

One in 10 are victims of workplace bullies

One in 10 workers has been bullied by a colleague in the past six months, according to the first comprehensive research into workplace bullying in New Zealand.

The research, a two-year project being undertaken by academics at three universities, has surveyed 20 organisations in the hospitality, health and education sectors. About 1600 employees completed a questionnaire on the issue and preliminary results show a significant number say they have been victims of workplace bullying, with many still suffering.

If the figures were extrapolated to the full working population, it would mean as many as 200,000 people are being bullied at work.

One of the researchers, Professor Michael O'Driscoll, an organisational psychologist at Waikato University, says the questionnaire asked people to identify whether they had been intimidated or abused at work, whether their efforts had ever been sabotaged, and what, if anything, they had done about it.

Bullying is defined by the researchers as a situation in which a person feels they have been repeatedly on the receiving end of negative actions from another worker, in an environment where it is difficult to defend themselves. In other words, it must be ongoing and between people with different levels of power within an organisation.

Preliminary findings have confirmed restaurant kitchens are hotbeds of workplace bullying—something referred to as the “Gordon Ramsay effect” after the British chef known for his fiery temper.

Hospital staff have reported bullying from patients' relatives, and teachers recorded instances of being bullied by pupils.

In the past year the Employment Relations Authority has investigated several cases of workplace bullying, including a university employee who claimed “insidious bullying” by her superior, and a man sacked for abusive and aggressive behaviour towards an employee that included driving a forklift in a manner that threatened his safety.

Claims of bullying and intimidation were also made against members of parliament last year as part of an in-house staff survey by Parliamentary Services.

O'Driscoll says of the 10% who reported being bullied, half were still being bullied, and the rest had

moved to another role, left the organisation or taken other action.

The research, funded by the Health Research Council and the Department of Labour, aims to show how workplace bullying affects a worker's health, wellbeing and job performance, as well as finding out what is being done at a organisational level to counteract the problem.

Although final results will not be available until the end of the year, O'Driscoll says preliminary findings show bullying occurs not only from the top down but also in reverse. A staff member can bully a manager or supervisor, perhaps because they have a unique set of skills and are therefore in a position to exert influence or power over others.

“There are definite negative effects for individuals and for organisations,” O'Driscoll says. “People being bullied are experiencing high levels of work-based stress which you would then expect to flow on into physical symptoms.”

But he warns that people who try to confront their bully won't necessarily help the situation. “It can inflame the bully, who thinks it is right to engage in more of the same behaviour.

“Bullying can be very self-reinforcing. People can feel very powerful, they have a lot of influence and control and it makes them feel good. The most important thing is that workers know there are consequences—if they display that behaviour there will be negative repercussions. It's what an organisation does about it that makes a difference.”

O'Driscoll says if there was a more organisational response it wouldn't happen as much. “Many organisations don't quite know how to deal with the problem. Most have a harassment policy and a stress policy but they don't often capture issues of bullying, and that's a problem.”

O'Driscoll says it is incumbent on management to be proactive and develop a work culture that promotes collaboration, respect and an environment that treats people with dignity. “If you have an environment where aggression is acceptable, it doesn't help when the issue is raised.”

O'Driscoll says while stress is an accepted part of the workplace, with bullying the evidence shows that people's stress levels are “beyond optimal” and that affects their performance and health.

Article by Susan Pepperell, Sunday Star Times

BULLY TACTICS

WHAT IS WORKPLACE BULLYING?

The researchers define it as “a situation where a people feels they have repeatedly been on the receiving end of negative actions from one or more people, in a situation where it is difficult to defend themselves against these actions”.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE BEING BULLIED AT WORK

- Be polite rather than provocative.
- Talk to someone you trust and ask for an honest second opinion.
- Tell your supervisor or another senior person.
- Tell your boss, even if they are the bully.
- Take a support person with you when you see your supervisor or boss.
- Mediation can be provided by the department of Labour.
- Remember employers have an obligation under the Health and Safety in Employment Act to ensure employees are not harmed at work.

BULLYING HOTSPOTS FOUND BY RESEARCHERS

Hospitality: Watch out for restaurant kitchens and the “Gordon Ramsay effect”. A clear hierarchy exists in a pressured, crowded, hot area.

Health: Staff complained consistently about being abused by patients’ relatives. Relatives are perceived by staff to have power and leverage.

Education: Students bullying a teacher. Waikato University Professor Michael O’Driscoll puts this down to the need for teachers to be careful in the way they interact with pupils, and students using that to their advantage.

SIGNS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

- Someone withholding information which affects your performance.
- Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with your work.
- Being shouted at or being the target of spontaneous anger.
- Hints or signals from others that you should quit your job.
- Repeated reminders of your errors or mistakes.
- Being ignored or facing a hostile reaction when you approach.
- Persistent criticism of your work and effort.
- Having your opinions and views ignored.
- Being given tasks with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines.
- Excessive monitoring of your work.
- Being the subject of excessive teasing and sarcasm.
- Having allegations made against you.