

Perfect Policies, Putrid Practices

Workplace bullying in the public sector.

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ABSTRACT:

An examination of workplace bullying within the public sector and the development of a new social contract with public administrators as a preventative measure.

***Facts do not
cease to exist
because they are
ignored.***

Aldous Huxley

One could be forgiven for assuming that public administrators go to a work environment each day that is safe and secure. Recent advances in the development and implementation of Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare policy and practices as governed and supported by government legislation would seem to support this assumption. Indeed, public sector workers have made workplace safety improvements to a number of operational areas and addressed some complex occupational health issues. Public administrators have noted this improvement and have congratulated and awarded prizes to those who have made significant contributions to the improved safety of work practices and workplaces.

However at least one senior public servant, upon noting the hoopla of self-recommendation, suggested that the awarding of such accolades should never lead one to assume. Clearly, she knew what she was talking about as she went on to describe the work place environment of a major OHS&W award winner. The story she told was all too familiar and portrayed a pattern of workplace violence and

inappropriate behaviours within a toxic environment. It is easy to assume that achievements in workplace safety indicate a safe work environment but the assumption is not necessarily accurate. Workplace violence in the form of bullying behaviour exists within the public sector. It can be masked to such an extent that toxic organisations can still be award winners. The hazard is often obscured from public scrutiny through fear as well as the inadequacy of current systems to protect employees from retribution and misuse of protocols designed to limit inappropriate behaviours. Instead, the silence begets cynicism. Many public sector employees would be familiar with the following scenario:

First she screamed at me, then stood so close to me that I was sure that she was going to hit me.

- *Y bullies X in some way.*
- *X is shocked and confused. X tries to improve his/her performance to meet Y's expectations.*
- *Y's bullying behaviour escalates, it intensifies and Y's control over the situation increases exponentially.*
- *X's distress escalates and X's control over the situation diminishes.*
- *X becomes the bully's victim and Y is the perpetrator.*
- *It takes some time for the victim to become fully aware of exactly what is occurring.*
- *The victim approaches other staff to seek clarification of the behaviour and finds that formerly supportive colleagues:*
 - a) *Ignore the behaviour and do not acknowledge the repetition or victimisation.*

I can't believe that I'm the only one that thinks her behaviour is not OK. No one seems to think that screaming, abusing and belittling staff members is unusual around here. What kind of work place is this?

b) Agree that the behaviour is occurring but can't / won't act in support of the victim.

c) Condone the bully's behaviour because they think that there may be some legitimate reason for its occurrence.

- The victim seeks to speak with the perpetrator about the behaviour.
- The perpetrator makes it a 'management' issue and then exerts some 'formal' control over the situation – without the requirements of natural justice being upheld.
- The victim confides in the perpetrator that s/he is stressed/ill/has a major life issue, thinking that this will elicit compassion and understanding.
- The perpetrator spends more and more time trying to manage/control the situation, often drawing in other workers to witness the victim's perceived inability to do the job or using them to exert more control or to answer the questions of superiors.
- The perpetrator advises / waits for the victim to take leave (sick leave, long service or annual leave).
- The victim may consult with a General Practitioner in relation to stress and may consider lodging a workers' compensation claim.
- The victim is replaced in the position by an 'acting' officer.
- The victim seeks advice from a Union.
- The perpetrator seeks protection from Management – usually by bringing up 'a major issue' (which may or may not be related to the victim but reflects on them).

He says I'm not coping. The only reason I can't meet the deadlines is because he keeps changing his mind about what he wants. Then I have to rewrite everything that I've already completed. He also has changed the time frame within which I have to write this report. The time frame is just too small. He seems to forget that I have to write this report as well as do all my other work.

I've never been so sick in all my life. I've been hospitalised for a week! The doctor says that it's stress induced. I've just about killed myself trying to appease him and to meet his totally unreasonable demands. I must be mad, I've got a family to consider! No job is worth this!

- *The perpetrator won't allow the victim to return to their job until they have been cleared as fit to work by a specialist medical officer – not the GP. This generates a feeling of fear and disempowerment in the victim as s/he is given the names of 'approved' specialists. The fear that s/he is going mad seems to take on a 'real' dimension.*
- *The Specialist certifies that the victim is well enough to return to work, but not in the area under the control of the perpetrator.*
- *Alternatively, the perpetrator may use the period of absence by the 'on leave/sick' employee to 'trial' working without the position, or to restructure business activities. The result of this strategy is that the victim becomes 'surplus to requirement' and is not able to return to their job.*
- *The removal of the victim from the workplace is 'done for his/her or the organisational good' and the behaviour of the perpetrator is justified by the outcome for the individual and the agency.*
- *Work colleagues are fearful of and 'discouraged' (sometimes banned) from contacting the victim – "they're too upset, unwell or need to rest".*
- *Colleagues have seen the victim upset or crying at work, so accept and are sometimes relieved to accept this directive or advice as it 'fixes' their sense of helplessness. . It's known that the victim has been sent by the organisation to see a Psychiatrist - so there's some question about their sanity. Issues to do with an individual's mental health are fear provoking or misunderstood and a common response is to limit contact with victims who have*

become psychologically unwell as a result of workplace bullying behaviours.

***I've lost my job!
She set it up so
that I couldn't
come back.
Somehow, I
always knew that
it would come to
this!***

- *Meetings with Management are contrived and the victim's issues are minimised by the perpetrator's capacity to previously engage support for their actions. The victim's ill health, mental status, work performance and capacity to produce or 'be part of the team' have all been raised as 'justifiable' concerns about their ability to return to the workplace.*
- *The victim is excluded from decision making about his/her capacity, his/her work performance, strategies to achieve wellness and his/her future and continuing work role.*
- *The victim now feels isolated, ill, disempowered, doubted, and pressured to undertake work options that are below his/her capacity and abandoned.*

***Nobody talks to
me any more.
He's threatened
them and scared
them into silence.
I feel so lonely
right now. When I
ring them I hear
the fear and
tightness in their
voices.***

The above scenario, or variations of it, is repeated in public sector workplaces far too regularly for it to be a mere statistical 'glitch' or unfortunate 'set of circumstances'. A recent study undertaken by the South Australian Working Women's Centre notes that a survey of 1007 workers conducted in 1996 in the UK for the Institute of Personnel and Development Management found that one in eight workers had been bullied in the previous five years¹. Clearly, it is not sufficient for public administrators to describe such insidious behaviour as a mere personality clash or inability of an employee to work under appropriate direction. It should always be of concern to a

¹ Gates, Elizabeth *In Line of Fire*, Occupational Health and Safety, (1997) June, pg 30 - 37

public administrator if they observe and/or experience behaviour in the workplace which includes:

- Verbal abuse, shouting, intimidation and sarcasm.
- Constant criticism or denigration of people in front of others or in private.
- Damaging the property of the recipient (victim) and / or the employer.
- Inducing exhaustion through work overload and the setting of unrealistic deadlines.
- Blocking an applicant's promotion prospects without justification.
- Isolating and excluding workers.
- Initiation or 'bastardisation' rituals.
- Deliberate insults including the use of offensive pictures and images.
- Stalking, loitering or repeated following.
- Setting out to make competent employees appear incompetent or make their lives miserable, in the hope of getting them dismissed or forcing their resignation.
- The threat of assault or actual physical assault².

Today, in front of all the other Managers, he told me that I was so stupid that I couldn't manage a root in a brothel. Then, at lunchtime he bought me a present.

Public administrators need a response to combat this behaviour and limit the potential for such behaviour to cause damage to individuals who have a right to be safe within their workplace and to undertake their work tasks without fear. Bullying undermines the public sector

² Mayhew, Claire *Preventing Violence Within Organisations: A Practical Handbook* (2000) pg 6-7

and the role that public administrators have within the sector. Good public administrators often leave.

Workplace violence in the form of bullying behaviour has been variously described as:

... the deliberate repeated, hurtful verbal mistreatment of a person (the target) by a cruel perpetrator (the bully).

(Campaign Against Workplace Violence: (1997) p 3)

I really don't know what's going on for me – I just know that this behaviour is wrong and that I don't deserve to be dealt with in this way.

... physical, mental, emotional and intellectual coercion, which violates the personhood of anyone who falls victim to it. It is alive in our workplaces not just as rape, murder and assault.

Workplace violation of personhood is an epidemic.

(Giacalone: (1997), p 51)

... persistent ill treatment of an individual at work by one or more other persons. To be recognised as bullying the ill treatment must be continuous and directed against a particular person. Workplace bullying has many features in common with school bullying. *(Bullies Not Wanted (1999) p 3)*

... behaviours, acts or situations such as sarcasm, threats verbal abuse, punitive behaviour, 'ganging-up' and isolation which has the effect of intimidating, humiliating or psychologically terrorising individual workers or groups of workers. *(Workplace Bullying – Finding Some Answers (1999) p 14)*

Workplace bullying is coercive, persecuting, often covert and subtle, making it difficult to identify and address. It can be bewildering in the extreme because the human psyche tries to understand and reason the behaviour. The incidents are often petty and vindictive having the effect of intimidating or terrorising their victims, sapping their self-confidence and even making them fearful of entering the workplace (*Workplace Bullying – Finding Some Answers (1999) p 14*).

By definition, workplace bullying is a form of workplace violence that has both an individual and systemic effect. Psychological assaults are as barbarous as physical acts of violence and can:

In one of her “little chats” I trusted my boss with some personal information about the death of my son. She behaved very oddly towards me from that time on. I think now that’s when she decided I had to go. I found out later that her son had died too but she never told me that.

- Stifle intelligent and appropriate analysis of issues and potential areas for development within public administration.
- Escalate significantly the potential for public administrators to respond inappropriately to issues of significance.
- Discourage innovation and creative ideas.
- Inhibit decision-making and fail to take advantage of the collective intelligence of the public sector.
- Remove bright, progressive thinkers and experienced workers from the field of public administration.
- Injure workers and involve for some, periods of hospitalisation and/or treatment and recuperation.
- Cost large amounts each year in workers’ compensation claims, sick leave, early retirement, work place separations and unexplained absences.

Workplace violence in the form of bullying behaviour is a more complex concept than statistics indicate. Current statistics do not reflect the number of people who have chosen to leave a job/workplace because:

- a) it was unsafe,
- b) they were too exhausted/stressed to remain,
- c) they became ill as a result of stress,
- d) they were too embarrassed to say they were being bullied,
- e) the perpetrator had inappropriately used the environment of downsizing, reorienting and restructure to construct their victim's removal.

At work all my colleagues seem to worry about is who is getting more than them. A lot of stuff gets ripped off as they battle for resources. It used to be good when we all worked together.

The South Australian Employee Ombudsman noted in his 1998-99 Annual Report that the number of complaints alleging poor management practices in the State Public Service show no signs of decreasing despite repeated attempts to have these problems addressed by the government. Additionally, the Employee Ombudsman noted that the incidence of complaints of workplace bullying also continues to increase. This phenomenon may be the result of a greater awareness of workplace bullying; however, this explanation does not adequately deal with the potential for environmental influences to facilitate an increase in this type of behaviour.

The South Australian Working Women's Centre research reported in *Workplace Bullying – Finding Some Answers, 1999* provides some very startling evidence. Of the 342 self reported victims of bullying

who were respondents to a questionnaire, 85.5% reported that they were bullied by a person in a position of authority, such as a manager, employer or supervisor.

Had a really nice new desk delivered today. Seems my desk and other furniture didn't comply with OHS&W standards. Really nice furniture. Never had such a nice office. Then I got hauled into the boss's office to explain why my face indicated that I hadn't agreed with her. She then demanded that I prove that I was loyal to her! Wonder when the desk will be removed?

Perpetrators of bullying behaviour are invariably driven by an insatiable need to control others³. The Bullies Down Under website states that bullies usually have low levels of skill and have the ability, through using their 'connections' (nepotism/cronyism) in organisations, to move into positions of power⁴.

In the USA a national study of workplace violence noted that 42% of respondents were victims of downsizing, 28% had seen management cutbacks, and 20% feared being fired⁵.

Bullying is not a new phenomenon. Whilst the behaviour has generally been associated with incidents that occur in the schoolyard, workplace bullying has been named and researched particularly over the past 10 years or so. In fact the parallels between schoolyard bullying and workplace violence are eerily similar, the latter however, without the prospect of a parent, teacher or significant other coming to the rescue. When an adult is bullied there is embarrassment, low levels of understanding, few support systems and even fewer organisational processes upon which to rely for safety and relief.

Whereas bullying has previously been equated with discrete acts of physical violence the concept of psychological violence has only

³ Campaign Against Workplace Violence *Workplace Bullying Defined* (1997) <http://www.bullybusters.org>

⁴ Crout-Habel, Catherine A *National Disgrace* (1999) <http://www.caitrin.mtx.net>

***My supervisor
one minute says
we all have to be
accountable.
That's cool but
the next minute
she makes a
really ad hoc
decision. If she's
questioned she
makes a joke
about how she's
the manager or
says she's too
busy to worry
about trivia.***

recently been recognised as a legitimate phenomenon. Discrete acts of physical violence have occurred where employees have entered their workplace and seriously injured and in some cases killed their work colleagues. Whilst such acts of violence are appalling, just as tragic are the insidious acts of covert personal violence that occur when one person threatens, manipulates, harasses or otherwise causes psychological or emotional damage to another. Indeed, there has been evidence of psychological violence preceding actual incidences of physical violence in the workplace and current research has posed the question that workplace bullying may in fact be the precipitator of physical violence⁶.

Australian public administration undertakes a wide variety of complex roles and functions and in doing so, it is legislatively required to provide a safe environment in which its employees undertake their duties.

All Australian States and Territories have legislation that supports the development and maintenance of safe and healthy work environments. Both employers and employees have responsibility to ensure that safe behaviours and environments are maintained⁷.

Therefore, appropriate management of occupational health, safety and welfare requires a level of understanding and commitment that extends beyond the level of workplace cleanliness, the adequacy of

⁵ Giacalone, RA **Antisocial Behaviour in Organisations** (1997) CA pg 51

⁶ Bruce, Willa *Breaking the Habit of Violence* (1999), Vol 4, Issue 3 <http://www.pamij.com>

buildings and ergonomic qualities of furniture. Research into bullying and its effects has consistently indicated that toxic work environments are affecting the health and well being of workers. Indeed, it has been suggested that the results of workplace bullying are significant in terms of personal, organisational and financial costs. Kellahan (1999) in her article 'Beating the Bullies' noted that apart from the obvious physical and emotional stress it inflicts on targets, bullying costs millions of dollars every year due to high staff turnover, increased 'sick' days, loss of productivity and workers' compensation claims. An annual cost to the nation has been estimated at \$4 billion⁸, not taking into account the hidden costs of family counselling, maintenance, disability pensions.

He actually hit me the other day. Of course he said he was sorry and has apologised. I'm just too frightened to tell anyone just in case I lose my job.

In recent years the public sector has been required to adapt and modify in order to embrace the changing environments within which it operates. These challenges will continue, as new responses are developed to accommodate a public administration, which has to assimilate and respond to a rapidly changing environment. Indeed this may be one reason for the poor performance of management as described by the SA Employee Ombudsman. Managers stretched beyond their level of competence, skills and learning are trying to maintain their 'old' level of control in a 'new' operating environment. The Employee Ombudsman noted that this environment of change in Australia gives rise to and encourages the bullying behaviour that is threatening the sector. He noted that "these conditions have been

⁷ Office of the Employee Ombudsman **Bullies Not Wanted – Recognising and eliminating Bullying in the Workplace** (1999), pg 20

created by the current economic and industrial fashion for economic rationalism, competition, downsizing, outsourcing, individual contracts, longer hours and no job security”⁹. The South Australian Employees Bullied Out of Work (SAEBOW) internet site suggests that there is a link between the labour market shrinkage, increased unemployment and workplace bullying. SAEBOW state that “fearful people, with low self esteem and a lack of confidence in their own skills and abilities are fighting for the ‘high ground’ in workplaces throughout the country. They often resort to psychological terrorism against colleagues in order to preserve their jobs.”

In summary then

- There is a phenomenon called workplace bullying.
- Bullying is an escalating global phenomenon.
- Bullying and intimidation cannot happen unless there is systemic / climatic or environmental support. This support can be implicit, explicit or by omission.
- Bullies are usually controlling persons who lack confidence, have low self-esteem and low levels of skill and knowledge.
- Bullies gain positions of power through coercion and manipulation of networks and friends/contacts.
- Bullies misuse systems to maintain and strengthen their control over their victims.
- People who are competent and productive can become victims.
- Bullies injure victims.

I can be out shopping and think I see my old boss. 3 years later and it still affects me. I think I'm OK and then it happens again.

⁸ Crout-Habel, Catherine A *National Disgrace* (1999) <http://www.caitrin.mtx.net>

I know there are “spies” here who do others in. Some e-mails came to me by mistake which show that the manager encourages this – in fact it’s how she keeps control.

Given the above information, it would be logical to assume that public administrators would have developed appropriate remedial action and established a system of ongoing vigilance. Something akin to the global response to the Melissa Virus would seem to be in order. Indeed, on fiduciary grounds alone immediate action to eliminate bullying behaviour would indeed be appropriate – in fact required.

The assumption that appropriate action has been undertaken is not substantiated in practice.

The public sector has not yet formulated a cogent and adequate response to this threat. Instead, many public administrators have tried to deal with this insidious hazard through fragmented, inadequate and potentially dangerous / injurious mechanisms. Indeed, in some parts of the public sector, so entrenched in organisational culture is bullying, that it is ignored or worse condoned implicitly or explicitly.

I was so pleased to get a job in public policy. Maybe I was naive but I really thought I had a contribution to make. I soon felt like I knew nothing as one by one every idea I had was picked to pieces or blocked. I was often told “That’s not how we do things - this is the public service”.

Julian Barling (1998) cited in the paper entitled *Bullying in the Workplace is a Violence Warning Sign*¹⁰ indicates that “aggression in the workplace is most likely when two factors are present: psychologically unhealthy people and psychologically unhealthy organisations”.

Public administrators are already being called on to appropriately respond to the challenges of the future, such as:

⁹ Office of the Employee Ombudsman **Annual Report, 1998-1999** (1999), pg 12.

¹⁰ Chauhan, DS *Preventing Violence in the Workplace: Threat Assessment and Prevention Strategies* (1999), Vol 4, Issue 3 <http://www.pamij.com>

- a) Rapid development of new knowledge and technological innovations
- b) Changing institutional patterns as a result of the emergence of post-industrial economies and structures of governance based on information, knowledge and services
- c) Changing constituent patterns as a result of access to and development of information 'super highways' and e-government.
- d) Increasing integration and globalisation
- e) Demographic and socio-cultural shifts requiring different responses to government. More constituent / community engagement through e-democracy.
- f) An erosion of confidence in traditionally structured institutions such as educational, religious and governmental institutions¹¹.

I wasn't hopeful that mediation would work. After the first 15 minutes or so I really started to think that this might just work. The Mediator was really good and she assisted me to get my supervisor to appreciate what I'd been through, accept responsibility and to say he was sorry!

The particular challenge for public administrators in the future will be the appropriateness of response within an environment where public administration will be characterised by less government and less control. Less government will be manifested via attrition in personnel and reduction in revenues. Increased growth and reliance on non-profit and/or specialised organisation, which will wrestle away decisional power from state and local governments, will evidence less control. (Hy & Veasey, 1999: 1).

The public administrator of the future will need to accommodate the requirement for change and work within a changed environment. The

¹¹ Denhardt, Robert *The Future of Public Administration: Challenges to Democracy, Citizenship and Ethics* (1999), Vol 4, Issue 3 <http://www.pamij.com>

key to breaking the habit of violence is a transformation of fear and anger so that they may mobilise change without harming others in the process¹² (Schmidt: 1995, p74).

The more contemporary and future public administrator will be the one who a) helps the organisation to understand its needs and potential, b) integrates and articulates the organisation's vision and c) acts as a trigger or stimulus for group action¹³.

Violence prevention and intervention strategies that include risk avoidance / reduction, coping and risk management strategies are real options for administrators. To an extent they collectively provide one possible response to the issue of workplace bullying.

It is time to consider a new social contract with public administrators.

Organisations that seriously want to address the issue of workplace bullying will develop management plans that comprise the following components:

- Organisational commitment
- Formulation and adoption of a workplace violence policy statement
- Administrative procedures
- Recruitment and selection process
- Safety and security measures

My boss wants us to believe he knows all the rules and is in control. I've seen him trying to resolve a problem by poking the policy at people like a gun. He won't look at anyone or listen to what they say. He just wants things fixed his way.

ise Transforming Abuse: Non violent Resistance and Recovery (1995), New Society
elphia pg 74

The mediation was a disaster. The boss just sat there, glared at me and told me I was imagining it all. The Mediator really tried hard but the boss just wasn't going to meet us half way.

That's it!

I can't keep this up any longer. My family is suffering now and I'm just so tired of the constant harassment!

I'm leaving, I'll put my resignation in tomorrow.

- Employee training
- Dispute resolution procedures
- Organisational recovery and victim support management

However, violence prevention, intervention strategies and management plans alone are not sufficient and do not replace the need for a compassionate and humane response. Public administrators must be able to distinguish between degenerative (unhealthy / toxic) and regenerative (healthy) work environments. Four key dimensions provide the necessary indicators for this differentiation: openness, trust, risk-to-experiment, and owning – using high and low measurements¹⁴. The authors of this paper add the dimensions of respect and practice in the spirit of fundamental 'good behaviour'.

These six key dimensions provide the cornerstone for the development of an appropriate strategic response to workplace bullying. The dimensions inform a social contract between employer and employee with the organisation within which they work.

The contract provides for the development of explicit values, goals, and a mission-oriented structure; it provides a picture of the entire system and where in that system the employee fits. Within this framework specific measurable criteria, as well as expected measures of success, can be negotiated with the employee.

¹³ Denhardt, Robert *The Future of Public Administration: Challenges to Democracy, Citizenship and Ethics* (1999), Vol 4, Issue 3 <http://www.pamij.com>

¹⁴ Golembiewski, R.T. ***Approaches to Planned Change: Orienting Perspectives and Micro-level Interventions***, (1993) New Brunswick, CT

It takes a really brave manager to admit they're wrong and she has! We couldn't have made it this far without the Mediator. It's not perfect but it's one huge improvement!

The contract will be based upon the concepts of humanism, ethical behaviour, and the premise that those participants in leadership positions understand 'right' and 'wrong' and act appropriately.

This social contract will support public servants to be accountable, empowered and to realise their full capacities. They will work in an environment free of toxins, the worst of which is fear¹⁵.

This paper was the runner up in the annual IPPA George Murray Award in 2002.

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¹⁵ Kilpatrick, Ann Osborne *A New Social Contract for the New Millennium* (1999), Vol 4, Issue 3 <http://www.pamij.com>

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