

Taking a

STAND

With Ban Bullying at Work Day taking place this November, Kate Nowlan highlights the effects of workplace bullying and looks at what employers can do to address the problem.

Shocking statistics from the TUC (Trades Union Congress) reveal that more than two million people are bullied at work every day. There is therefore no doubt that the need to address the problem is greater than ever, particularly as workplace bullying has been identified as a major cause of stress-related illness.

This year, the Ban Bullying at Work Day is taking place on 7 November and the popular press will no doubt mark the day with stereotypical profiles of the “office bully” and the “broken victim” that will encourage readers to feel somewhat self-righteous as they distance themselves from the caricature. It is still common to portray the bully as the “manager from hell” and the victim as the “tearful little woman” covering by the coffee machine. However, employers are increasingly aware that bullying occurs across all levels of organisations. Colleagues can be as capable of bullying their “friends” as students can be of driving their teachers to suicide.

Cyber bullying

The media has recently highlighted the effects of cyber bullying on schoolchildren, who have been picked out at random and then targeted via social networking and blog sites. They are then accused of

being fat or thin, of having eyes too close together, of having the “wrong” colour skin or hair. It is impossible to monitor the sites, and literally thousands can log in to add to the jeering taunts so that the children who are victimised feel their lives are in ruins. They may also be the recipient of vicious text messages, and a chilling factor is that there is no protection – these attacks can take place 24/7. More and more people are becoming urgently aware of this insidious dimension of unprotected cyberspace and it will not be long before these bullying schoolchildren who are rarely identified enter the workplace, where internet communication is the norm and mobile phones are universal. There is evidence that cyber bullying already exists in the workplace, and with patterns now being set in the playground the problem can only increase. According to the Dignity At Work Partnership survey of 1,072 workers, one in five said they had been bullied by email. One in 16 told the partnership that they had been bullied by text message.

The effects

These statistics on the effects of bullying at work are horrific, and a new study by Just Fight On! (JFO) reveals that the long-term impact on employees’ wellbeing has been severely underestimated.

Last year, the national press reported the story of a primary school headteacher whose bullying behaviour caused her deputy to leave. The head, who scolded teachers for eating at their desks or visiting the bathroom too often, was accused of the “worst case of bullying ever seen in the workplace”

during an employment tribunal hearing. The deputy head won her case for constructive dismissal and subsequently received compensation for her ordeal.

Jo Anne Brown, Chair of JFO and developer of the Return to Work Toolkit, says: “There is a lack of support and help to enable people to get back to work after being bullied. People who are harassed find themselves without a job, without their health and discriminated against when trying to find employment because they are seen as ‘troublemakers’.”

Beyond teasing

Most people imagine that those who are receiving Incapacity Benefit as a result of bullying were victims of sexual or racial harassment or gross managerial intimidation. However, there is a growing awareness that covert and unconscious forms of bullying take an equally high toll on staff in the workplace. So when does teasing turn into something more unpleasant? The “teasing” that children suffer when victimised online or by text which turns by degrees into something more sinister has its echoes in office behaviours. Exclusion from group activities such as lunch in the canteen, or drinks after work, jokes made at your expense or “funny” emails that do the office rounds can make life intolerable. Those doing the bullying will just turn the situation around, accusing people on the receiving end of being over-sensitive, or of not having a sense of humour – and therefore increasingly squeezing them out of team banter. Ricky Gervais playing the fragile David Brent in the TV series *The Office* is a case in point. The swaggering

boss often reverted to a desperate child, wanting to be included in the office gang but knowing that the minute he leaves the room his team will be laughing at his expense, probably texting each other and circulating emails among themselves.

Indirect acts

In 2000, a thorough piece of research on workplace bullying was conducted by Helge Hoel and Cary Cooper involving 5,000 employees in private, public and voluntary sectors in the UK. They report that indirect acts (such as information manipulation) are much more commonly found in workplace bullying cases than direct acts (such as being shouted at). Tony and Caitlin Buon who act as workplace mediators discuss the current “profile” of the bully and challenge the common definition in a thought-provoking article in *Counselling at Work*, the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy journal. They suggest that much so-called bullying is in fact unintended by the “perpetrator”, and that there is often little awareness of how someone’s behaviour is impacting on someone else. They say: “There is no doubt that there are individuals who are predatory and do wish to deliberately

harm the person or persons who are on the receiving end of their negative behaviour. However, our experience as practitioners in the investigation and resolution of workplace conflict involving allegations of bullying and harassment tells us that they are in the minority and that the majority of bullying that is being experienced is in fact unintended. That is, the person using the bullying behaviour is unaware of the true impact their behaviour is having on someone else and does not intend for that other person to be harmed.”

Power politics

The research calls for organisations to look more closely at how power politics play themselves out. Power politics in the office do not simply lie within tiers of management. It is not difficult to identify the “office bully” who is posing as a “strong manager” but it is much harder to pinpoint the colleague who is texting his mates at your expense. Power in the office can often lie in unlikely places and cyber bullying can spring from the most surprising sources. It can be hard for senior managers to admit they feel bullied by those they are meant to lead – yet this is a widely shared experience.

Dealing with shame

The whole subject of bullying touches on the raw area of shame – a topic hard for most of us to discuss even with the most trusted of colleagues. Who did not feel ashamed of the pictures of English soldiers humiliating Iraqis? It has since emerged that most of the squaddies involved had been abused themselves, or came from violent and deprived backgrounds. They transferred their shame on to others in the most brutal ways. We are more subtle than this in our office culture – but we too bring shame and wounds from our childhood and our families. We repeat patterns at work that we learned in our early years. We battle to be part of the group, we are ashamed if we are excluded and we revel in “in jokes” that others might not understand. We pretend we don’t care when people stop talking as we approach, we take our wounds home with us, either internalising the criticism and believing eventually that it is our fault after all, or lashing out and hurting those who never sought to do us damage.

Tackling the problem

There is much education to be done in companies of all sizes, in all sectors. Managers need to be more aware of subtle behaviours in their teams – be more alert to characteristics among their staff that might indicate a secret bully who victimises innocent colleagues via email or in other covert ways. Bullies are insecure, they lack self-esteem, they are terrified of exposure. HR departments need to re-examine their bullying and harassment protocols and policies, which can be too prescriptive and are often too rigid to catch some of the more sensitive indicators of bullying behaviour. It is essential that bullying policies enable victims to report such incidents in a way that is confidential and feels safe.

Complainants must learn to find their voice and have courage in speaking out when a member of staff is behaving in a way that is hurtful and bruising.

*Kate Nowlan is Chief Executive
Officer of CiC; www.cic-eap.co.uk*

