



# Prevention is Better than Cure

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## **Bullying is a common workplace problem and most of us will know someone or some workplace where bullying occurs.**

The direct effects of bullying include: reduced efficiency and productivity; the creation of an unsafe work environment; increased absenteeism and sick leave; increased numbers of worker's compensation or stress claims; and increased risk of civil court action. Indirect effects include the cost of time spent on investigating or dealing with the problem, industrial problems, negative publicity, rehabilitation costs, increased insurance premiums, and working in a hostile work environment.

Statistics tell us that about one third of Australian workers will experience an episode of frequent bullying at some point in their work lives. Yet, in spite of this rather alarming statistic, bullying is often under reported. Experts tell us that as few as ten percent of bullying experiences are brought to the attention of management. The reasons for this may be varied. For instance, it could be indicative of a hostile workplace where employees may fear reprisals or victimisation if they make complaints. Or the complainant may feel they will not be believed or supported if they do complain. It may be that workers and managers don't really know what constitutes bullying and make no complaint because they aren't clear about the definition. Organisations may not be clear about the definition either. It wouldn't be uncommon for these same workplaces to have incomplete, poor, or a lack of workplace behaviour policies, or to have very little organisational communication about what bullying is, or isn't.

Workplace bullying statistics are mostly collected through self-reporting mechanisms such as surveys. Think the biennial Tasmanian State Sector employee survey,

or member organisations like the Australian Human Resources Institute. If one third of Australian workers report that they have experienced bullying at some point in their work lives, this means that as many as 20% of bullying experiences are not being officially reported.

We do not know how much of the nation's \$36 billion workplace bullying costs is attributable to Tasmania. Nor is there one Tasmanian body that collects and collates bullying statistics for analysis and therefore, the full extent of the problem remains unclear. Additionally, a lack of Tasmanian workplace bullying research exists and until this is rectified, there will be a need to rely on self-reporting survey information.

However, there are other ways to determine if your workplace has a greater potential for bullying to occur. Becoming aware of the danger zones in your workplace can be a good place to start. A danger zone is a cultural, environmental, or occupational activity in which there is a potential for the abuse of power, or bullying to occur. This may result in an increased risk to all workers. Possible danger zone examples include: a homogenous work environment; a competitive sales environment; a stressful work environment; restructures; significant change or takeovers; an environment that expects its workers to do more work with less resources; generational differences (what one generation thinks is okay behaviour, another generation may not); an occupation or job with a clear imbalance of power; a directive authoritarian management style; and employers or managers (particularly senior management) not role modelling appropriate and respectful workplace behaviour, or who fail to impart clear guidelines of what constitutes appropriate respectful workplace behaviour.



Other indicators that might alert us that all is not well could include low levels of trust or morale, people who are excluded or ostracised, people who isolate themselves or withdraw from their colleagues, cliques, inappropriate behaviour not managed, open displays of favouritism, lack of open communication, or employees too scared to speak up.

Leaders have an important and cost effective part to play in preventing workplace bullying. Numerous studies conclude it is the CEO's attitude that determines the cultural tone of an organisation. Those organisations that shift their thinking, starting from the top-down, and who demonstrate a strong commitment to creating and fostering a bully-free, respectful work environment are significantly more likely to succeed.

However, there are constraints or limitations as to why an organisation is not successful. Poor or lack of skills (or training) in conflict competence may result in managers ignoring, concealing, or downplaying an incident or complaint. Unfortunately, managers that are promoted or employed for their operational expertise and not for their leadership skills can find themselves in a situation of not quite knowing how to effectively deal with bullying. Managers may not understand the role that power plays in bullying or they may fail to see bullying as being part of their responsibility. Conversely, they may see bullying as an OHS issue but only in terms of compliance, without taking into account the need to deliberately build organisational conflict competence and actively promote a bully-free culture. As well, organisations may fail to see the need to adequately resource the building of a respectful culture.

To adopt a preventative approach to bullying means money will need to be spent up front in order to decrease the future costs that bullying may incur. Organisations are required to take all reasonable steps to demonstrate a commitment to promoting a bully-free workplace. Reasonable steps includes: a thorough induction process that clearly and comprehensively outlines what is expected of an employee in terms of their behaviour and work practices. It is also an ideal time to make sure new employees are given a thorough knowledge of the relevant policies and procedures, including grievance mechanisms, so there is no misunderstanding of what is appropriate or not.

However, if these policies are not part of a wider education program that explains the impact of bullying and fosters positive workplace behaviours, then any targeted approach is likely to fail. Awareness of bullying training is an important part of any preventative approach but it needs to be regular and on-going. A once-off approach is a waste of time and money.

An organisation that is consistent in their message will repeat the same information using various formats such as training, posters, screen-savers, a strong code of conduct, organisational values, clear and easily accessible policies, and inclusion of an on-going meeting agenda item. But this message must be supported by highly skilled leaders who promote the very behaviour and work practices they expect their employees to adopt. Good leaders will engage their employees in

daily conversations about the importance of a safe and respectful work environment and will intervene early when behaviours are inappropriate or disrespectful. Leaders who do not have these skills can learn them through conflict coaching.

Performance management tools are often given a bad name because of the way they are used – that is, they are used in an ad-hoc manner and not part of the wider preventative approach, or worse, they are used as a bullying tool to bring 'unruly' employees into line. Assuming they are used for the purpose they were intended, the use of behaviour-based KPI's can be a useful component to measure the behavioural performance of an employee. KPI's such as: communicates respectfully, faces up to criticism, takes responsibility for behaviour, role models appropriate behaviour and responds appropriately to conflict, are ideal ways to measure employee's behaviour. However, the same expectations must be applied to management.

Workplace contact officers are specially trained employees whose primary role is to impartially inform and support people who are seeking specific information about bullying. This is a voluntary role (in addition to their paid role) and if done well, a contact officer becomes a first port of call for anyone seeking information about bullying. Contact officers work best if the organisation commits to the process of supporting them to do their job well (including regular refresher training). Measuring the numbers of people who come to see them (without identifying characteristics) is a useful way for an organisation to capture information about the work culture. Another early intervention strategy is peer mediation. Peer mediators are specially chosen employees who, like contact officers, display fairness and impartiality in their dealings with others. Peer mediators are specifically trained to provide a low key intervention option when early conflicts arise in the workplace.

Lastly, a risk management approach provides a whole of culture response to addressing possible risks associated with workplace bullying. The approach aims to identify and assess the potential hazards and then evaluate and address those risk factors. It would include analysis of consequences and severity of harm caused if the risks were ignored. A list of recommendations would be designed to transform any potential or existing risks with a sole focus on rebuilding a bullying environment into a respectful bully-free culture.

Taking these approaches and actively promoting a respectful, inclusive culture will go a long way toward bully-proofing your organisation. 🍷

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Caroline Dean is a sociologist with specialist expertise in workplace conflict. She is a consultant, trainer and conflict coach. Caroline assists organisations to take a cultural approach to preventing workplace bullying through developing organisational competence around bullying and conflict. She is the founder of community organisation Challenge Bullying Inc.

# Findings of First National Survey into Mature-age Workers Released

**Australia has an ageing workforce with up to 3.8 million mature age Australians, many who still want to work and be part of the economy, but are facing barriers. The Federal Government recently released the findings of the first national survey of employment barriers faced by mature-age workers, commissioned to help inform policies to attract more mature-age workers into the workforce.**

Some key findings of the survey include:

- Illness, injury and disability was reported as preventing one-fifth of the total population aged 45-74 from working or looking for work in the last 5 years;
- 36% of job seekers reported having experienced exclusion while looking for a job in the last 5 years and attributed it to their age, while 83% believe it to be an issue in Australia;
- Care-giving responsibilities are reported as preventing around one-third of care-givers from working or working more hours;

Minister for Employment Participation Kate Ellis said the survey tells us that flexibility in the workplace – particularly for care givers and for people with an injury, disability or a health condition – is essential if we are to support mature-age workers. ▼

**For more information, visit [www.deewr.gov.au/Employment/Programs/ExpPlus/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.deewr.gov.au/Employment/Programs/ExpPlus/Pages/default.aspx).**



## Defining a Successful Mayor and CEO Relationship

**New research from the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) can assist in rethinking one of the most important relationships in Local Government between the mayor and the chief executive officer.**

The research is presented in the report, *Political Management in Australian Local Government: Exploring Roles and Relationships between Mayors and CEOs*. The paper presents ideas and resources on what is known about the topic and may provide some guidance to councils considering ways of redesigning and redefining the roles of the two local leaders.

One of the authors of the report, Prof John Martin said the working relationship between elected mayors and appointed officers in western

democracies is one where the prescribed roles and responsibilities are negotiated over time between those who occupy these positions. “This is the reason why we see so many differences in style and approach in councils.”

Some of the research and commentary included in the report include: models that define the complimentary nature of the relationship; whether the relationship is influenced by structural issues (such as the method of election of the Mayor at large, or by the council itself); what defines a successful Mayor-CEO relationship; and how the relationship can be supported by other elected and appointed council staff. ▼

**The report can be downloaded from [www.acelg.org.au](http://www.acelg.org.au).**



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# Living the Values

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High Performance



**Often behaviours at work can cause more challenges for productivity and teamwork than skills, resources, plans or structures, and how leaders within council address behaviour varies greatly. Some managers fail to address behavioural issues due to concerns about creating conflict in the workplace, or because the staff member is achieving good operational outcomes in spite of their behaviour.**

Behaviours can also be difficult to manage as they are often a reflection of an individual's attitudes about their work, their team and even about change itself. So, how do we manage behaviours when we really need to discuss attitudes?

One approach is to recognise that attitudes are actually choices that people have made somewhere in their lives (and often not even while working at council). In other words, why do some people see the 'glass as half empty' while others see the 'glass as half full'? At some stage, someone has decided to look for the negatives in situations, while others have decided to look for the positives. A manager can create a conversation to not only challenge staff attitudes but to help them become aware of the choices they have made and the impacts of those choices on their outlook and behaviours.

Staff have the choice to change their attitude and it is the role of this management conversation to help staff consider other choices they could make. Managers cannot direct a change in attitude but they can make staff aware of how their current attitudes are affecting their behaviours and the perceptions of others. This type of counseling and coaching can be quite effective in making staff aware of choices and supporting them to make different choices.

Another approach we use to address staff behaviours is a review of values. Each council has a stated mission, vision and values to establish the purpose, future direction and the way that council staff will work with each other and with members of the community. These values should have specific definitions which all staff should be aware of. However, sometimes these values

become 'motherhood statements' that are too broadly defined to impact on daily operational work at council.

In this council-wide approach to address behaviours we ask "How are staff living the values"? Beyond the necessary specific definitions of council values, each value needs to be demonstrated by 'observable behaviours'. For example, if 'respect' is an agreed council value, the associated behaviours of staff who live by this value might be that all staff are to be treated equal in importance as they all play an important role in council's delivery of services to the community. So behaviours like genuinely listening and considering other viewpoints, collaborating to problem-solve with them, and working through conflicts or disagreements as team members could be 'observable behaviours' when staff are working with respect.

Some councils establish core behaviours under each council value while others add specific behaviours to these core behaviours based on the staff member's position and job duties. These specific behaviours consistent with council values are then added to the position description as part of the performance in that role.

At High Performance, often we are asked to support councils in developing or updating their values and associated behaviours, and then lead small group discussions 'Living the Values' to review the attitudes, values and behaviours expected. Ultimately, reviewing and providing feedback on staff behaviours becomes a consistent management conversation to recognise effective behaviours and correct behaviours inconsistent with the values of council. Additionally, a 360 degree feedback process can be used to assess staff behaviours as the perceptions of others are a key measurement of 'living the values'.

How specific are your council values and behaviours? Are all staff aware of the behaviours expected of them to be consistent with the values of council? How are these reinforced on an informal and frequent basis? How are behaviours measured objectively to provide meaningful feedback? ♥

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