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Workplace bullying: Six key prevention factors

Workplace bullying is repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers, and is considered a risk to health and safety under the Work Health and Safety Act 2011 (WHS Act).

Workplace bullying negatively affects employee wellbeing, organisational productivity and reputation along with unforeseen costs, which is why we need new approaches to this pervasive issue.

A scoping review from Edith Cowan University *New Approaches to the Prevention of Workplace Bullying: A Scoping Literature Review and Evidence Guide* has identified six key factors that are commonly in place in organisations that are successful in stamping out or alleviating workplace bullying. They are:

1. Organisational ownership

Successful organisations are agile and designed to respond to emerging risk. They share an internal mechanism to drive change such as a steering committee or task force that is comprised of staff from across the organisation who collectively motivate the organisation and provide the infrastructure required for a successful and sustainable change.

This includes gathering valuable input on behalf of other staff, acting as champions and encouraging engagement by sharing updates about progress in addressing bullying.

2. Senior management accountability

Successful organisations require engaged senior management. This includes personally leading anti-bullying or culture change activities and ensuring that sufficient time and resources are allocated to enable success.

Having an effective and engaged senior champion or champions helps build trust and reflects the organisation's genuine commitment to address workplace bullying. Having a strong senior level champion also engages staff throughout the process.

3. Worker engagement and participation

Successful organisations build off worker engagement and participation from the outset as required by the [Work Health and Safety Regulations 2011](#).

Empowered staff are a critical ingredient for success and allows culture change to occur through commitment to a shared purpose, encouraging workers to act as change agents.

Middle managers have a special role to play as they can help drive the change at an organisation level and tailor it accordingly at a team level. For example, they can create reporting procedures, accessible resources, conduct training, and act as confidential advisors for staff seeking support.

4. Multi-faceted approaches

Successful organisations use a range of targeted preventative measures to build a culture of respect where bullying is not tolerated.

This includes setting organisational expectations regarding appropriate behaviour, establishing clear and safe processes for raising concerns and addressing wider risk factors such as the work demands and organisational culture that either passively allow for or encourage bullying to occur, rather than focussing on the individual perpetrators.

Successful organisations view workplace bullying as an organisational problem to be managed through robust policies and systems.

5. Tailored to workplace context

Successful organisations recognise that every workplace is different, and so for an anti-bullying program to work it needs to be tailored to the workplace in question. Workplaces should conduct an initial risk assessment (generally through a staff survey or other feedback mechanism) to identify the causes of workplace bullying.

Causes can include the nature of the work, work design, workplace culture or leadership style. Once the causes are identified the change program should be tailored accordingly at both team and organisation wide level. Tailoring should also reflect that the nature of the bullying might be different in each organisation or team.

6. Broad and immersive

For an anti-bullying program to work, it needs to reach a “critical mass” of the organisation, that is needs all or most staff to be committed. Ideally, all employees should be engaged in the design and implementation of anti-bullying interventions, with the view to creating a shared understanding, language and culture regarding bullying.

Accessible communications are also important. These include through organisation wide updates and staff newsletters and public displays, ie posters and screensavers.