

## How to beat the Workplace Bully

Workplace bullying has become a hot topic. Even ACC has been campaigning against it. How should managers deal with it? Andrea Needham has some answers.

Andrea Needham may be an extraordinary person, her experience, however, is not. Needham was a target of workplace bullying. The success of *Workplace Bullying – the costly business secret*, her book on the subject published last year, has touched a nerve with many employees.

Workplace bullying is currently a hot topic. But in a corporate game that is shrouded in management non-disclosure agreements, cover-ups and a lack of willingness by perpetrators to talk about it, Needham discovered that it is difficult to sell a secret or the answer to it if employers refuse to acknowledge its very existence. Now the secret is out, however, and Needham is intent on talking about it to prevent the workplace bully from 'coming to an organisation near you'.

Needham does not come across as the type of person a workplace bully targets. She appears assertive, in control and self-aware. But her self-awareness was tested at an early age. With knowledge gained from growing up in a violent household she recalls: "I used to come home from work and think – I feel like a battered wife." This awareness enabled her to confront senior management with evidence that put an end to the bullying.

Her experience, however, is all too common. Australian research conducted by the Beyond Bullying organisation in Queensland in 2002, cites that up to half the country's working population has been targeted at sometime or other by a workplace bully. Hayden Olsen, development manager for Rotorua-based Workplaces Against Violence in Employment (WAVE), suggests bullying in New Zealand is four times more prevalent than sexual harassment in the workplace and responsible for between 30 and 50 percent of workplace stress.



Andrea Needham: a workplace bully tested her self-awareness.



Needham crusading to "create a culture of moral managers".

Stories about managers who rule by intimidation are never hard to find. When Auckland management consultancy Stratos established a workplace bully hotline last year, it received 1100 phone calls in the first three days of operation.

The profile of a typical bully's target suggests they are:

- good at their job,
- popular with their colleagues, or
- have befriended the bully's current target.

Once selected, the bully moves to exclude his or her target from meetings; separate them from their peers; belittle their efforts behind closed doors; halt their career advance within the organisation and crush their self-esteem.

Needham is well qualified for commenting on workplace bullying. For the past 30 years she's worked as a management consultant in human resources strategy, mostly in the United Kingdom and United States.

Her book reached number one on Whitcoulls' best-seller list, outselling more than the list's next two placegetters combined. However, as one senior manager in a major public organisation was heard commenting to staff recently: "Since Andrea's book came out we've had nothing but trouble." Needham's response is unequivocal. She hasn't, she says, created the problem, but simply "labelled a behaviour" that others have chosen to ignore.

Ignorance, according to Needham, is bliss for the organisation, if not for the employee. She believes workplace bullying

exists in New Zealand management culture because many senior managers are poorly skilled in conflict management.

Overseas research from the United Kingdom suggests senior managers usually support colleagues who bully for fear of showing weakness in the management ranks. Consequently, most targets leave the organisation because the situation becomes personally untenable. The cost to the organisation is anywhere between 50-100 percent of the employee's salary. High staff turnover, workplace absenteeism and lost productivity ultimately costing the New Zealand economy. UK studies put that cost at around £3000 in hidden tax per taxpayer per year.

Changes to our Employment Relations Act over the past few years have intensified the occurrence of offending. Most bullying targets assiduously avoid publicity or lengthy litigation. Personal grievance actions can't be taken directly to court. The natural justice provisions of our legislative system require that complaints must first be mediated and then adjudicated. This imposes heavy financial and emotional burdens on employees who have been victimised by the bully – usually for a considerable period of time. They are then, according to Needham, confronted by a legal system that "seeks to extend their term of disempowerment". Needham cites one bully's target recently spent \$60,000 on legal and medical costs and the case has only reached stage two in the adjudication process.

WAVE's Olsen believes that 95 percent of targets never take their complaint to senior management. Anecdotal evidence suggests this is because they believe management will not take any action. In Needham's words: "Bad things happen when good people do nothing."

Needham's crusade is to "create a culture of moral managers". She argues, in the last chapter of her book 'Legislation or Morality at the top' that "we shouldn't need legislation to halt the progress of this malady". She now conducts focusing workshops, working one on one with organisations, to 'prevent' rather than 'cure' workplace bullying. She wants to educate corporate New Zealand in conflict management and help them to have difficult and courageous conversations – "a critical leadership skill".

Needham thinks she provides managers with a specific opportunity to understand workplace bullying, to identify their own current or potential issues and to assist them to ensure their employment processes support the organisation's desired stance on eliminating and preventing workplace bullying. It is not, she says, sufficient to state in a company policy that workplace bullying is not allowed. The employment process including recruitment and performance management processes must be assessed to ensure that each step protects the organisation and the employees.

"Organisations need to develop their own assessments and defences against workplace bullying," says Needham. Her corporate workshops enable managers to speak openly about internal issues in their organisation, which a public forum may not lend itself to. Her website, [www.beyondbullying.co.nz](http://www.beyondbullying.co.nz), provides information to achieve this.

Astute leaders understand that workplace bullying is expensive and the related costs impact directly on the bottom line, says Needham. "Good managers prevent the spread of workplace bullying. I understand that good leaders are created and the greatest legacy that I could leave behind is to help them positively shape our future workforce." **M**

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