

Handling Workplace Bullying



It's a busy, bustling office with lots of banter going on, but Anya is sat with her head down seeming quite isolated and focussed on her work when the boss walks in and says 'less talk, more work please' and wanders off again. He goes back to the office and says to his PA 'if only they all got their heads down like Anya'. Sadly he was just not aware that Anya was not included in conversations because of her poor English. Her accent was mocked and she was constantly belittled by her supervisor when she made grammatical errors. In short, Anya was being bullied and unfortunately Anya is not alone.

Millions of people wake up dreading going to work because they know they are going to face bullying and harassment.

In the workplace so many excuses are made for this unacceptable behaviour ranging from 'it's just his robust management style' to a workshop foreman shouting and swearing at his staff or saying 'it's just a bit of banter' when offensive homophobic comments are directed at team members. At The HR Dept we have heard every excuse for unacceptable behaviour but that's what those comments are: just excuses and it's time to say STOP. Another false impression is that the victims must be weak or they would not allow themselves to be bullied, which is absolute rubbish. If someone is so scared that they feel they will lose their job if they mentioned anything, they would rather say nothing and eventually be off sick with stress or worse still, decide to leave. Either way no one wins.

So what can the employer do?

- Like any workplace issue, fostering a culture that is free of bullying needs to come from the top down. Always be proactive; firstly you need to have a bullying and harassment policy in place, making it clear that this type of behaviour is considered a gross misconduct and those found guilty will be dismissed.
- The policy must not be a 'tick box exercise' but a real commitment to building a working environment that values all of the team.
- Words alone won't change a thing, so the next step is to train managers so they understand what constitutes bullying and harassing behaviour. Perhaps this is a good opportunity to reflect on their management style as well as build awareness of discrimination characteristics which are often the precursor for ridicule.
- Bullying and harassment may be verbal, non verbal, written or physical. It is therefore important that examples are laid out in a policy so that all staff are aware of their own behaviour and can take responsibility for it.
- While employers should encourage employees who believe they are being harassed or bullied to notify the offender that their behaviour is unwelcome (by words or by conduct), it is worth recognising that this is not always possible.
- It is important to make clear to employees that all allegations of harassment or bullying will be taken seriously, confidentially and that grievances or complaints of harassment will not be ignored or treated lightly.
- Communicate the procedure to employees so they understand how to make a formal grievance, who the employee needs to speak to (normally their manager) and what will happen after the incident has been reported.



So what can employees do?

- They need to commit to the zero tolerance policy, be honest about their behaviour, be prepared to report transgressions and actively support those that are bullied, rather than hide behind a wall of silence and look the other way when abuses take place.
- If ever we needed a policy of 'stand up and be counted' it is to combat bullying.
- For those who are targeted by bullies, the worst feeling is that of helplessness. You can take control again.
- Firstly confide in someone you trust. Then keep a diary logging each and every incident that makes you feel belittled or afraid.
- Note down the names of people who witnessed this. Hearsay evidence is not relevant, so this detail is really important.
- Log what occurred but also how it made you feel. The writing of a diary is quite a cathartic experience in itself and empowers the employee by understanding that it is not them that has the problem, but the bully.

Sometimes bullying can be stopped by a simple intervention. You can face the person and say 'I am sure you are not aware but when you treat me like this (and give an example), I feel bullied. Please stop or I will have to use the formal grievance processes'. If it does not stop then put your complaint in writing and express clearly how the behaviour makes you feel. The company has a legal obligation to follow up any formal grievance and deal with bullies firmly and fairly up to and including dismissal.

At The HR Dept we do not tolerate bullies. Successful companies thrive through good employee relations and unfortunately bullies totally undermine this. A word of caution: bullies back off and those bullied, take heart and arms against the injustice.



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If you are a victim of bullying in the workplace this could be affecting your family life. As well as talking to your employer you may wish to seek support for yourself. Family Lives can help, please visit their website on www.familylives.org.uk