

A public service scenario

<http://timfieldfoundation.org/what-is-bullying>

“...bullying tends to be an accumulation of many small incidents over a long period of time. Each incident tends to be trivial, and on its own and out of context does not constitute an offence or grounds for disciplinary or grievance action.”

“Some people project their inadequacy onto others:

- to avoid facing up to and doing something about it;
- to avoid accepting responsibility for their behaviour and the effect it has; and
- to dilute their fear of being seen as weak, inadequate and possibly incompetent; and
- to divert attention away from the same: In badly run workplaces, bullying is the way that inadequate, incompetent and aggressive employees keep their jobs and obtain promotion.”

“The hazard is often obscured from public scrutiny through fear as well as the inadequacy of current systems to protect employees from retribution and misuse of protocols designed to limit inappropriate behaviours. Instead, the silence begets cynicism.”

Scenario

Perfect Policies, Putrid Practices Workplace bullying in the public sector.

Karen Grogan & Sandra Dann

“Many public sector employees would be familiar with the following scenario:

- Y bullies X in some way.
- X is shocked and confused. X tries to improve his/her performance to meet Y’s expectations.
- Y’s bullying behaviour escalates, it intensifies and Y’s control over the situation increases exponentially.
- X’s distress escalates and X’s control over the situation diminishes.
- X becomes the bully’s victim and Y is the perpetrator.
- It takes some time for the victim to become fully aware of exactly what is occurring.
- The victim approaches other staff to seek clarification of the behaviour and finds that formerly supportive colleagues:
 - a) Ignore the behaviour and do not acknowledge the repetition or victimisation.
 - b) Agree that the behaviour is occurring but can’t / won’t act in support of the victim.
 - c) Condone the bully’s behaviour because they think that there may be some legitimate reason for its occurrence.
- The victim seeks to speak with the perpetrator about the behaviour.
- The perpetrator makes it a ‘management’ issue and then exerts some ‘formal’ control over the situation – without the requirements of natural justice being upheld.
- The victim confides in the perpetrator that s/he is stressed/ill/has a major life issue, thinking that this will elicit compassion and understanding. The perpetrator spends more and more time trying to manage/control the situation, often drawing in other workers to witness the victim’s perceived inability to do the job or using them to exert more control or to answer the questions of superiors.
- The perpetrator advises / waits for the victim to take leave (sick leave, long service or annual leave).
- The victim may consult with a General Practitioner in relation to stress and may consider lodging a workers’ compensation claim.
- The victim is replaced in the position by an ‘acting’ officer.
- The victim seeks advice from a Union.
- The perpetrator seeks protection from Management – usually by bringing up ‘a major issue’ (which may or may not be related to the victim but reflects on them).

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- The perpetrator won't allow the victim to return to their job until they have been cleared as fit to work by a specialist medical officer – not the GP. This generates a feeling of fear and disempowerment in the victim as s/he is given the names of 'approved' specialists. The fear that s/he is going mad seems to take on a 'real' dimension.
- The Specialist certifies that the victim is well enough to return to work, but not in the area under the control of the perpetrator.
Alternatively, the perpetrator may use the period of absence by the 'on leave/sick' employee to 'trial' working without the position, or to restructure business activities. The result of this strategy is that the victim becomes 'surplus to requirement' and is not able to return to their job.
- The removal of the victim from the workplace is 'done for his/her or the organisational good' and the behaviour of the perpetrator is justified by the outcome for the individual and the agency.
- Work colleagues are fearful of and 'discouraged' (sometimes banned) from contacting the victim – "they're too upset, unwell or need to rest".
- Colleagues have seen the victim upset or crying at work, so accept and are sometimes relieved to accept this directive or advice as it 'fixes' their sense of helplessness. . It's known that the victim has been sent by the organisation to see a Psychiatrist - so there's some question about their sanity. Issues to do with an individual's mental health are fear provoking or misunderstood and a common response is to limit contact with victims who have become psychologically unwell as a result of workplace bullying behaviours.
- Meetings with Management are contrived and the victim's issues are minimised by the perpetrator's capacity to previously engage support for their actions. The victim's ill health, mental status, work performance and capacity to produce or 'be part of the team' have all been raised as 'justifiable' concerns about their ability to return to the workplace.
- The victim is excluded from decision making about his/her capacity, his/her work performance, strategies to achieve wellness and his/her future and continuing work role.
- The victim now feels isolated, ill, disempowered, doubted, and pressured to undertake work options that are below his/her capacity and abandoned."

Quotes

- I've lost my job! She set it up so that I couldn't come back. Somehow, I always knew that it would come to this!
- I've never been so sick in all my life. I've been hospitalised for a week! The doctor says that it's stress induced. I've just about killed myself trying to appease him and to meet his totally unreasonable demands. I must be mad, I've got a family to consider! No job is worth this!
- First she screamed at me, then stood so close to me that I was sure that she was going to hit me.
- I can't believe that I'm the only one that thinks her behaviour is not OK. No one seems to think that screaming, abusing and belittling staff members is unusual around here. What kind of work place is this?
- I can be out shopping and think I see my old boss. 3 years later and it still affects me. I think I'm OK and then it happens again.