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Is there a bully in the office?

Every workplace has the potential for bullying: it's all about power, reports. By Rosita Boland

“Many people associate bullying with schooldays, but the truth is that it is by no means confined to childhood,” warns Lucy Costigan. She is the author of the first book to be published in this country about bullying and harassment in the workplace.

Like school, the workplace is generally a controlled environment, governed by the clock, rules and set tasks. A crucial difference, of course, is that now you get paid for getting up in the morning. And disagreements in adulthood, it is assumed, will be settled with more subtlety than fights in the playground.

Bullying is one of those hidden, insidious forms of behaviour which manifests itself in ways which have the effect of undermining an employee's confidence. Taken in isolation, such incidents can seem petty or trivial. However, when accumulating over a period of time, they can become a serious problem.

Classic forms of being bullied at work, often after the arrival of a new manager or fellow colleagues, include:

interesting and responsible work being withdrawn without reason

being told to carry out lower-level work which you were not employed to do

work targets (particularly in sales) being gradually changed to unrealistic levels

no longer being included in business meetings or social events

monitoring of phone calls and post

being moved to a less pleasant workspace

having someone else take the credit for your work or ideas

These forms of bullying span the genders.

"The feeling of isolation is the worst result of bullying," suggests Costigan. "People are often too embarrassed to discuss these problems with people they know." She points out that often people are unwilling to use the vocabulary connected with bullying or harassment.

"They'll maybe say things like, 'work isn't going too well', or that they're 'being picked on', but are not often more specific than that. And if these people are

living in a small town, then they'll be even more afraid of naming names or drawing attention to their situations, because there's always the danger of the word getting back."

The stereotypical child victim of bullying is someone who is small, weak and fatally different in some way from his peers. The reverse is true of adult victims.

"It's often the strongest people in the workforce, and those who are very efficient and organised, with high qualifications who are targets," Costigan reveals. "They'll be the ones who don't fit in and who aren't yes folk, willing to go along with whatever management want. In the wrong situation, they are the ones who will be perceived as a threat. At the end of the day, it's all about power."

There are a number of case studies in Costigan's book, illustrating the effects of sexual harassment, violence, and stress upon employees. "These were people who, when they heard I was writing this book, opened up and started telling me stories they had never told anyone else." None of the case studies profiles identifiable people. This is Ireland, after all. Costigan was amazed at the way in which often total strangers opened up to her. "I don't think in any other case of abuse, say sexual or physical, it would be possible for people to talk about their experiences as easily," she says. None of those she spoke to had brought a case to the Labour Court.

According to Costigan, the potential for bullying or harassment exists in every workplace. "Everywhere there is a hierarchical situation. The worst scenarios are those in which the bullying is built into the management structure. The most vulnerable workplaces are those where unions are frowned on."

Sexual harassment is somewhat easier to define than bullying. The victims are usually, but not exclusively, female.

One of the most recent international high-profile cases of sexual harassment was in New York's Wall Street, where 17 female employees of Lew Lieberbaum & Co took their case to the courts. Among the jawdropping catalogue of offences carried out by male colleagues, were: demands for oral sex; sexual obscenities broadcast over the tannoy; frequent flashing; and the old chestnut of trading promotion and higher pay for what are coyly termed "sexual favours".

Some \$1.75 million was paid out in compensation in the Wall Street case. Extraordinarily, even this case resulted in the staff being obliged to receive only two hours counselling on harassment awareness. To Costigan's knowledge, nobody has yet been prosecuted for bullying in this country, although there have been a small number of sexual harassment cases.

The Irish Business Employer's Federation (IBEC) is the biggest business organisation in the country, with a membership of more than 5,000 companies. It has produced a booklet of guidelines to bullying and harassment in the workplace, which is available to its members. In addition, it runs management training programmes on how to design and implement harassment policies, as

well as a good communication system. These training course are apparently having a big take-up, which can only be encouraging news for Irish employees.

Bullying And Harassment In The Workplace is published by the Columba Press on Thursday. Price £7.99. © The Irish Times