respect

creating a workplace where individual differences are respected and bullying is prevented

Workplaces that foster a culture of mutual respect and diversity enjoy higher employee engagement and productivity. This type of environment also discourages workplace bullying – behaviour that threatens, intimidates, humiliates, or isolates people at work, or undermines their reputation or job performance.

suggested actions

- **training** Proactively provide appropriate coaching, training, and on-the-job learning to promote positive and constructive interactions. Educate staff on how to display respectful behaviour, communicate more effectively, develop group decision-making techniques, and recognise bullying and harassment. Managers can be coached on how to work through threatening issues and learn to replace interpersonal aggression with emotional awareness and control. Emphasise the importance of early intervention when inappropriate workplace behaviour occurs. Anti-bullying training should promote awareness of the problem, its psychological and economic costs, appropriate courses of action and consequences of non-compliance.

- **leaders model respectful behaviour** Successful and sustainable anti-bullying programs require support and commitment from organisational leaders to add credibility, and to build a culture of respect. Research has shown that leaders' behaviour sets the tone for what is acceptable in the workplace, is imitated by others, and therefore perpetuates the culture.

- **implement a policy** Having a strict and clear anti-bullying policy in place allows transparency and support for those seeking relief from bullying. It should include a definition of what bullying is, what it is not, and the procedures to take if bullying occurs. It is also useful to involve staff in the policy development to increase awareness and encourage ownership of the policy. Most importantly, it should be applied consistently. Behaviour which reflects a lack of respect or intimidates others needs to be immediately and actively discouraged and where appropriate, be subject to disciplinary action with reference to the policy.

- **clearly define roles** Research has found that when employees are unclear about their roles or are faced with conflicting demands, bullying and perceptions of bullying are more likely. Ensuring employees know what is expected of them and others promotes a workplace that is more stable and encouraging of optimal performance and cooperation.

- **encourage feedback** Regular surveys to measure staff perceptions of their environment and their level of satisfaction with team members will give an idea of how people are getting along. Dissatisfaction and frustration are not always obvious, but tend to enable bullying. Anonymous feedback can also uncover issues such as fraud or other unethical behaviour, which perpetrators often mask with controlling and bullying behaviour.

- **reward** Respectful behaviour should be recognised and rewarded. This is often codified in organisational value statements. Rewarding value alignment encourages positive behaviours in line with team values and signifies the importance of the way things are done, not just performance outcomes.

case study

Voice Project works with an Association which provides services to a number of member organisations. They employ approximately thirty staff across five departments, each with a senior manager. When a new CEO was recently appointed, she observed numerous dysfunctional relationships and poor team dynamics. In order to gauge the extent of the issue, baseline data was gathered via Voice Project's Engagement and Culture survey. Results revealed less than half of staff felt that bullying and abusive behaviours were being prevented or discouraged. Investigations revealed a culture of intimidation and fear with no formal feedback system in place, aggressive interactions, personal attacks, blaming, isolation and withholding information and support. Some of these behaviours had been displayed by the previous CEO and tolerated in other managers and staff.

The new CEO immediately addressed the issues by updating and developing the organisation's policies. She explained "So that the staff knew that I was taking it seriously, the first policy they got was the 'Bullying and Harassment' one … they know the policy is there, it will be implemented, and there are consequences". This policy outlines what bullying is, what it is not, how to detect it, and steps to be followed in cases of inappropriate workplace behaviour. Courses of action include contacting a third party organisation which is available to hear grievances, and to escalate issues which employees believe have not been handled appropriately by the CEO.

A strong stance was taken against aggressive exchanges, and 360 degree feedback enabled managers to reflect on exactly how their behaviour was impacting their co-workers. The CEO commented that one manager, who had previously been described as a bully, has stopped being aggressive. "I gave him some fairly honest feedback about his behaviours and how it was being seen, and he's worked really hard on it … now people actually respect him and go to him for advice." Another manager faced with a similar 'tough conversation' chose to leave the organisation.

Additional activities to build a more positive and respectful culture included a number of team-building exercises, and increased formal and informal opportunities to interact. "I knew I [needed to] start dealing with the people and getting them to trust and respect each other, which was about getting to know each other…". The CEO has been coaching her managers in analysing others' reactions and behaviours, taking others' perspectives, and having 'crucial conversations'. She plans to roll out a similar program for all staff.

Twelve months on, there has been a dramatic decline in perceptions of bullying and significant increases in satisfaction with the workplace. This has been demonstrated by improvements in approximately 85% of the items in the culture survey. Teams are working together, and the workplace - although extremely busy - has become more harmonious than ever. "It's good now … there is certainly no yelling, and there is laughter".

useful resources

- Government of South Australia. (2006). **Preventing workplace bullying: A practical guide for employers**. http://www.stopbullyingsa.com.au/documents/bullying_employers.pdf

- Field, E. M. (2010). **Bully blocking at work: A self-help guide for employees and managers**. Australian Academic Press.

- Caponecchia, C. & Wyatt, A. (2012). **Preventing workplace bullying: An evidence based guide for managers and employees**. Routledge.

- Worksafe ACT – Office of Regulatory Services (2011). **Ten steps to managing and preventing bullying at work**. http://cdn.justice.act.gov.au/resources/uploads/Worksafe/Publications/Handbooks/WSACT_HB_0014_-_Bullying_1._Checklist_For_Employers_Addressing_Workplace_Bullying_.pdf