

Perceptions of Injustice: The Consequences of Complaining of Workplace Bullying.



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Introduction

So What is Bullying?

The post modern construction of workplace bullying provides an approach that recognises a diversity of behaviours that are attributed to the concept of bullying at work. While a number of these may not fit recognised definitions of workplace bullying, they may still result in a workers compensation claim being lodged for psychological injury following what *complainants* describe as bullying.

Questions Explored

5. What behaviours are complainants of workplace bullying describing?
6. What happens when complainants utilise their workplace bullying and harassment policy and grievance processes?
7. How do perceptions of organisation justice influence a decision to lodge a workers compensation claim?
8. Why did complainants decide to make a workers compensation claim?

Method

- É Semi structured interviews were carried out with 10 males and 14 female participants (average age 54 years).
- É All participants self identified as being bullied at work over the previous year.
- É Interviews were transcribed and a thematic analysis of interview transcripts was carried out.
- É 12 participants were working, 10 were receiving workers compensation as a result of psychological injury caused by workplace bullying.
- É 14 participants worked for the public service, 8 worked for non-government or private organisations, and one worked in the tertiary sector.

Results

What is Bullying: The Complainants perspective

- Participants named a number of behaviours as bullying, including one off conflicts, sexual harassment, discrimination, disagreements over performance, management decisions, and organisational restructuring resulting in changes of role.
- É The way the organisation managed the complaint was also viewed as bullying in some cases, and the bullying then moved from the individual to an organisational level.
 - É About 1/3rd of participants reported repeated, systemic negative behaviours directed towards them (behaviour that met the legal definition of bullying).
 - É There were a small number of querulous complainants.

Main Themes revealed:

Conflict Framed as Bullying

The conflict was framed as bullying by all participants. Those organisations that had bullying and harassment policies encouraged participants to use the policy and procedures to address bullying. This contributed to the participant framing the conflict as bullying.

Responsibility to Stop the Bullying

All participants viewed the responsibility to stop the bullying as being with the organisation, their manager, or HR Department, (or external agency). They did not acknowledge that their own behaviour may have contributed to the conflict, and did not take any responsibility for the bullying or maintenance of the conflict.

Perceptions of injustice

Most participants reported that a lack of justice in the complaint handling process contributed to increased psychological distress.

"It is very unfair. I feel that it is very unfair. I just want justice because the only reason my lawyer says if you want to get over it, you want to close the gap first, this is the only way, finish it off. Everybody knew, it is not the money issue; it is the fact that I want justice..."

Workers compensation (as a means of external validation)

Participants spoke to a number of professionals and agencies in order to validate their side of the story. A number of participants applied for workers compensation because they saw it as the only way that their complaint would be believed or investigated.

"I didn't go on straight away. It happened about ten days after I had spoken to her, and spoken to my manager. Nothing was happening and so the only thing I could make them take notice about what was going on was to go onto WorkCover. At least then it would be investigated and stop. I was really stressed."

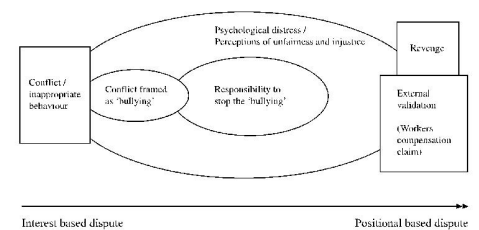
Revenge

Some participants were so angry with the organisation because of the way their complaint was (mis)managed, that they carried out revenge behaviours. These ranged from petty misconduct to threats of violence

"I had become so angry with them and depressed and just didn't care about any consequences and I had got to the point, where if it hadn't been for my partner, I firmly believe that I would be in jail today. Because I was going to go to the head office, pick up the human resources manager and throw him off the balcony of the building, which is three stories high. That is how bad it had got".

Final Thematic Map

Interlocking themes developed from participants' interviews



Discussion

When the conflict was framed as bullying, the organisation was seen as being responsible for stopping it, especially if they had a bullying and harassment policy in place. The lack of perceived justice in the way the organisation managed the complaint contributed to increased distress and a workers compensation claim being lodged. When this happened the organisation defended its vicarious liability against the bullying allegations. This contributed to the complaint becoming an adversarial positional based dispute, rather than the underlying initial behaviours being addressed.

Questions to ponder

- É Is it best practice to have a bullying and harassment policy without incorporating a conflict management component to it?
- É Does the lack of a conflict management policy contribute to staff framing all conflicts as bullying?
- É Should training be directed at conflict management (with an additional bullying component) rather than focusing on bullying in the workplace?
- É Are perceptions of injustice in dealing with complaints a significant reason why compensable injuries develop?
- É Could targeted early intervention in workplace conflicts prevent the development of psychological injuries?

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