's success and keep a primary organisational asset safe and productive – that is their people.



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