

# WORKPLACE BULLYING

A WORKERS GUIDE

## WHAT IS WORKPLACE BULLYING

Workplace bullying is *'the repeated less favourable treatment of a person by another or others in the workplace, which may be considered unreasonable and inappropriate workplace practice'*.

In other words, bullying is behaviour that intimidates, offends, degrades or humiliates a worker, possibly in front of co-workers, clients or customers.

Bullying can take place between:

- > a worker and a manager (or supervisor)
- > co-workers
- > a worker and another person in the workplace, eg a student

Bullying behaviour may be part of the culture at the workplace (eg some 'initiation' practices), but if the behaviour offends you, then it is not appropriate.

There are bound to be occasional differences of opinion, conflicts and problems in working relations – these are part of working life. But when the behaviour is unreasonable and offends or harms you, then workplace bullying exists and should not be tolerated.

It is important that you do not blame yourself for the bullying you experience.

## KINDS OF BULLYING BEHAVIOUR

Workplace bullying is a pattern of abuse of workers or co-workers which can range from the subtle to the more obvious and may include:

- > yelling, screaming, abuse, offensive language, insults, inappropriate comments about your appearance, personal life or lifestyle, slandering you or your family
- > belittling opinions or constant criticism
- > isolating workers from normal work interaction, training and development or career opportunities
- > overwork, unnecessary pressure, impossible deadlines
- > underwork, creating a feeling of uselessness
- > undermining work performance, deliberately withholding work-related information or resources, or supplying incorrect information
- > unexplained job changes, meaningless tasks, tasks beyond your skills, failure to give credit where due
- > tampering with your personal effects or work equipment
- > teasing or regularly being made the brunt of pranks/practical jokes
- > displaying written or pictorial material which degrades or offends you
- > unreasonable "administrative sanctions" eg undue delay in processing applications for training, leave or payment of wages

Where bullying involves assault or threat of assault it may become a police matter – for more information refer to the *Violence at Work* guide (details at the back of this booklet).

## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS ON YOU?

The effects of workplace bullying on you include:

- > high stress levels, anxiety, sleep disturbances etc (For information on managing stress at work see the *Stress At Work* guide for employers – details at the back of this brochure.)
- > ill health, severe tiredness, panic attacks, impaired ability to make decisions etc
- > incapacity to work, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem, feelings of social isolation at work, reduced output and performance

The costs to the organisation include: reduced efficiency, unsafe work environment, increased absenteeism, poor morale, increased workers' compensation claims and civil action.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO ABOUT WORKPLACE BULLYING?

### KEEP A DIARY OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

Bullying can sometimes be difficult to define and to prove. It is therefore important to keep a diary of events, recording:

- > incidents, in as much detail as possible
- > the names and addresses of people willing to support your claims

This diary can be used at a later date to assist you with proving your case and may be seen as valid evidence in a tribunal or a court of law.

### APPROACHING THE ALLEGED BULLY

Sometimes, if you speak to the alleged bully directly, tell them you object to their bullying behaviour and ask them to stop the behaviour, this will solve the problem.

You could also ask the contact person – your employer may have appointed a contact person for workplace bullying – or someone else to approach the alleged bully on your behalf.

**If the above approaches are unsuccessful, you should do the following.**

## CHECK YOUR LEGAL ENTITLEMENTS

Check your legal entitlements with your union, government or other agencies listed at the end of this booklet.

Under the *Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995*:

- > your employer has an obligation to ensure the health and safety of all workers. Workplace bullying may harm the health and safety of workers, therefore your employer's obligations extend to ensuring that workplace bullying is prevented or stopped
- > you also have an obligation to take reasonable care at work. This includes following instructions given by your employer relating to the health and safety aspects of workplace bullying, eg reporting workplace bullying

Where bullying involves acts such as sexual harassment or discrimination, a claim may be lodged under the *Queensland Anti-discrimination Act 1991*.

If you are dismissed as a result of making a complaint you may be entitled to lodge a claim under the Unfair Dismissal provisions of the *Industrial Relations Act 1999*.

## CHECK FOR A WORKPLACE BULLYING POLICY

Check whether your employer has a policy and complaint procedure for workplace bullying.

Information on workplace bullying at your workplace may be:

- > included in induction programs, awareness sessions, in-house newsletters
- > displayed on noticeboards
- > discussed at staff meetings and team briefings
- > available in community languages

## GRIEVANCE PROCEDURES

Check for grievance procedures:

- > at your workplace
- > in your Award – many Awards contain grievance procedures which you could follow to resolve the situation

If you think there will be no unfavourable consequences, you may:

- > approach the contact person for advice, support and assistance if you experience workplace bullying
- > inform your immediate supervisor and together attempt to resolve the problem
- > if this does not work, or the immediate supervisor is part of the problem, approach the next in line
- > seek mediation, eg from the Dispute Resolution Centre (see the back of this booklet)

You may wish to lodge a written complaint to the workplace if the other approaches are unsuccessful, or the allegations are so serious that other approaches are inappropriate.

Your employer may carry out an investigation into the allegations of bullying. Possible outcomes of the investigation include:

- > dismissal of the complaint where it is not upheld
- > a finding that bullying occurred
- > disciplinary action for the bully

## COUNSELLING AND REHABILITATION

You may wish to undertake counselling and/or rehabilitation.

## PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

You may also wish to undertake personal development courses to enable you to cope with the bullying while the problem is being resolved.

These courses may cover:

- > improving communication skills
- > conflict resolution
- > stress management
- > self-confidence and self-esteem

## WHERE TO FIND INFORMATION

### Information and Referral

- > Queensland Council of Unions, OHS Unit
- > Beyond Bullying Association
- > Centrecare
- > Dispute Resolution Centre
- > Division of Training
- > Division of Workplace Health and Safety
- > Legal Aid Queensland
- > Queensland Anti-discrimination Commission
- > Commerce Queensland
- > Queensland Industrial Relations Commission
- > Relaxation Centre of Queensland
- > Translating and Interpreting Service
- > Wageline
- > Workers Medical Centre
- > Working Women's Service (Queensland)

### Guides

- > *Stress at Work: Information for Employers*, Division of Workplace Health and Safety
- > *Violence at Work: A Workplace Health and Safety Guide*, Division of Workplace Health and Safety
- > *Workplace Bullying: Employers' Guide*, Division of Workplace Health and Safety

### Books and Articles

- > Adams, A. (1992) *Bullying at Work*, Virago Press, London.
- > Downing, J. (1995) *Finding Your Voice*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- > Gorman, P. (1997) *The Duty of Good Faith as Against Bullying*, The Inaugural Roberta Morgan Memorial Lecture, Queensland University of Technology.
- > McCarthy, P., Sheehan, M., Wilkie, S., and Wilkie W. (eds) (1998) *Bullying: Causes, Costs and Cures*, Beyond Bullying Association Inc.
- > Randall, P. (1997) *Adult Bullying: Perpetrators and Victims*, Routledge, London.
- > Spry, M. (1998) *Workplace Harassment: What is it and What Should You Do About it?* 40(2) *Journal of Industrial Relations*, pp 232-246.

### Videos

- > BBC (1994) *Bullying at Work: Combating Offensive Behaviour in the Workplace*.
- > Video Communications (1995) *Workplace Harassment* (Qld Distributors: Boyd, Faye & Associates)

