

Workplace bullying: an EAP perspective

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About Michele Grow

Michele is the CEO of Davidson Trahaire Corpsych (DTC), a national corporate psychology firm providing EAP, critical incident management, and employee wellbeing services.

Michele has particular expertise in the areas of employee wellbeing and workplace risk management including employee wellbeing, mental health, fatigue management, stress, and bullying.

Michele is a regular presenter on workplace issues and has conducted benchmarking research on the impact of work-related issues on individuals.

She is a Fellow of the Australian Human Resource Institute and the Australian Institute of Management and a member of Chief Executive Women and the Australian Institute of Company Directors. She holds tertiary qualifications in HRM, Corporate Management and Business.

An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) provides support for individuals and their family members for a broad range of issues. This includes personal issues such as anxiety, stress management, self esteem, grief and loss, relationship and family issues and navigating your way through major life events.

Work-related concerns that are commonly supported through the EAP include interpersonal issues with others, dealing with change, perceived bullying or harassment and managing job demands and pressure, to name a few.

The two most commonly presenting work-related issues are interpersonal issues with managers and perceived bullying or harassment. At DTC we see almost 9,000 employees every year who are seeking support to manage one or both of these issues. Despite significant focus on building respectful workplaces in recent years, the number of employees presenting with bullying concerns has increased by over 17% in the past two years. Likewise there has been considerable attention given to improving leadership and management capability, however the number of employees presenting

with issues with their manager has increased by over 20% in the past two years.

Through the EAP, employees share many examples of concerning workplace behaviours. The five behaviours most commonly reported by employees accessing the EAP are:

- verbal abuse (shouting, swearing, malicious sarcasm or threats to safety);
- mistreatment (isolation, intimidation, humiliation, cruel conduct);
- abuse of authority (undeserved evaluations, taking credit for others' work, tarnished reputation);
- interference with work performance (sabotage, ensuring failure, undermining); and
- destroying workplace relationships.





While many employees report a concern with one person in the workplace, in some cases it is a number of people or entire teams. This is not always seen as bullying behaviour, but examples such as everyone rolling their eyes when one person speaks is a form of individual targeting that can have a measurable impact on an employee.

One of the reasons for the high use of the EAP service for workplace bullying or manager concerns is that many employees don't feel they can talk with anyone in their workplace about the issues. While many organisations have policies in place for dealing with bullying, few employees are prepared to raise the issues internally. The primary reasons for not reporting the issues include concern over personal reputation, concern over ongoing career prospects, and fear of the situation becoming worse.

For those employees who do report the behaviours, in approximately two out of five cases either nothing is done or nothing changes. In around one out of five cases the situation does in fact become worse.

The extent to which bullying actually occurs in the workplace is difficult to measure given the low level of reporting. Our own experience and the findings of most studies estimate that up to 40% of employees are either experiencing bullying now or have experienced it at some time in the past.

Regrettably this leaves a large number of employees trying to manage inappropriate workplace behaviour on their own. At best there is a negative impact on their engagement and productivity, and at worst there is a direct psychological and physical impact on the employee with a ripple

effect across their team and family. Many employees in this situation will make the decision to move to another organisation – again without any advice to their employer of the reason.

Employees who are being bullied have one common goal – they just want the behaviour to stop. Dealing with bullying and poor workplace behaviour is challenging, but the single most effective strategy to address workplace bullying is to have the courage to act. This may be seeking support outside of the workplace or may be addressing within the workplace – but leaving the issue to continue is exceptionally harmful for everyone involved. ●