

Troubleshooter - bullying

When workplace aggression leaves HR practice in shambles

Source: People Management magazine

Issue date: 07 December 2006

Page: 48

The problem

This HR manager has found to her cost that her company's 'robust' culture is actually one where bullying behaviour is the norm. Without a more senior HR figure to turn to, how can she resolve the situation with her professional credibility intact?

"I joined my company as HR manager two years ago. There is no HR director, and I report to a corporate services director. I have a team of six. I was recruited to bring a modern perspective to our HR practices, which were described as 'lagging behind in some respects'. I joined the company from a large multinational, where I had a lot of freedom to develop my professional skills and to take the lead on new initiatives. It seemed the ideal move.

I was told at interview that the company culture was 'robust'. I now know from bitter experience that this means disrespectful, bullying, dismissive, belittling, loud and aggressive. My boss has systematically blocked almost every proposal for change that I have put forward, insinuating that I am incompetent and do not understand the practicalities of operating in our business sector.

We do not have a bullying and harassment policy (it was one of my rejected proposals). Meanwhile, bullying seems to be an accepted way of getting results here. I have had several 'off the record' conversations with staff who are at their wits' end about being bullied by their own managers. While I manage to keep a professional face when talking with them, I am powerless to advise them effectively, and embarrassed to be in that position.

I used to love my job. Now my confidence is at rock bottom, and I dread coming to work. Even small challenges feel like mountains. I avoid my boss, and struggle to maintain my team's morale. Feeling as I do, I don't think I would be able to project the confidence required to get another job and I can't afford to walk out. I feel powerless and stuck. How can I turn things around and regain my professional credibility?"

The solution

Ann Lewis

Leadership and executive coach

She says: You have every right to be treated with dignity and respect, and your current position is both personally unacceptable and professionally untenable. I have no doubt that there are many organisations in which your experience would be welcomed and respected. I think it unlikely that you will succeed in changing this one.

You can, of course, challenge your boss's behaviour formally through your grievance procedure. But you will have to be prepared for an emotionally draining process, which in your current brittle state may do you more harm than good. Take early advice from a good employment lawyer and, whatever you decide to do, make rebuilding your resilience and protecting your health your priorities.

Given the climate at work, I'm guessing that you are taking the problem home. I suggest that you find a supporter – a mentor, a coach, or someone else neutral whom you trust – who can help you make sense of what is happening and be alongside you as you move forward. Family and friends



Email: ann@annlewiscoaching.com

Tel: 01273 553026

Mobile: 07885 291410

Website: <http://www.annlewiscoaching.com>

can be wonderful, but it is difficult for them to see things objectively, and making them your only refuge may put strain on your relationships.

With your supporter, aim first to get a grip on exactly what is and is not happening. It's easy for your perceptions to become skewed under the stress of being bullied, and it's worth checking them with someone else, to confirm what you're experiencing, and to prevent you overreacting to every event.

Your next step is to map out what you would like for the future in terms of your work, your outlook, your feelings and your personal circumstances. A clear vision will keep you on track through the difficulties to come. List your strengths, experiences and skills, and think about how to use them.

Now clarify your values. Start by typing "personal values" into an internet search engine. You'll find lots of ideas. Narrow your shortlist down to about 10 key values. Highlight the one or two you will never compromise on. Think about why they are important. When you are clear about your values and wants, you'll more easily recognise organisations and jobs that reflect your personal and professional approach, and you will be in a better position to decide how to find a better job. Lastly, consider what you'd do differently in similar circumstances, to minimise the likelihood of a repeat experience.

Christine Pratt

Managing director of HR and Diversity Management; founder of National Bullying Helpline

She says: Clearly, there is a bullying culture from the top down. To avoid meeting the corporate services director is not resolving matters – in fact, it might be argued that you are condoning this style of management by failing to address matters. There are three core aspects to this situation:

- Your duty to advise staff of their rights while ensuring management knows the risk to the business caused by the culture;
- The bullying conduct of the corporate services director towards you;
- Proactive anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies, training and diversity initiatives.

If you lack the confidence to come up with a strategy for addressing matters, you should seek help. There are numerous sources of information on the internet, including the DTI and the CIPD.

The corporate services director is a liability to the organisation. You need to consider remedies for the bullying culture. First, you could familiarise yourself with the statutory position versus existing policies. Do exit interview notes or resignation letters raise inappropriate practices? Is there a history of grievances and has the company entered into compromise agreements? Consider, too, an employee's right to pursue a claim under the harassment laws through the civil courts.

A presentation to the chief executive should highlight the financial position in terms of absence statistics, staff turnover and costs associated with defending any future tribunal claim. Consider hidden costs such as legal costs, loss of productivity and future loss of business. If a formal presentation fails, you may need to lead by example and invoke a formal grievance yourself, based on the director's conduct towards you. A grievance should be addressed to a senior director and statutory procedures should be referred to if the company grievance process is out of date.

Looking to the future, you need to bring about a change in management approach. Sharpening up in-house policies and processes would help, and should include management training and an employee assistance programme for staff. Identifying and addressing contentious workplace situations early on is crucial.

Carolyn Solomon-Pryce

Principal diversity officer and manager of anti-bullying programme, Brent Council

She says: It is important to note that the impact of the behaviour displayed towards the individual, and not the intention of the perpetrator, is the key principle in bullying and harassment cases. With that in mind, you should consider taking the following steps:

- If you feel confident enough to approach your boss, tell them how their behaviour is adversely affecting your working life, and ask them to stop. They may have been unaware of the effect of their actions.
- You may also consider sending your boss an email outlining the matter, making it clear how their behaviour is affecting you.
- Log all incidents in a diary – dates, times, any witnesses, and so on.
- Gather and make a note of evidence from colleagues who may also have been bullied by your boss, or anyone who has witnessed you being bullied.
- Speak to a colleague who you can confide in about the problem.
- If you are a member of a trade union or have access to another adviser, seek support from them. Organisations such as Acas, Citizens Advice Bureau and the Andrea Adams Trust offer such assistance.
- If you decide to make a formal complaint, it is important to follow your organisation's procedures. Most employers have a grievance procedure, and some may have special procedures for tackling bullying cases.
- If nothing is done to remedy the mistreatment despite all your efforts, you could seek advice on your legal rights. Currently, it is not possible to make a direct complaint to an employment tribunal about bullying; however, you might be able to bring a complaint under the law of harassment.
- In the meantime, you may want to consider taking positive steps to eliminate the bullying culture in your organisation. You might want to consider presenting recommendations for adopting an anti-bullying culture to the corporate board/senior management committee.

Further info

If you have any queries or problems you would like to receive expert opinion on, please send them to

- troubleshooter@peoplemanagement.co.uk, placing "Troubleshooter" in the subject line