

I was a young woman working as a senior officer in a State Government Department. Over a number of years I became the bullying target of a much older woman who was obsessed with power and promotion. Her tactics were covert and manipulative and it took me some time to work out what was going on. We both reported to the same manager who was unable to manage this woman and who refused to acknowledge her destructive behaviours. His primary interest was in maintaining a relatively easy path to retirement and it was clear that he didn't have the skills or inclination to address the situation. The situation progressed to the point where it had a severe impact on my health and wellbeing. My increased insistence to my manager that he deal with the situation only lead to further resistance on his part and the commencement of white-anting by him. The efforts of me and my team were misrepresented to the senior leadership team and he constantly shifted goal posts to make achieving anything impossible. I had no support whatsoever within the department and my manager once removed, the senior officer of the department appeared to have little interest in managing people situations.

I took the decision to take the situation to a more formal level and followed the process provided by the public sector for such situations. I lodged a formal grievance and a notification under that State's OSH laws. My reward for this was my manager's decision to conduct a review of me and my team. He framed it in terms of some major reforms being conducted on the department at the time but we all knew that this was an excuse on his part to split our team and bury a problem he didn't want to deal with. He was eager to get me out of his work area and at the same time to extract as much budget and resources as possible to retain in his area. Having spent months white-anting and misrepresenting our work to the senior leadership team he then insisted that the reviewer *he* had hired to review my team interview these people about the efficacy of my team. Having control of the interview process, he also made sure that two female officers who operated within the leadership team were not interviewed. My team and I knew from the beginning what the outcome of the process would be. This view was confirmed a few months later when I was moved elsewhere in the department and the team was split. Most members subsequently left the employ of the department.

Concurrent with this process a bullying investigation commenced. It was also obvious that the department's senior officer did not believe my claims and that he found the situation irritating and inconvenient. This only added to my sense of abandonment and futility. In addition to having to manage a team of people who knew they were being disbanded I was completely alone. For almost three years I suffered from chronic insomnia, a range of physical symptoms such as chest pain and extreme anxiety and in the last few months at the department was diagnosed with severe depression. Prior to this situation I had no history of any such disorders and was surprised at how severe the impact was. Despite the department being made aware of this I was expected to perform at a high level. There was no concession at all for what I was going through, in fact it was quite the opposite. I was punished and berated by my manager for the most minor things and this was used against me in both the review and the formal bullying process,

The department's senior officer took no action whatsoever in relation to my formal notification under the OSH legislation. He assigned the management of the bullying case to an internal officer who also reported to my manager. Eventually the matter was referred to an external investigator. While the external investigator appeared impartial and reasonable, the final report (under the State's Public Sector Standards) was always to be used at the discretion of the department's senior

officer. That is, it was up to him to make a final decision. It was interesting that the investigator asked for medical evidence of the impact of the bullying which I was able to provide yet the senior officer of the department did not acknowledge or refer to this in his letter to me at the end of the process.

While the bullying investigation was in process the State Government launched a voluntary severance offer. My health had suffered so much at this stage that I was not in a position to either continue working without a substantial break or look for other work. This seemed like the only viable option and one which I applied for (and unsurprisingly received). I did not opt for workers compensation as I knew that a claim would count against me for the rest of my career. While I “voluntarily” accepted severance I did not see that I had any other option and in many ways I see my situation as “passive” dismissal.

One week after I left the department, I received from the department’s senior officer a pro-forma letter (sent by someone reporting to the person I had alleged had bullied me) saying that there had been no finding of bullying. There was no acknowledgement of any of the health impacts of the situation on me.

It became apparent that the senior officer of the department was only interested in protecting himself and the state from liability and this exposes a fundamental flaw. It has never been in the interests of the department or indeed the public sector to find in the affirmative in bullying cases as the legal liability is too great. Bullying cases must be managed by an independent authority.

The process was littered with conflicts of interest throughout (e.g. the department investigating itself, even the external investigator was chosen and paid for by the department). Legislation must be enacted to protect claimants. For example, my manager’s decision to conduct a review and change my responsibilities. Once a claim is made, a department or agency must not be able to amend a claimant’s work position under fictitious claims of “operational need”. An independent authority must perform an investigation first while everything else is placed on hold. There are too many stories of claimants being punished for making claims – this usually involves a loss of responsibility and being move elsewhere or being passively (or actively) dismissed.

Essentially all avenues available to people being bullied are futile. Within the public sector there are numerous conflicts of interest inherent in the process. The union was impotent as was the HR department due to so many conflicting relationships. The only real option available to targets of bullying is to leave and to do so quickly before too much damage is done. Unless you have a bruise on your face and irrefutable evidence you will struggle to prove it.

The legacy of my time in this department is not just the complete loss of professional standing , it is continuing nightmares and anxiety and a loss of self-esteem. You cannot just “snap out of it” as I once thought and no amount of resilience makes this easy. It is hugely traumatic and life changing.

I have since heard that the person I alleged bullied me has gone on to do the same to someone else. Thankfully this person had the sense to leave. And so the cycle continues.....