

A submission to the Australian House of Representatives Inquiry into Workplace Bullying

By

attempted to end her life by suicide in August 2004 (aged 52) after being subjected to months of intense workplace bullying by several workmates who wanted her removed from her position to make way for a younger staff member to take over. Some two years after the bullying episode she instituted legal action seeking compensation for pain and suffering and economic loss. A lengthy and demoralising legal process spanned six years and was finally concluded in February 2012. Despite continuing psychological counselling and support from her GP, remains on antidepressant medication and is unable to return to the work as she still experiences bouts of depression, anxiety and occasional panic attacks. She lives alone, leads a very reclusive life, and rarely socialises or even attends family functions.

In February 2012, in the Victorian Supreme Court, she was awarded a compensation payment for her workplace injury of \$100,000 (\$50K for Pain and suffering and \$50K for economic loss) of which she received only a small percentage after legal costs had been deducted.

Today, sole means of financial support is a disability pension.

My Own Experience

I speak with informed, calm and confident insight on behalf of those many Australians who share my profile, characteristics and vulnerability. In that regard, my ordinariness provides the strength and authenticity that underpin this submission.

During 2004, I was subjected to repeated unreasonable conduct, isolating behaviours, and harassment on an almost daily basis from several workmates. On August 8, 2004, after finally reaching a point of no return I attempted to take my life with a fatal overdose of barbiturates. There were no bells or sirens to announce my epochal decision. I had simply run out of reserve, options and ideas and could not bear the idea of returning to work the next day.

This was the end point of many months degradation at my place of work where I was employed as a senior staff member. A number of my colleagues formed a clique and actively prosecuted my exclusion from the team and from access to the resources, cooperation and mutuality upon which my position relied.

Ordinarily this would not have been an insurmountable problem; it would simply have been a routine if complex challenge for my management skills. The intractability came from senior management above me who appeared to be bemused by these antics, and were apparently unprepared to challenge the group dynamic they relied on to support their own self esteem and prestige. In a nutshell, the most senior management of the company wasn't prepared to rock the boat.

They were careful not to provide any explicit endorsement of the bullying. It was their passive reaction to this dilemma that provided a powerful green light to the perpetrators and gave them the authority to continue with their malicious conduct. In my opinion, turning a blind eye gave them a licence to kill.

Bullying of the type I experienced simply starts off with a twinge. A curt remark becomes a spiteful attack with sporadic sorties interspersed with uneventful conduct. I used to wince when the attacks arrived and sought to interrogate my own behaviour as a way of justifying or explaining my colleagues' conduct. I would begin to doubt my judgement during the quiet periods, wondering if I had imagined it all.

Each episode became more stringent and daring and increasing numbers of the team became aware of the process, and by degrees others become more overtly involved. I initially felt hurt, then increasingly betrayed as more colleagues, some of whom I had worked with harmoniously for years, joined the game. This eventually gave way to humiliation, fear and depression. I began to dread going to work; the quality of my judgement became impaired, and my confidence and self esteem plummeted. On many occasions my frustration turned to deep-seated internalised

anger.

As one of seven siblings, I felt my traditional role as the family “anchor” convert to one of dependent as I lost the belief in my ability to do or say anything that was particularly worthwhile. To my bitter regret, I learned just how interconnected were the different parts of my own life and my life as a family member and friend. Workplace bullying, and the sense of worthlessness that it imposed on me, was like the initial domino toppling at the beginning of a chain reaction.

Caring family members and health professionals thwarted my suicide attempt with loving care and abiding professionalism. While I have learned coping skills to deal with the depression and anxiety caused by the bullying, I have no sense of jubilation or catharsis at having survived. My suicide attempt crystallised the reality and effect of my bullying experience, but the urgent reality of my predicament was simply replaced with the languorous drudgery of a deeper problem.

Despite having a background of some 36 years of continuous and successful Employment in both middle and upper management roles, by taking leave from work on workers’ compensation, I was branded a malingerer and having suffered a mental or nervous breakdown I was immersed in the stigma of mental illness.

I have endured a workplace crucifixion that I did not deserve and which I actively and conscientiously sought to avert. There is nothing more I could have done, and my workplace could not have done less.

At the time of applying for Workers Compensation support, the company manager who had initially been supportive of my plight turned against me and became belligerent. He telephoned my treating GP and threatened her with retribution if she went ahead with my Worker’s Compensation application. The insurance company then conducted a Circumstance Investigation which found in my favour. I was placed on WorkCover payments to allow time to recover my health. My employer then refused to prepare a Return to Work schedule, declined to accept a Return to Work schedule I had prepared and in fact advised me that he would not allow me to return to the workplace at all. Once I accepted this situation, I asked for a reference so that I could seek alternative employment. This was also declined on numerous occasions.

Without a written reference covering the past five years of my working life, I found it very difficult to obtain alternative employment despite applying for some 50 different positions. I was not able to be certain, but I felt when a prospective employer contacted my former workplace they may have been given a disparaging reference as positions for which I was well qualified suddenly dried up or were withdrawn.

Before I was brutally forced from my workplace, I was a highly respected, productive and competent professional. I paid my own way, saved for my retirement and was a prolific contributor to my local and the wider economy. I was paying off my own home, had savings in the bank, and growing superannuation savings.

In the years since, I have become a pariah. I have been shunned by members of the business community within which I worked, had to sell my home, and depleted my savings and superannuation on living expenses. I now live in rental accommodation and receive taxpayer funded social welfare payments. Instead of remaining a nett contributor to the Australian economy I have become an enduring and significant burden.

In effect, the hapless Australian taxpayer has conscripted me as the vessel through which it endlessly subsidises the managerial incompetence and ethical depravity of my former employer. The taxpayer loses, my community loses and I lose:

There are thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of individuals whose experience typically follows mine. That is not to say that all will succumb to the abject despair which dragged me from an ordinary but rewarding life. In fact the majority of bullying victims will endure their lot silently, quietly fleeing their workplace persecutor or tolerating their wretched lot in abject misery if they are unable to relocate to a new position, but make no mistake that the costs to productivity, health and public budgets continue to amass silently and dangerously.

While short-term policy makers and regulators continue to bow at the altar of economic growth, few take the time to consider the quality of that growth nor the intrinsic quality of the gross domestic product. If, as the data indicates, our GDP is becoming increasingly reflective of fixing problems rather than creating things; if we are spending our wealth on ameliorating dysfunction instead of eliminating it, then ultimately the joke is on us.

The deep seated problem of bullying will not be remedied by the emerging industry of bullying experts dealing with the problem in an entirely ex post facto environment. Tough decisions need to be made and they are decisions that will test the most convenient and lucrative relationships between political parties and some of their greatest corporate donors.

People who commit, condone or allow bullying to be perpetrated should be liable to criminal indictment and heavy penalties including incarceration.

For these reasons, the central contention of my submission is that the act of individual or institutional bullying should be established as an

authentic criminal offence. Bullying costs lives and costs big money, and creates a burdensome legacy that endures for generations.

Any society that tolerates bullying as a central tenet of their economic success is effectively admitting it is not smart enough to do anything better.

And so it is with bullying. We tut-tut sadly when a school child takes her life as a result of bullying, but we make no connection between her lifeless body and that of a murder victim found strangled and stabbed in a laneway. We make no connection between the utterly hopeless form of a suicide victim making the final escape from bullying and the crushed and mangled body of a construction worker trapped and inert beneath twenty tonnes of concrete.

As a community we fail to grapple with the reality of bullying, possibly because we wonder if every dangerous bully is simply each of us on a bad day. In fact, I don't believe this to be the case. I think institutionalised bullying is reaching such endemic proportions that the inherent injustice of it all can no longer be silenced or ignored. It is a travesty that is screaming for attention; it is one that can only be answered by a political determination that explicitly accepts that every life is valuable and that each one is as valuable as the next.

Whilst this submission bears my name as author, I also speak for the young children whom it is our duty to protect and nurture to adulthood; for the teenage girls and young men, still at school or just entering the workplace, whose future potential may never be realised; for the adult men and women, like myself, whose lives have been shattered by circumstances beyond their control, but mostly, I speak for the many whose voices have now been permanently silenced by their own hand, for they embraced the act of suicide as a form of enduring pain relief from the unbearable anguish of being bullied.

May someone please hear their voices through this submission, and stand up to be counted?

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