

Submission on Bullying

Personal Experience



Foreward

The purpose of this report is to share the personal experiences of me, _____ and the impacts of bullying in the workplace. I will provide a background, some of the bullying and the aftermath. I have attached the original appeal and the response from Workcover so you may further read and understand the processes.

The impacts that I incurred in the three months I spent at the _____ were:

- Micromanagement
- Ignored
- Given tasks that could not be completed
- Hiding equipment
- Hostility
- Anger
- No training

The aftermath of the bullying has left me with a Total and Permanent Disability and:

- Clinical depression
- Sleep disorder
- Anxiety
- Income loss
- Lowered self esteem
- Poor memory
- Poor concentration

The department I was in had already sent six others before me packing and since then I know of two more that have left. It has been difficult for me to revisit this and due to the stressors now on my cognition I find it difficult to be able to write as coherently as I once did.

The long term impacts of bullying cannot be undone. The perpetrators always seem to go unpunished while the victim is crushed by the system that is believed to be in place to provide support. It is little wonder that many cases of bullying in the work place go unreported. Since being involved as a victim I now meet many people who have suffered as I have done and have felt powerless to stand up to it. It is hard enough to stand up to a bully let alone a system that treats you like you are inconsequential.

Contents

| | | |
|---------------------|---|-----------|
| 1 | Introduction..... | 4 |
| 2 | Background..... | 4 |
| 3 | January 17th | 4 |
| 4 | The Department | 5 |
| 5 | First week at work..... | 5 |
| 6 | Conduct | 5 |
| 6.1 | Micro-managed | 5 |
| 6.2 | Ignored..... | 6 |
| 6.3 | Given tasks that I could not complete..... | 6 |
| 6.4 | Hiding equipment..... | 6 |
| 6.5 | Hostility..... | 6 |
| 6.6 | Anger..... | 6 |
| 6.7 | No training..... | 7 |
| 7 | My thoughts | 7 |
| 8 | My Health..... | 7 |
| 9 | Human resources | 7 |
| 10 | Other help..... | 8 |
| 11 | Union | 8 |
| 12 | Workcover/Insurer | 8 |
| 13 | Appeal..... | 8 |
| 14 | Centrelink..... | 9 |
| 15 | Life After | 9 |
| 16 | Suicide..... | 10 |
| 17 | The New Workplace..... | 10 |
| 18 | Me Currently..... | 10 |
| 18.1 | Mentally..... | 10 |
| 18.2 | Financially | 10 |
| 19 | Recommendations..... | 11 |
| 20 | Summary | 12 |
| Attachment 1 | Letter of Appeal | 14 |
| Attachment 2 | Medical Assessment Tribunal Decision | 2 |

| | | |
|-------------------------|--|-----------|
| Appendix A | What does bullying in the workplace look like? | 7 |
| | How bullying can affect your work..... | 7 |
| Appendix B | | 9 |
| Attachment 3 | Letter and part of reply from Ayr and my response | 10 |

1 Introduction

Workplace bullying affects thousands of people each year in Australia. Workplace bullying has affected me, in many ways and I am left with a Permanent Disability. This submission is to help clarify and provide insight into bullying in the workplace and put forward some recommendations to help alleviate this common problem. I have included Appendices which contain my appeal and the medical tribunal's judgement so that many of the smaller details may be related.

I have organised this report to provide you with some background information and then the order of events which occurred to me over the next three months and the aftermath of the bullying until current. This type of abuse in what ought to be a safe place has to be condemned from every person as a cowardly and deadly activity. It is fair to suggest that often the perpetrators of this abuse often seem to enjoy the control and the pain and suffering they inflict on their victims. In those short harsh three months I was destroyed. My confidence was shattered, my life utterly messed up and my health ruined. How do I get that back? Why are the guilty persons left happily in their positions?

In the recommendations I have included some thoughts on the processes which from my perspective I feel some of these may be expanded upon and made useful to help others in the future. There is no doubt that workplace bullying will continue however to what extent is up to all of us to master the future course.

2 Background

My working career has been mixed of employment and self employment. Work places were always a good place to be and prior to my experience in I had never encountered workplace bullying before. Of course there is always one person who is a bit prickly I think that's pretty average in any work space or even family.

I had my own business for twenty years and decided to then go to University and change my career. I sold the house that I had for my business and went to the University of the Sunshine Coast where I completed a Bachelor of Science Degree in 2010. My degree was in Environment and Public Health and geared towards employment as an Environmental Health Officer. Prior to graduation I succeeded in securing a position within the in Far North Queensland. Prior to beginning employment in January of 2010 I flew to and travelled to in order to meet with the team working in the .

This was an exciting time for me and quite busy as I had to find someone to house sit until I was settled and packing and organising getting myself and belongings to .

3 January 17th

My first meeting prior to beginning work was with the woman with whom I shared a house for less than one month. This person was on very friendly terms with the Manager and that first Saturday night we spent at another work

colleagues place for dinner. Over dinner disparaging comments were made on a former work colleague who had left most recently.

4 The Department

I worked in the _____, my first job since completion of my degree. The staff was a Director, Manager, Manager and ten staff members. The offices were not open plan but each room had 2-3 staffers seated. The Manager and 5 of the other staff members had also worked together in previous _____. This should have been a clue as well.

5 First week at work

The first day was spent meeting the staff in the entire _____ at _____. My first clue should have been the several people who asked me point blank 'how long do you think you will last?' Of course I didn't understand the implications of these types of comments at first as I didn't believe for a minute that I would not last at this job. Several other staff in other areas warned me that there was a high turn over and yet I still did not believe that this would apply to me.

I was placed in a room with one other female staff member who from the outset did not speak to me. I spent three days in this room without any conversation or training from this person. It was a month later that I asked her why this was and it was because I looked like someone she hated. This was not the start of my great journey; this was fast becoming a nightmare.

6 Conduct

For more detail please read Attachment A & C

These are the things that happened to me:

- Micromanaged
- Ignored
- Given tasks that could not be completed
- Hiding equipment
- Hostility
- Anger
- No training

6.1 Micro-managed

For more detail please read Attachment A & C

This occurred on the most trivial of items. Trying to send a letter to a client that would be about 3 lines long was never correct. I still joke that I probably didn't breathe correctly in that office. I was informed by the second on the first day that I was 'being watched'.

6.2 Ignored

For more detail please read Attachment A & C.

When I initially told this to the first psychologist that I was micromanaged and ignored he deemed it impossible to be both. Trust me, this is entirely possible. If I wasn't being overly managed I could not get the help I required to perform any tasks. I could not get training but I could get into trouble for not knowing how to do things for the office.

6.3 Given tasks that I could not complete

For more detail please read Attachment A & C

Asking me at 4.30 pm to find out about whether or not a private burial could take place on private land when the whole of the office except me knew that the department I needed to contact went home at 4 pm. Then I tried to find out from a previous colleague about the laws regarding burials, while also trying to find local laws. It turned out that on the Home Page of the Shires web page that there is there for all to see about the 3 most recent private burials. I found this out after as I asked the customer service staff who I should be talking to about the matter. My superiors would have known this being in a position that had previously dealt with the issue.

Being asked to make brochures for a project that I was to do yet not having access to the Micro soft publishing package. When I asked the IT people about this I ended up in an argument. Apparently that was a sore point and yet I had no idea I was set up. This was deeply unsettling and when I told my Manager about this she thought it was funny. It turned out later that one of the computers in our team had the publisher package and I could have used that only no one wanted to share that information.

6.4 Hiding equipment

For more detail please read Attachment A & C.

Part of my function as a Health Officer was to make audits on food premises. The teams only thermometer was one with the long probe and at a meeting I asked if it were possible to get a thermal thermometer this was met with incredible hostility and a suggestion that I was incompetent. Later a thermal thermometer was bought as it is not always possible to use a probe.

6.5 Hostility

For more detail please read Attachment A & C.

It was always on a Thursday afternoon about 4.30 when everyone else had gone home that either one of the managers or both would pull up a chair to my desk and told me where I had gone wrong for the last week. It was usually fabricated things or decidedly unusual complaints. As an example I was brought to task for coming back into the office to have morning tea with the rest of the My department did not associate with the rest of the and ridiculed them for having morning teas. I on the other hand felt it was beneficial to me being new to the and area to have morning teas in order to understand who did what in the and to learn about the area and the people.

6.6 Anger

For more detail please read Attachment A & C.

I would greet everyone of a morning and one of the managers would either not answer or turn her back and walk away saying 'fine' as she had her back to me.

The last meeting with the two Managers was intense as the rage I felt from one was palpable.

6.7 No training

For more detail please read Attachment A & C.

I was never trained during the time I spent in . At first I asked for training and at the end I asked for types of training I knew I wouldn't get as it was obvious any training was out of the question. The manager was away for 7 weeks of my time there and the second manager in charge was in a constant bad mood.

7 My thoughts

The first week or so I couldn't work out what was going on. I didn't understand what I could have done wrong and how I had offended my department. I found out later that this is normal to come to the conclusion that I was at fault and try to modify my behaviour. I wanted to make things right and fit in. The harder I tried and the more work I did the angrier and resentful my colleagues became. As I had worked with people for many many years without any trouble I had a lot of trouble trying to understand what was happening to me. It seemed crazy.

Appendix B explains some of the thoughts I had at the time with the Insurer.

8 My Health

Before working for the I had worked as an Acupuncturist and Naturopath and my health was and still is very important to me. I don't drink, smoke or take drugs. I was functional.

In the short time I was there I went from a functional human to a nervous wreck. On the 22nd February I had my first ever panic attack. While I was having a panic attack my boss continued to harrass me and watched me unable to breathe. On the 28th I had come home and went to my GP in and was put on Xanax and high dose of antidepressants.

In the short time there I had three anxiety attacks and on the last day even though I had a friend with me, I could not walk further than a few feet into the building before collapsing into a panic attack. If anyone had ever suggested that I would suffer from anxiety like this I would never have believed them.

While in the I suffered from:

- Severe and prolonged headaches
- Severe body pain
- Upset stomach/digestion
- Blood pressure of 180/110
- Disturbed sleep and
- Increased tiredness
- Confusion

9 Human resources

I had contacted HR after the episode of being harassed after coming back to the office for morning tea. I was told that I needed to speak to the staff about it and I said that I would try to handle it. I did discuss with HR some of the odd behaviour I had encountered but was not offered any solutions.

As I discovered later the Occupational Workplace Health and Safety Act does not apply to bullying although I don't understand why although clearly there ought to be some correlation.

Workplace Health and Safety Act 1995

An Act to promote and protect freedom from disease or injury to persons caused, and risk of disease or injury to persons created, by workplaces, workplace activities and certain plant, and for related purposes

10 Other help

I contacted the Employee Assistance Programme in _____ and utilised their service three times. This type of help is not always that useful. The quality of psychologists is not always as high as it might be and this can cause more grief. I tried various different people until I found one this last year who was not completely dippy and suggesting lavender baths or lighting candles for relaxation. I needed real help, not glossy brochures and clichés to help me get through this.

11 Union

As I had not been contacted by a Union representative and being very new I had no idea that there was a Union to join.

12 Workcover/Insurer

Appendix B explains some of the thoughts I had at the time with the Insurer.

This seemed like a good idea at the time and I believed this was the route you take. I had an initial interview with 2 of the lesser staff from the HR department and sent the same material to Workcover. I filled out the various forms presented to me.

After I moved back to Brisbane I had one interview with a psychologist that worked for Workcover. I took my sister along as I was very weak from the three months in the north. The interviewer seemed rather disinterested in discovering events.

I am not a fan of Workcover, I understand that is what you have to do, but it's hard to navigate around the whole process. These people work in it everyday and forget that the victim is under duress and has no clue how to proceed in order to get their needs met.

It was months later - perhaps 12 months when I was contacted by Workcover to talk to me about rehabilitation. I had already contacted Commonwealth Rehabilitation Services sometime before this. I had never been told anyone would contact me in the future.

13 Appeal

Please read Attachment 2

As I had lost the first round I had the right of appeal and the right to read all of the documents from [redacted] and the responses from the staff when questioned. I almost was not going to go ahead as it's very draining, tiring, demoralising and stressful. However, when I read untruths I decided that I had enough strength to keep going for a little longer. The lie was as simple as declaring the room I sat in was an open plan office and it was not. I thankfully had taken photographs of my offices to show off to family and friends. But here's the thing, the liar was the Director and curiously the psychologist who went there didn't notice the discrepancy. That really rankled. I could understand people's altered perception of events or occurrences but this was physically untrue.

In order to appeal this process I had to reread all of the material and find a way in which to support my claims. I did not use legal help as I did not know I could have done so. When you are in the midst of all of this it is like being inside a well.

I did find enough evidence in their responses which negated themselves. Basically they made my case for me which was a relief. The second person I dealt with in Workcover was quite good and was surprised that the original claim was not taken up.

I won the appeal by myself and that wasn't the end however, I got to see a psychiatrist then a panel of three psychiatrists. All this because I won. Tell me, what did I win?

The determination was that I had suffered PTSD from the workplace. What happened to the people in that workplace? Nothing. Not a thing.

I received some money and thanks to Centrelink they took what they had provided me back so in the long term I really didn't benefit if that's what you call it.

14 Centrelink

In going through all this and being unable to work, Centrelink placed me on a Newstart Allowance. This took an enormous effort and an equally enormous amount of paperwork. Nothing was easy to provide and the whole time treated with contempt. A staff member stated that I needed to sell my house. I couldn't believe what I heard as even IF I sold my house that day it would be weeks before I could obtain any funds, let alone find a place to live, pack and move in my state of mind. On top of all the indignity of what I had been through I could not easily get any help from Centrelink.

It was sometime later that I was able to go onto a Disability Pension as it was discovered I had a PTSD.

15 Life After

In the first year back from North Queensland I stayed 3 months with my sister as I was so unwell from that workplace. I did some more study which was so hard to do being so tired and mentally messed up. I finally got back into my house and then became ill. So very ill that I spent every day fighting fatigue. I developed Chronic Fatigue and was constantly sick. I developed pustules in my throat which turned out to be Herpes Simplex. It took a trip to hospital ER to finally get them swabbed to identify the culprit infection. Eight months of my life spent sick mostly getting worse, slightly better and depressed. I couldn't study at this stage as I was so ill so had to go

through the process of withdrawing after the Census date. This is hard as I have to still pay full price even though I was so ill and had all the substantiating paperwork.

16 Suicide

January 20th 2012, I had enough. I was tired, I was sick, no job, high anxiety, major depression, felt like a burden to my family, I am broke so I took an over dose of Valium and Xanax. I wrote a note and went to bed. Somewhere in all of that I texted my sister and I still don't remember doing it. Next thing I recall was waking up to 4 paramedics and my sister in my bedroom. I have been asked what I would do differently; I would take up drinking and take all the medication - as I failed even to die.

Does bullying impact your life? I would have to state at this time a definite 'Yes'.

17 The New Workplace

I received a phone call from the _____ in early March 2012 for a four month appointment in a policy role. I really didn't know if I was able to do this but at the same time thought that if I didn't take the position I would be broker faster than I am. Thankfully the people here at _____ where I am employed until the 29th June 2012 are really normal people except for one person. There is always one. I truly wish I could get the people here to send a report in on the bullying done by this woman. But as I know after this time I have spent people do not want to be involved in a positive outcome where they need to participate in something a little tough. Even now even though this workplace is so much better I have still experienced high anxiety and depression. My anxiety of course is high once again as I have to find another job in this current climate of job shedding and if I do find one I have to go through all the fears about workplaces again.

18 Me Currently

18.1 Mentally

The aftermath of the bullying has left me with a Total and Permanent Disability and:

- Clinical depression
- Sleep disorder
- Anxiety
- Income loss
- Lowered self esteem
- Poor memory
- Poor concentration

I am going into the _____ Hospital on the 3rd of July 2012 to get further help with the depression and anxiety. At this moment I have only a small window of opportunity as I am out of work this week and cannot afford to pay any more of the premiums for health care. I cannot keep living the way I feel on a daily basis.

18.2 Financially

Completely broke. I have been unable to gain work due to health issues and mental health issues. I owe \$23000 on my credit care and have an overdraft maxed out to \$17,000. If I had been able to work I know that I would not be facing the trials that are now ahead of me. Again I ask, what about the perpetrators? Still working and paying off their mortgages.

19 Recommendations

'the role of workplace cultures in preventing and responding to bullying and the capacity for workplace based policies and procedures to influence the incidence and seriousness of workplace bullying'

Human Resources could be outsourced from a second party so they became more responsible for their work

Human Resources could be made accountable for failing to meet the regulations for the work place as in OH&S

Punishment for the bully

- Reduction in wages as a penalty or,
- Demotion or,
- No progression in ranking or,
- Possible loss of employment and
- An apology to the victim.

For managements inability to act upon bullying written advice to be held stating that the staff member with their knowledge bullied other staff members.

Ongoing medical costs to be borne by

- employer or
- insurer

which don't stop once the payout is made.

Encourage staff to stop bullying

Re educate staff on what bullying is and is not

Set firmer boundaries

Listen to staff who have problems at home as they may be a bully at work

Encourage staff to care for other people

Make it known that there is a Zero tolerance and mean it

Improve communication skills

Improving the skills from the counsellors to the victims

- Realising not everyone drinks, smokes or takes drugs
- Not treating each person the same
- Patronising victims

Provision of a case worker to assist with the paper work

Clearer direction (I kept finding more hoops and more hoops)

Faster resolution

Everyone must be treated equitably

20 Summary

I have researched mental health issues and bullying in the workplace a good deal since my time in in order to re-establish my health. I have tried to understand what motivates people to behave in such a manner and why business places don't react in a functional way to the problem.

- HR doesn't assist as they are employed by the business
- Other staff members don't wish to become involved
- Managers can be ignorant or complacent
- Managers can also be the bully
- The victim is alone
- Employee Services such as counselling is contingent on the ability of the psychologist being competent
- Counselling is not always easy to get to
- The hurdles or hoops to jump through for the victim are intense and difficult
- The lack of support in the community is overwhelming
- The lack of support by the government is overwhelming
- The time you need help and your brain isn't working is a huge problem
- The poverty you experience
- The fear
- The stigma

There is room for considerable improvement in the integration of health providers to:

- Referral agencies to coordinate treatment/assistance
- Further education for front line officers to understand the pathology
- Enquiry should be made on the mental health of the bully and not just the victim

My first encounter with the psychologist was clearly biased towards the bullies as my life's history was on trial. I asked if the bullies were going to be asked about their lives as well and if there would be reasons for their behaviours. I was told that I was being aggressive. I thought I was asking for equity.

Community Groups/Forums

There is a lack of adequate groups in Queensland for Mental health issues particularly with regard to depression and anxiety. After my suicide attempt I tried to find adequate resources and as I did not have a case worker I could not access Nunah House. I tried the group "Grow" but that was with people who had become reliant on the group and many suffered from drugs and alcohol issues. I could not relate to this group. I have more success with the Anxiety Group from Victoria.

- Work places could be encouraged to have intranet pages for people to complain either anonymously sort of like a social media. There of course would need to be moderators.
- The ability for HR to hold sessions on bullying and to manage it.

-
-
- Teaching the positivity of the workplace

Policy Gaps, early response

The lack of swift action meant that the bullies had time to organise a collective story. I know this as people that I had become friendly with told me about the meeting that tried to consolidate their stories.

The public knowledge in that workplace that knew about the others who had been previously bullied meant that the workplace was guilty of the 'bystander approach' to the problem. In my current workplace there is also evidence of this having occurred previously to my position here as I replaced the person who was bullied. I feel for anyone that goes through this experience. The staff here know and yet nothing was done to the team leader, the bully.

In the _____ if a thorough examination had taken place it would have shown that others had suffered. Therefore there must be a need to alter or make legislation and law to encompass improved work places.

- Legislation to increase pathways for victims of this crime
- Bystanders must be included in policy
- The bully must attend rehabilitation

Appropriate ways of ensuring bullying culture or behaviours are not transferred from one workplace to another

- If the bullying is substantiated there must be penalty.
- Whether there is community service, public/private apology.
- Loss of income
- Loss of level or decrease of level
- Laid off from work for the time that it takes for the process to deal with the claim

My hope is that more expectations are placed on the employer who knowingly allows this behaviour to continue in the work place. There must be penalties for this behaviour, if not then you are condoning it. You must not allow unethical and morally bankrupt people to ruin lives.