

The Irish Times

Tue, Feb 20, 01

Taking The Stand Against Bullies In The Workplace

Morale, creativity and initiative are all affected when there's a bully in the workplace. But bullying is also starting to cost employers dearly as a result of legal actions and bad publicity, writes Rosita Boland.

Bullying is one of the nastiest words in the English language. It's a word usually associated with the world of school and playground; adults, it is assumed, have outgrown such behaviour. Accusations of bullying in workplaces may not be as crudely straightforward as a kick to a shin or the pulling of hair, but it is generally agreed that psychological bullying is more insidious, leaving no physical marks but doing far more long-term damage.

It's a word that employers must dread to hear. Publicity about it reflects badly on an organisation, quite apart from the fact that accusations of bullying may lead to the payment of substantial damages in ensuing legal actions.

Jacinta Kitt, who is in the process of researching her doctoral thesis on bullying in the workplace at Trinity College Dublin, has been studying the subject for several years.

"There was no definition of bullying in the workplace a decade ago; it got mish-mashed into other things," she says. "People are putting words on it now. Bullying is the type of obstructive behaviour that prevents people from reaching their potential in work. It prevents people from doing their work."

Kitt stresses that bullying is not a gender issue. Women can bully men, men can bully each other, and so on.

"The type of bullying that is psychological rather than, say, sexual harassment, is insidious and subtle and very very difficult to identify," she says.

She says the single most defining symptom of workplace bullying is stress. "The most common complaints are reports of being disrespected, demeaned, humiliated, put down, ideas ignored or stolen. It's bullying when it's a problem you know you can't solve by yourself. That's why there has to be a good organisational system in place to deal with it," she says.

Kitt reports that the patterns suggest that bullies are usually promoted, thus filtering the behaviour further up the structure of the organisation.

"Bullies don't consider that they are at fault in any way," she says. "They're motivated by power, control and self-advancement. This is usually at the expense of the organisation they work for. In the long term, organisations lose out hugely

through the presence of bullies. Morale, creativity and initiative are all affected when there's a bully in the workplace."

Within the past two years, RTE has attracted considerable publicity over allegations of bullying by various employees. Other organisations have also been in the media spotlight recently, involved in legal actions over claimed incidences of bullying.

Liz Allen, a former crime correspondent with the Sunday Independent, this month took a case against her former employer to the Employment Appeals Tribunal. She alleged that she had been bullied, harassed and intimidated by two colleagues, who were named as news editor Willie Kealy and assistant news editor Jody Corcoran. She is claiming constructive dismissal by the company. She claims that she has suffered stress and depression as a result of her treatment at the newspaper. The case has been adjourned until April 9th.

Also this month, nurse Anna Louise Kellet, like Liz Allen, took a case of constructive dismissal against St Colmcille's Hospital in Loughlinstown, Co Dublin. She told the Employment Appeals Tribunal that she was forced to leave her job because she was being bullied by a ward sister, who picked on her and found fault with her work.

Kellet won her case and was awarded £4,500. It's a small sum of money for such a stressful course of action, but cases like this are rarely simply about money. Dignity is all. The hospital offered to settle the case just before hearing, but Kellet went ahead because she wanted the details set on the record to redeem her good name. On winning the case, she said she hoped it would encourage other members of the medical profession in a similar position to take action.

According to Lucy Costigan, author of *Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace*, published by Columba Press, the following are all warning signs of bullying:

Leaving employment before being offered another job;

Sudden bouts of crying;

Loss of appetite and/or sex drive;

Chain-smoking and/or uncharacteristically heavy drinking;

Emotional withdrawal from family and friends;

Difficulty in sleeping;

Talking obsessively about work.

© The Irish Times