

# Workplace Bullying: A New Zealand Association of Scientists Perspective<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

For the most part New Zealand is fortunate in having productive working environments in which people are treated fairly and rewarded appropriately. The Employment Relations Act 2000 and related regulations, such as the Employment Relations Regulations 2000, provide mechanisms whereby parties to employment relationships can deal with each other in good faith and achieve the desired outcomes. Bodies such as the Public Service Association have been established to protect the interests of workers and improve management practices in accordance with Government's stated objective of building fair and inclusive workplaces. Such measures have proved quite effective in ensuring positive environments and in providing remedies when problems occur.

However, in recent years the New Zealand Association of Scientists (NZAS) has become aware of concerns among both public and private sector staff about negative behaviours within their employing organisations. Certain concerns articulated to the NZAS involve allegations of workplace bullying, an issue that has gained considerable public recognition recently through television documentaries, newspaper articles, workshops and the publication of books<sup>2</sup> on this difficult subject. During the last few years we have seen the formation of a number of groups interested in improving organisational behaviours. For example, the Strategic Interest Group on Workplace Bullying<sup>3</sup>, comprising mostly Wellington-based managers and other staff, was established in 2004 to discuss workplace bullying and identify ways of addressing and preventing it in New Zealand.

## **Workplace Bullying: a Definition**

We can think of workplace bullying as persistent unwelcome behaviour that may involve unwarranted criticism of the performance and attitudes of a member of staff. It may involve the exclusion, isolation and excessive monitoring of a particular person. It may involve verbal abuse, including threats, shouting or persistently talking across the subordinate member of staff and disallowing right of reply. It may involve withdrawal of all contact with a person, a technique known as 'sending to Coventry'. It may involve deliberate humiliation in the presence of others or making someone an object of ridicule. It may involve withdrawal of the resources needed for successful completion of the work at hand. It may also involve the imposition of verbal and written warnings that are based on distorted or fabricated allegations of underperformance and that diminish the credibility and reputation of the recipient. Such actions may occur on a frequent basis and over a sustained period. Bullying may be carried out by more than one senior person, or with the tacit approval of others who close ranks with the senior person, so that the recipient is not only outranked but outnumbered. However, bullying behaviours can be exhibited by any member of staff, regardless of seniority.

Because of the high frequency and long duration of hostile behaviour, such mistreatment can result in considerable mental and psychosomatic trauma and ill-health, thus diminishing the employee's ability to perform a role for which he or she was considered competent before the bullying began. The bullying episode may lead to marginalisation of the recipient and cause

real professional damage, including loss of opportunities for career development, termination of the recipient's position within the employing organisation, and even the termination of a career. In some bullying episodes, processes designed to address underperformance may be used to undermine the credibility of the recipient (i.e. official warnings and the compilation of reports and affidavits) and substantiate the case should litigation ensue. Further, litigation against an employer or tertiary institution can prove to be extremely expensive, is potentially traumatic in itself, and generally achieves very little.

Bullying can occur in a diverse range of environments, including that of post-graduate research. Post-graduate students are people (generally young and inexperienced) who elect to devote several years of their working lives to self-development through the pursuit of advanced education. The anticipated return includes enhanced skills and knowledge and a qualification that may bring latent professional advantages. However, students require a positive learning environment, including the support of a concerned and co-operative supervisor and a supportive research community, in order to underpin their eventual success. Others at risk in the research environment include post-doctoral fellows and junior staff, but in effect many are vulnerable, partly because research careers are particularly dependent upon reputation.

### **The NZAS Position**

Dealing with workplace bullying poses a most difficult challenge because in New Zealand it is not yet seen as an official issue, as opposed to the United Kingdom, the United States, Ireland and other countries where workplace bullying policies are already in place. Further, there is considerable difficulty for any third party in discriminating between situations in which there are real underperformance or behavioural problems, and situations in which there is real workplace bullying. NZAS recognises that managers and supervisors are sometimes driven to take effective action in cases of underperformance or attitudinal difficulties. NZAS also recognises that, in order to function effectively, all organisations require a strict decision-making hierarchy, strong leadership, clear expectations of staff, and a minimum of outside interference. However, NZAS contends that all organisations, including universities and others within the research, science and technology sector, should discuss workplace bullying openly, identify, address and prevent workplace bullying, and implement and reinforce strong leadership and management practices to address this issue effectively. Of course, positions of responsibility carry obligations towards others, but it is axiomatic and non-negotiable that control of others' working conditions, type of work, remuneration and career development be exercised in a fair and equitable manner. Equally, while the doctoral student or junior research fellow is obligated to work at the required level, in turn the university is obligated to provide the conditions necessary for success.

Most public sector and private sector organisations have agreed codes of conduct that articulate clear expectations of staff performance and behaviour. Such policies usually include explicit recognition of the rights, as well as the obligations, of staff. However, to be truly effective, such policies must also articulate clear expectations of senior staff in their management of others and in the creation of positive and harmonious working environments. The New Zealand Public Service Code of Conduct, pursuant to section 57 of the State Sector Act 1988, requires public servants not to harass, bully or otherwise intimidate clients or colleagues, but does not go as far as to define the behaviours that constitute workplace bullying.

Similarly, universities must have effective policies in place that govern the supervisor-student relationship and the professional relationship between managers and research staff. Such policies should also include the provision of processes whereby concerns about workplace bullying and other negative behaviours can be addressed. NZAS believes that all employees and students deserve fair treatment and supportive working environments in which each person can perform to the best of his or her abilities and develop new knowledge and skills.

### **A Way Forward**

NZAS recommends that New Zealand's public and private sector employers consider the following suggestions:

1. Define workplace bullying for New Zealand
2. Identify issues and potential resolutions for New Zealand
3. Identify unacceptable management practices
4. Develop an educational brochure for management
5. Develop mechanisms to highlight, recognise and reward excellent management and research supervision
6. Identify valid and reliable information on workplace bullying and enhance the relevant policies on the basis of this information
7. Include explicit recognition of workplace bullying within organisations' codes of conduct and employment policies, and provide clear mechanisms whereby concerns about workplace bullying can be addressed
8. Develop robust, merit-based reward structures, and ensure that selection into the management stream is based on demonstrated capacity or potential for excellent leadership
9. Encourage Chief Executives to monitor and address workplace bullying as an explicit obligation within their Performance Agreements.

Additionally, NZAS recommends that:

10. The Royal Society includes an appropriate reference to workplace bullying in its Code of Ethical Practice and encourages research, science and technology organisations to do the same
11. All research, science and technology organisations adopt workplace bullying policies and implement measures to identify and prevent it.

NZAS contends that organisations that adopt some or all of the above suggestions, and that strive to create environments in which employees and students are managed fairly and equitably, will reap considerable performance benefits, as well as benefits to their own reputations as good employers.

## **Endnotes**

1. This article is available on the web-site of the New Zealand Association of Scientists through the following link: <http://www.faster.co.nz/~nzas/>
2. An excellent New Zealand reference is: 'Workplace Bullying - The Costly Business Secret', by Andrea Needham, published by Penguin Group (2004).
3. The Strategic Interest Group on Workplace Bullying is an informal group, established by Andrea Needham with the assistance of the New Zealand Institute of Management. It meets regularly in Wellington to discuss workplace bullying in New Zealand organisations and develop strategies to identify and prevent workplace bullying.

NZAS Council  
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