Preventing bullying in the workplace

Bullying is not specifically defined in law but ACAS suggest that it can be characterised as offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour or an abuse or misuse of power through means intended to undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient. Bullying can involve single or repeated incidents ranging from extreme forms of intimidating behaviour such as physical violence to more subtle forms such as ignoring someone.

Bullying needs to be taken seriously by employers as it can damage an employee’s confidence, morale, motivation and health, causing them to be less productive and effective at work. How individual managers and companies manage bullies can have a big impact on their reputation and can often be a window into the wider culture of the organisation.

Bullying can often occur without witnesses and therefore, it can be difficult for Human Resource departments to identify problems. Often, those being bullied find it difficult to talk about what is happening, particularly if there is not a culture of trust and transparency within the organisation.

During times of recession and downturn, there are fewer people doing more work, and managers are under more stress than ever before. A "robust" management style is more likely to occur in a recession than at any other time and this may be the tipping point for bullying.

Professor Linda Trenberth, Birkbeck College, developed a reliable and validated way of measuring the nature and prevalence of bullying and stress in New Zealand workplaces that could be applied elsewhere for comparative purposes. Nearly 2,000 participants from the sectors of health, education, hospitality and travel were surveyed on dimensions including
negative acts, organisational commitment and support, leadership, psychological well-being, absenteeism and work performance using a number of well documented and validated scales.

Apart from high levels of bullying, the research revealed the importance of organisational level initiatives for controlling the problem. For example, leadership style and the degree of organisational, supervisor and colleague support are all key to preventing and managing bullying. The research also raised interesting issues around the role of social and supervisory support in buffering the psychological strain as a result of bullying.

The study reinforced the impact of bullying in terms of the correlations with higher levels of strain, reduced well-being, reduced commitment to the organisation and lower self-rated performance. Targets of bullying also reported lower levels of constructive leadership, colleague and supervisor support. The research showed that bullying was notably higher in the health and education sectors, where ineffective leadership was one of the main causes.

The government of New Zealand included the findings of the study in the Occupational Health Action Plan 2013 and used data from the report as one of the foundations for new guidelines on workplace bullying. The Department of Labour warned employers that they had a duty under the Health and Safety in Employment Act to provide a healthy and safe workplace, which included having a workplace in which bullying is not tolerated. This was a specific response to the finding that ineffective leadership can be a key factor in increased stress and bullying.

Like any workplace issue, fostering a culture that is free of bullying needs to come from the top and a good start is to have a bullying and harassment policy in place, making it clear that this type of behaviour is considered gross misconduct. Training managers so they understand what constitutes bullying and harassing behaviour is also key and a good opportunity for managers to reflect on their style as well as building awareness of discrimination characteristics. Finally, communicating the procedure to employees so they understand how to make a formal grievance and what will happen after the incident has been reported should be part of the policy dissemination.