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Problem: Bullying and harassment in the workplace

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1. Introduction

All organisations encounter problems. These can either be with staff, customers, or business models amongst others, and can cause serious complications if not handled correctly. Companies use many different techniques to identify problems, ranging from customer complaint boxes or phone lines, to anonymous employee reporting.

In this report, I will identify a complex problem encountered by a business, outline the possible solutions to it, and analyse which would be best to help fix it.

2. The Complex Problem

Workplace bullying is a serious issue which occurs regularly in many businesses around the world. A 2015 study by solicitors Slater and Gordon, found that 37% of the 2000 employees asked, had been a victim of bullying in the workplace, while 21% said that they had witnessed it. 52% of those who had been victim or witnessed bullying also said that they had taken no action. (How to deal with bullying in the workplace, 2019)

This shows how big of a problem it is, and there is much that can still be done to prevent it.

Examples of bullying can include;

- Spreading negative rumours.
- Unfair treatment.
- Picking on or undermining someone.
- Denying training or promotion opportunities.

(Workplace bullying and harassment, n.d.)

Bullying can occur through several ways, including face-to-face, letter, email, and phone, showing that it is not limited. This also means that it can be difficult to prove, or difficult for employers to witness. While it is possible for someone to give evidence of its occurrence via written media such as email, it is difficult to prove that it has happened face-to-face, and it becomes a case of someone's word against the other.

Bullying in the workplace is a complex issue because it can be difficult to identify. Many employees may be reluctant to speak up about the issue, as they may feel as though in doing so, they could be looked at badly, and their need to settle in could be negatively impacted if they report issues with an existing staff member, especially if they person is popular inside the business, or that they may be considered weak for not being able to handle what is perceived as humour in the workplace. ACAS (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) gives an example of how a groups idea of humour, can lead to someone feeling bullied or harassed:

“Steve is continually being called gay and other related names by a group of employees at his work. Derogatory homophobic comments have been posted on the staff noticeboard about him by people from this group. Steve was recently physically pushed to the floor by one member of the group but is too scared to take action. Steve is not gay but heterosexual; furthermore, the group know he isn't gay”. (Bullying and harassment at work, n. d.)

This is obviously an unacceptable thing for the employees to be doing and shows how outdated opinions can lead to bullying.

3. Scope and Impact

Bullying and harassment in the workplace is not only limited to occurring between employees. It can come from management, ownership, or even customers. This is important to point out, as there is a long-standing mantra of “the customer is always right”, which many hide behind to excuse their behaviour towards staff. If you go into most London underground stations, or supermarkets, you will see signs reading “please treat our staff with respect”, or words to that effect. This shows that mistreatment or bullying does not only arise between staff, but also from outside forces. Bullying from management is another deep lying issue not only in the UK, but around the world. Many employees who suffer harassment from those above them find it incredibly difficult to speak up, as they can feel pressured or threatened into acceptance or silence, for fear of being punished or losing their job as a result. This is especially prevalent in smaller companies, which do not have a dedicated HR team to speak to and require complaints of bullying to go straight to the person who is in charge, and the one who is perpetrating it.

There are many impacts of this issue. Employees who are bullied can become disillusioned with their job, which can lead to lowered productivity, mistakes, or departure. It can also have a large negative impact on either/and their mental and physical health. If the bullying becomes physical, it can potentially prevent someone from carrying out their tasks, and if it is verbal/emotional bullying, it can make an employee dread coming in to work, leading to more days taken off, or as mentioned before, simply quitting the position entirely.

While there may not be many direct impacts on the business itself, as it is unusual for a business to be bullied, the fact that staff can suffer from this problem does have a big effect on an organisation. When a staff member is being bullied or harassed, their productivity may suffer, including motivation, which will come across badly to customers, and may result in a loss in sales. There may also be more mistakes, as the employee is distracted by the fear or idea of more bullying occurring. All these things can have a very negative effect on a company or organisation, showing just how important it is to prevent it from occurring, or if it does, to solve it as quickly as possible.

4. Solutions

There are several actions that an organisation can take to prevent bullying or deal with currently ongoing cases. Here I will lay them out, and using PMI tables, outline the pros and cons of each. (Walker, 2017)

4.1 Anti-Bullying Policies

This is perhaps the easiest solution a company can use to prevent bullying and harassment and is something that all should have. It allows the organisation to have a strong position in any future cases, as they have already expressed that it is not acceptable. It also gives victims piece of mind, as they know that the business is more likely to back them.

Plus	Minus	Interesting
Strong and clear messaging	Some may ignore	Victim may still be scared to report a problem
Explains actions that will be taken	Only works if the bully is not responsible for handling complaints	

The only real issue with this is if it is the only action an organisation takes to prevent bullying. Simply saying something is not acceptable is not enough, it must be followed through with. As long as all involved are fully committed to it, it is essential to a healthy work environment.

4.2 Training and Education

By correctly training and educating new and existing employees, a company can go a long way to prevent bullying. Looking at the example from ACAS that I mentioned earlier, if that business had educated their staff better, and explained that using homophobic language is unacceptable, not only in the workplace, but also in everyday life, they perhaps the situation would not have occurred, and all members would better know how to behave at work.

Plus	Minus	Interesting
Allows for in depth explanation	Can be expensive for small businesses.	Better understanding of what is and is not acceptable.
Can cover multiple staff at the same time.	Time that staff are not working	
Can be used before and during an occurrence of bullying		

Proper training is essential in the modern world. Outdated opinions which are not acceptable any more are important to eradicate, and when it is used with a strong anti-bullying policy, it can be very effective.

4.3 Clear and Straightforward Reporting

The ability to report an instance of bullying in an easy and straightforward way is vital to combat harassment. If it is difficult to do so, then victims may be put off in speaking out about their problems, which undermines any work the organisation may have done to prevent bullying in the first place. This also includes the fact that the business must take all reported cases seriously, other wise the process is not helpful.

Plus	Minus	Interesting
Gives victim confidence to report a problem		More victims will come forward
Allows for good collection of evidence		May discourage future cases
Shows potential bullies that incidences will be investigated		

There really are no significant negatives to this. It is very important for all businesses to give employees the confidence to speak up about any problems they have, and by taking all of them seriously, the organisation shows that they are taking a tough stance on this difficult problem.

4.4 Appropriate action

Once an incident has been reported, and the company has investigated, it is important to then take appropriate action against either the accused if it turns out to be true, or the reporter if it is false. By doing so, it sends out a strong message to anyone who would harass another member of staff and show that the company will not tolerate any form of bullying.

Plus	Minus	Interesting
Strong message	Can be expensive if harassment is not against company policy	Staff know the company takes bullying seriously
Shows the victim that the company cares	Can lead to legal challenge	
Removes harmful employees		
Positive look for organisation		
Discourage future incidents		

Taking appropriate action is imperative to not only deal with ongoing cases of bullying, but also to prevent them in the future. It also shows that having a good anti-bullying policy can give an organisation a strong position in which to deal with possible cases.

5. Solution Implementation

How an organisation implements its chosen solutions for bullying is almost as important as the solutions themselves. If they fail to implement them correctly, then all the work that has gone in to deciding and choosing is wasted.

To implement an anti-bullying policy, a company must first decide what it is to include. It is often best to cover as many forms of bullying and harassment as possible. Things to cover would include Age, disability, gender, race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation. It is also important to cover the different forms of bullying, such as physical, verbal, emotional, or sexual. As I mentioned previously, harassment can also come from third parties, such as customers, or suppliers. By including how the organisation will deal with third party harassment, such as banning a customer from a store, or ending business ties with a supplier, it encourages people to want to work for them, as they know they will be supported. It is important to include all these things as it helps to prevent ambiguity or misunderstanding in the future. It is also important to mention in a policy what actions will be taken should the policy be broken by any party.

Correct training and education is relatively easy to implement. There are numerous companies that offer different courses or single day classes on discrimination or bullying. While these are an expense for an organisation, in the long term they can save money versus lost productivity or recruitment resulting from a victim leaving.

In order to have a clear and straightforward reporting framework, a business must try to find a way that limits the barriers for the victim. If there is a lot of paperwork, or the report is shown to those not involved, then it can lead to the victim feeling reluctant, due to the amount of work required, or the fear of ramifications from any supporters of the bully. One way to stop this is to make the reporting process anonymous. This would prevent anyone from finding out who has made the complaint, and greatly reduces the chance of new bullying occurring as a result of the complaint. If

the business is large, they can also ensure that they have a dedicated HR department. This means that any complaints against management or people in higher positions, is better scrutinised by someone who is not involved in the situation.

Taking appropriate action is the most difficult for an organisation to implement. While it is important to make sure that all reports are followed through with action, it is sometimes difficult to know what action is best to take. A victim may push for the strongest action possible, however if the accused is an important member of the business, an employer may be hesitant to dismiss them. Many companies use a "Three Strike" system. This means that should an employee be seen to be bullying another, they are first given a verbal warning. Should they then do it again, they are given a written warning, with a third resulting in dismissal. This ensures that employees are given a chance to realise they were at fault, and correct their behaviour going forward, but if they do not, it also shows that bullying will not be accepted.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, there is no single best solution to deal with bullying in the workplace. While an organisation has many options, in order to encourage victims to come forward, and to show potential bullies that their actions are not acceptable, it is best for the organisation to use all the solutions I have outlined above. It is in the best interests of all companies to ensure that bullying and harassment are not found within them, and that by doing this, they can promote a positive workplace atmosphere, and not only improve their sales, but the wellbeing and mental health of their employees.

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