Bullying and poor workplace cultures

These demonstrate that while workplace bullying can come in many different forms, there are a number of common approaches that have been successfully employed to help turn the tide on bullying.

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Introduction

Workplace bullying affects the health and wellbeing of staff and the productivity of organisations. It is hard – but not impossible – to tackle.

About 20 per cent of employees perceive bullying in their workplace, according to results from an annual survey of Victoria's public sector workers, the People Matter Survey. This rate has remained largely unchanged for more than 10 years.

The news on tackling bullying is not all bad. Some public sector organisations have managed to buck the trend and reduced perceptions of bullying in their organisations. The Victorian Public Sector Commission (VPSC) has obtained insights from five Victorian public sector organisations which have successfully reduced bullying rates over the last two to five years. These organisations represent a range of sectors, sizes and locations. Interviews and workshops were held with CEOs, human resource directors and staff in these organisations to better understand:

- the reasons for high rates of employee perceptions of bullying in the past; and
- the actions that led to a reduction in workplace bullying.

This report provides details on the journey taken by these organisations.

One thing is clear from these case studies: the journey has not been easy. It is also not over. A number of CEOs have acknowledged there is still work to be done to further improve workplace cultures. Others are aware of the possibility of bullying behaviours reappearing in their organisation and acknowledge this will need constant monitoring.

The case study organisations have had varied experiences of bullying which include:

- bullying from a single individual, which had a wide impact across the organisation
- bullying by senior leaders in the organisation
- bullying behaviours occurring right across the organisation due to poor workplace cultures, or poor change management processes.

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What is common across all these organisations is that their approaches haven't solely been focused on tackling the specific issue of bullying. Leaders understand that bullying behaviours tend to stem from poor workplace cultures and that any strategy to reduce bullying has to be integrated with strategies to improve culture more broadly.

Key themes emerging from the case study organisations include the importance of:

- strong leaders who set the tone of what is acceptable in the organisation
- clear grievance processes
- training for staff to be aware of bullying and to self-resolve issues where appropriate
- encouraging respectful and positive workplace behaviours throughout the organisation
- investing in leaders to effectively manage and build harmonious teams
- clear and transparent communication, particularly during change
- building a positive organisational culture

With close monitoring of bullying behaviours and a commitment to building better organisational cultures, the chances of these organisations mitigating or preventing bullying altogether is better than ever.

These stories may help your organisation turn the tide on bullying too.

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Organisation A – Be willing to 'send a strong message' to your organisation

'Organisation A', a Melbourne based organisation with fewer than 100 staff, had its bullying levels peak in 2014. One in five staff reported they had experienced bullying.

By 2016, this figure had plummeted from 20 per cent to 7 per cent.

This case study tells the story of how not dealing with bullying early can lead to severe consequences for an organisation. However it also tells us how taking strong action against bullying is a critical start to mending poor workplace cultures. It demonstrates the importance of a workplace that is built on values such as mutual respect, trust and collaboration. It is based on interviews with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Human Resources (HR) director and other staff.

The problem

Issues of bullying in the organisation came to a head in late 2013 within weeks of the current HR director joining the organisation. Bullying behaviours had been surfacing in the organisation for some time. While some action had been taken on complaints, they were not handled systematically The organisation dealt with single incidents rather than seeing a pattern of behaviour.

The organisation had just finished a significant restructure and the previous HR director had been appointed to lead this change. The CEO said the restructure process was complex and managing individual bullying issues was particularly difficult at the time. The current HR director was appointed once the restructure was complete to help the organisation to focus more on its people.

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This case study focuses on one major case of bullying, where a manager was both aggressive and intimidating to staff. Their behaviour worsened the longer it was not addressed. Staff reported that the perpetrator targeted women and used offensive language. As the bullying started to escalate, further reports of serious misconduct emerged.

The bullying behaviour increased and tensions started to rise. Some staff stopped coming to team meetings if the perpetrator was going to be present. Staff would also avoid discussing work with the perpetrator and would instead go straight to the perpetrator's team members. The HR director said that the behaviour from the perpetrator led to many staff losing confidence in their ability to do their jobs.

The catalyst

As complaints started coming to the new HR director, the CEO and HR director started a formal investigation, which substantiated a number of allegations. The perpetrator was then dismissed.

This started a year-long arbitration process for the organisation. The perpetrator lodged an application for documents under the Freedom of Information Act 1982 to obtain information to use as part of a planned unfair dismissal submission to the Fair Work Commission. The organisation obtained legal advice and collected statements from staff who had experienced bullying as it prepared its response.

The organisation eventually settled with the perpetrator before the case was put forward to the Commission but not before the organisation, and particularly the HR director, had invested substantial time and work in preparing to defend against any unfair dismissal action.

Response and reflections

1. Be ready and willing to take strong action when needed

The CEO does not regret embarking on the challenging process of investigating and dismissing the perpetrator. She wanted to send a strong message that certain

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behaviours would not be tolerated, regardless of any individual's senior status.

While the CEO and HR director could not directly inform staff of what was happening, staff suspected the organisation had taken firm action, given the perpetrator was removed. The HR director said: 'Staff were coming into my office and saying, "I don't know what you did, but I know you did something, so thank you!"'

2. Building trust is the key to identifying bullying early

The HR director said because reports of bullying had not been addressed before she arrived, there was no confidence or trust in the process. Staff reported that in the past, they were made to feel like they were the problem, with suggestions they undergo resilience training to be able to better deal with the situation. Others felt that the perpetrator's behaviour had almost become normalised, with everyone 'getting the same treatment'. Because no action was taken, people stopped reporting the misbehaviour.

The HR director placed a focus on building relationships with staff so more employees were willing to speak with her about bullying issues. She said at times, staff had come to her to report what they thought was bullying behaviour but was actually a misunderstanding that was sorted out through a conversation between her and the other staff involved. Staff said they were comfortable talking to the new HR director about a range of issues. There is more trust in the way the organisation deals with bullying, with bullying and misconduct issues not left to fester.

3. New workplace behaviours policies

The new HR director developed new workplace behaviour policies, focusing on the organisation's values and behaviours. These set out the behaviour expected of staff, explained the grievance process, and encouraged self-resolution among staff where possible.

The organisation ran multiple training sessions to teach staff how to identify bullying and to empower them to self-resolve issues. The sessions included: how to have assertive conversations, managing difficult personalities, relationship management and managing workplace stress. Staff were given psychometric profile tests, which found the vast majority of staff were highly introverted. This meant extra care was needed in

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dealing with each other so issues did not simmer.

Staff agreed that if bullying behaviours were now to occur, they are clear on the type of action that should be taken.

4. Focus on values and collaboration

The organisation focuses on the public sector values and collaboration, endeavouring to put these at the heart of everything staff do. Workshops help staff identify how to make the values and behaviours real, and include examples from managers of when and how they have demonstrated the values and behaviours. Staff agreed that the values and behaviours were prominent in the organisation and it was clear what behaviours would not be tolerated.

New starters have to complete a thorough on-boarding process which also focuses on the values. Rather than being asked to develop performance plans as soon as they start, new staff are placed on an initial 12-week plan where they have to complete a range of tasks, such as building relationships with units across the organisation.

Much work has been done to build strong, collaborative work environments. For example, project teams are set up to have people working together from multiple teams to avoid siloes forming.

5. Happier staff = engaged staff = productive staff

In exit interviews, departing staff regularly report that the organisation is flexible, healthy, friendly and respectful. The HR director said the organisation caters for all types of flexible arrangements, including working from home and part time, or supporting secondments.

Recognising good behaviour and actions in the workplace has been a major driver for positive change. The organisation has set up a reward and recognition program, which includes staff recognition awards and a 'What Outstanding Work' (WOW) card system. Any staff member can hand out a card to a colleague, regardless of hierarchy, if they've demonstrated outstanding behaviour in line with the values of the organisation. The uptake of the program has grown substantially over the last couple of years.

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Current Situation

The HR director said she is not currently aware of any issues of bullying. The organisation monitors workplace culture and bullying with quarterly reviews into health and safety incidents and how staff are demonstrating the values.

Staff said they had greater trust in the organisation and the courage to approach senior leaders when having issues at work. They believed the environment was supportive and friendly. Staff also said there is a stronger understanding of the values and behaviours expected of them.

The CEO said it was certainly possible for bullying behaviours to emerge again, despite the strong organisational culture. Given the small size of the organisation, a single bully can have significant impacts. However, the CEO believes the strong culture and regular monitoring of the organisational climate will help mitigate these issues.

Advice to others

1. Focus on good human resource support

In a small organisation, there is limited support and resources for human resource functions. The CEO consciously built up the human resource capability which led to a greater focus on people and culture. This has helped ensure a strong workplace culture which can help mitigate bullying behaviours.

2. Deal with issues early and be consistent in order to build trust in the organisation

One of the key lessons is to deal with bullying early, rather than letting it grow into a major problem like it did for the organisation. Dealing with matters consistently was also important. Trust can be damaged if one person can get away with behaviours and others do not.Keeping records of poor behaviours and complaints is essential to gathering evidence of persistent bullying behaviours and identifying systemic issues. If a bullying case progresses to legal proceedings, the CEO would encourage organisations

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to tackle this head on if there is strong evidence of bullying behaviour. It sends a message and builds trust among staff.

Organisation B – 'Walk the talk' the importance of leaders living the values

The small organisation with fewer than 100 staff once had very low rates of perceived bullying (11 per cent) – half its sector's average rate of 22 per cent. However, the rate spiked suddenly.

The organisation took action and the rate fell back to 10 per cent a year later in 2016.

This case study is the story of how bullying behaviours can come from highly valued staff and one bully can have a big impact in a small organisation. It also demonstrates the importance of addressing uncivil behaviours early. It is based on interviews with the former Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and a former Human Resources (HR) director.

The problem

In late 2014, the organisation started to get complaints from staff about poor behaviours coming from a senior manager in the organisation. The perpetrator was considered very competent and had been with the organisation for several years.

The CEO said he believed changes in personal circumstances may have led to the perpetrator being more critical and negative towards colleagues. Staff who reported to the perpetrator noted bullying behaviour, including intimidation and ongoing criticism of employee competence and capability. The HR director said trainees in the organisation felt intimidated by the perpetrator and did not want to ask her work-related questions for fear of being reprimanded. When issues were raised with the perpetrator, she defended her actions as a response to the urgent nature of the situation they were in. The CEO said the signs that workplace bullying was occurring included staff wanting to reschedule their shifts so they did not have to work with the perpetrator. The CEO recalls the perpetrator being mentioned by at least one person in

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an exit survey as one of the reasons they were leaving. Recruitment also became difficult. The CEO suspected this was partly due to the perpetrator's reputation in the region.

The catalyst

The situation came to a head in 2015 with a number of staff reporting bullying behaviours. The CEO and HR director met with the perpetrator to discuss the bullying allegations, which shocked the perpetrator. When the perpetrator asked for proof on the allegations, the CEO and HR director produced written complaints from staff. The CEO was keen to have a positive resolution; he did not want to lose the perpetrator as she was a valuable employee. In the end, the perpetrator chose to leave the organisation rather than take up offers of training and support.

Response and reflections

1 Bullying perpetrators can also be valuable employees

Although perceptions of bullying dropped with the perpetrator leaving, the CEO said losing the perpetrator was 'the last thing we wanted'. The perpetrator had worked in the sector for a number of years and was a highly valued member of staff. The CEO believes the perpetrator never came to terms with the evidence presented and may have felt too embarrassed to stay on.

2 Trust is vital to raising bullying in a small community

The CEO admits that bullying behaviour could have been happening for months. However in a small, regional organisation, staff may not have felt comfortable reporting bullying for fear of potential repercussions in the organisation and wider community.

The HR director said that the nature of working in a small community meant that if you had issues at work, you would still have to 'walk out the door and have your sons play cricket together'. The HR director said that while bullying awareness training helps in identifying bullying behaviour, ultimately individuals who reported bullying had to be

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willing to deal with potential repercussions in the wider community.

The HR director said the key factor in ensuring staff were willing to report bullying behaviours was trust. Staff had to feel that they could report bullying and know that it would be handled both appropriately and confidentially.

3 Equip everyone to be aware of bullying behaviours

The CEO said better training to help staff recognise bullying behaviours had now given affected staff the confidence to identify bullying behaviours.

The organisation has expanded bullying awareness training, delivered through eLearning, to all staff. Users can complete online modules at their own pace. This mode of delivery was the best option due to the various working hours of staff. Managers were given additional training to help them effectively deal with bullying. The HR Director and another senior manager also sought advice from the relevant professional industrial association on their bullying and harassment policies and procedures.

All new staff are advised during orientation where they can go to for support if bullying issues are raised. They are told that if the issue cannot be discussed with the line manager, then another manager, the HR director, or even the CEO would be willing to talk about the issue. The CEO and HR director said more awareness meant staff now felt more comfortable to discuss bullying issues when they arise.

4 The importance of having shared values and 'walking the talk'

The CEO said that while bullying awareness training has helped encourage staff to raise issues of bullying, the strong workplace culture which is built on the organisation's values is the more significant reason bullying rates are low.

The performance of all staff is assessed against the organisation's values. These values, which include trust and mutual respect, are well publicised within the organisation.

Senior leaders within the organisation are expected to live the values and 'walk the talk'. This is crucial to maintaining trust and mutual respect. The CEO said this has helped build a workplace culture where staff regard each other as peers, regardless of

hierarchical status in the organisation. The CEO deliberately avoids making the organisation feel too hierarchical and is often seen in break rooms with staff. He sees forming meaningful relationships with staff as essential to building trust, particularly in small organisations. He believes staff members do not necessarily see him as 'the boss' and decision making is shared wherever appropriate.

The CEO said staff regularly come into his office and share their thoughts on how things at the organisation can be improved. The CEO believes that this is a reflection of the mutual respect and trust now experienced.

Current situation

Since the departure of the perpetrator, the CEO said the culture in the organisation had 'never been better'. However, the CEO said it was important to be continuously vigilant on the issue of workplace bullying. The impact of one bully can potentially affect a large proportion of staff in the organisation.

Advice to others

1 Don't just talk the values, demonstrate them

The CEO emphasises it was important that management demonstrated it was willing to commit and tackle work issues as they arose. This was critical to building trust among staff and demonstrates a willingness to 'walk the talk'. Managers often have difficulty sitting down with their staff to discuss issues of bullying and the CEO said that more work could still be done in the organisation to support senior managers to know what to do when staff raise bullying issues.

2 Be open with staff

The CEO said it was important to be open and transparent with staff when bullying was raised. He did not feel any concern with sitting down and discussing the actions he would be taking when staff raised the issue, with many thanking him for being honest about action to be taken.

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3 Identify and address issues early so you don't lose good people

The CEO said he wished the bullying issues had been raised with him earlier, as it may have been easier to resolve without the perpetrator or other staff feeling like they had to leave. The CEO hoped that the awareness training provided to staff would help staff identify these issues sooner if bullying were to occur again.

4 'This isn't how it's done here'

The HR director said raising bullying awareness is a big component in changing the culture around what is tolerated. Just because a person has been behaving a certain way for a number of years does not make it right. It also does not mean other staff members have to put up with it.

Organisations can only take action if staff are willing to report bullying. However, this will only happen if the workplace culture encourages people to speak out against bullying.

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Organisation C – Making sure 'every voice has the same volume'

This metropolitan Melbourne entity with fewer than 200 staff, had nearly a quarter of employees experiencing bullying. The problem was coming from the highest levels.

Within two years, the organisation had transformed its culture; perceptions of bullying fell from 23 per cent in 2014 to 6 per cent in 2016.

This case study is the story of how one Victorian public sector body changed from a culture of low trust which allowed bullying behaviours to thrive to one which is positive and engaged. It is based on interviews with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Human Resources (HR) director and staff from the organisation.

The problem

Organisation C went through a period of turmoil, including a series of major restructures, significant reduction in staff and numerous changes of CEO. The body was also performing poorly: it was struggling financially, underperforming against its corporate plan and not meeting expectations of its key stakeholders.

The senior leaders, successive CEOs and board members did not always share a common vision for the organisation. Staff were suffering because of so much change, about which they received little communication. Many were not sure if the organisation had a future, let alone if they would have a job in a new structure. During this period, staff reported that they experienced intimidation and bullying behaviours from senior members of the organisation, which included openly shouting at staff.

Some staff reported feeling physically ill coming into work. The organisation was losing staff through a restructure, so those who remained had to take on more work. This was a

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particularly stressful time for managers, who faced the brunt of bullying behaviours, and many sought counsel from colleagues. Leadership team meetings became dominated by the issues they were having with the perpetrators.

The catalyst

Senior managers within the organisation sought independent advice on what to do. The HR director started an independent investigation into bullying behaviours and the investigator met with individual staff. A report was presented to the then-CEO and the findings discussed with a Deputy Secretary from the department which oversees the organisation.

While under an interim CEO in 2014, a number of senior leaders, including some of the perpetrators, did not have their positions renewed and left the organisation. The current CEO started soon after.

Response and reflections

1 Dealing with bullying at senior levels is particularly difficult

Addressing bullying at the most senior levels of the organisation proved challenging. Staff were concerned about repercussions of being involved in the independent investigation, perceiving the perpetrators as powerful and well-connected.

The current CEO said it would have been very difficult, especially for junior staff, to discuss bullying – particularly if it came from very senior individuals.

To address this, the current CEO, together with the leadership team, created an environment where people were willing to talk about it. He made it clear to all staff that bullying at any level would not be tolerated and that everyone had the responsibility to report bullying behaviours.

The CEO commissioned sessions for all members of the organisation to help them recognise bullying behaviours and know what to do about it. These messages were regularly repeated in staff meetings. The CEO said constant reinforcement made the

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expectations clearer for everyone.

2 Putting organisational culture first

With the new CEO starting during a period of disarray, the need for immediate action was clear.

A workshop was scheduled with the leadership team to set a plan to rebuild the organisation as a centre of excellence. The output resulting from the workshop was the 'plan-on-a-page', a strategy document that provided clarity and transparency to the whole organisation about the priorities and objectives for the next twelve months. Each division, in turn, mapped out a 'plan-on-a-page' aligned with the CEO's plan, clearly stating its vision, core objectives and cultural expectations. One of the key priorities identified by the leadership group was prioritising cultural transformation, underpinned by employee engagement.

The CEO opened communications channels, sharing the organisation's vision and objectives and reporting regularly on progress. The CEO believed that 'trust is about communication' and wanted to be open with staff about changes – even if staff didn't agree with them. He replaced a culture of secrecy with one of openness and trust.

3 'Eat well, move more, live longer' – focus on wellbeing and collaboration

A new 'culture club' supported a shift to a more positive work environment. The leadership team aimed for the club to be mainly driven by non-executive staff. Initiatives to improve culture included team-building exercises, peer-recognition programs and social fundraising events.

Other initiatives to improve staff wellbeing and culture included:

- psychometric testing for all staff and training on how to work collaboratively with different personalities
- change management training to help them deal with change
- an annual survey that measured employees' perceptions on how the leadership team was performing in a range of areas, such as the ability to transform vision

into results

- setting up a 'mobile desk environment' to allow staff to better manage their workloads flexibly.

The organisation also wanted to place a specific emphasis on the physical and mental health and wellbeing of staff. A survey was sent to all staff asking if the organisation was doing enough in this area and what improvements could be made. This led to a health and wellbeing program being developed. The program runs all year and focuses on healthy eating, moving more and promoting positive mental health. Some of the activities include healthy morning teas, weekly yoga classes and daily meditation sessions.

The CEO contends that improving work/life balance, decreasing stress, and building trust is pivotal to improving productivity.

Some staff advised that these initiatives felt tokenistic when they were first introduced, given trust levels were still low in the organisation. However, with the culture much improved in the organisation, many now engage with and appreciate the value of these initiatives.

4 Building stronger, cohesive leaders

The CEO determined that cultural change had to start from the top by building trust among the senior leaders. This had to start with leaders' willingness to show vulnerability. Leaders are now more willing to share problems they face with each other and the leadership team works together to give support.

In addition, the CEO said it was important to create an environment that encourages different views. The CEO said that while he can be quite forthright with his opinions, he regularly calls upon leaders to share their thoughts and opinions, even if contradictory, as debating an issue leads to a better result.

The organisation also focused on setting up a program to develop its current and future leaders, which further supported the positive cultural shift. The HR director made a conscious decision to steer away from traditional short leadership courses that may look good on a resume but rarely result in changed workplace behaviours. As a result, a five-month program was developed to build leadership capabilities. This included

training on self-awareness, having critical conversations and optimising the productivity of teams. Leadership staff were also able to receive coaching from their peers and superiors.

5 Good human resource leadership make a difference

Staff and the CEO said the appointment of a new human resources director had made a significant impact on the culture. She was the driver for a number of key initiatives, such as running bullying workshops.

Current situation

At the time of writing, the organisation was going through another substantial structural change. Some staff were concerned the culture of the organisation could change. However, the HR director said, as a whole, staff have been quite engaged in the change process. There has been a lot of communication around the purpose of the change and what it means for individuals.

The HR director said that a few years ago, most staff left because of poor workplace culture. Now they tend to leave on positive terms and due to career progression opportunities.

Advice to others

1 Make sure leaders are aligned

Leadership across the organisation needs to be aligned, cohesive and consistent in their behaviours. For example, performance must be assessed consistently with everyone following the same processes. This is vital if an organisation is going through change management; the purpose and focus must be clear across leadership levels.

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2 Be clear that bullying will not be tolerated

Staff need to be aware that bullying will not be tolerated. Running training programs and reinforcing this in team meetings makes it clear that everyone has a responsibility to report this behaviour. The CEO said that an increase in staff who were willing to discuss or report behaviour that was perceived as bullying was a good thing, as it means staff are not being intimidated to stay silent.

3 Ensure new staff fit the culture

The CEO meets every prospective employee before they are hired to talk about the cultural environment and understand if the recruit will fit into the culture the organisation is trying to build. This has been critical in building the positive workplace culture of the organisation from the ground up.

4 Ensure 'every voice has the same volume'

Organisation C is building a culture where everyone feels free to voice their opinions and not be intimidated by hierarchy. The CEO walks the floor every Friday to build relationships with staff by having informal conversations. This investment in staff has been critical to breaking down hierarchical barriers and building trust. Ensuring staff feel they can approach any level of the hierarchy with issues means there is less chance of these matters festering. Staff agreed that they would not hesitate in approaching the CEO with issues of bullying or poor workplace behaviours.

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Organisation D – 'Communication, Communication, Communication'

'Organisation D' and its 500 plus mainly Melbourne based staff have been through considerable change and long periods of uncertainty, which affected workplace culture.

In 2013, 17 per cent of staff were perceiving bullying within the organisation, slightly below the sector average. However, by 2016, this figure had dropped to 10 per cent. Staff engagement and job satisfaction rates were also up.

This case study is the story of how an organisation recovered from years of disruption by placing a strong focus on better and more open communication within the organisation. It also shows how desired changes in culture must be modelled from the top. It is based on interviews from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Human Resources (HR) director and a range of staff.

The problem

The organisation's culture had been negatively impacted after going through major upheaval over several years. The organisation has absorbed large numbers of staff from other organisations, had several changes of governance at the Board level, and had to very publicly deal with instances of serious misconduct. Service quality was poor and significant financial losses meant a large number of positions were made redundant. The current CEO joined the organisation in 2011 to find a poor workplace culture where staff felt stressed and under pressure. The CEO said the culture had driven 'morale to a

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very low point'.

Staff said that stress levels contributed to some of the poor workplace cultures and bullying behaviours in the organisation, often bringing out the worst in managers. Staff recalled feeling undermined and unsupported. Some staff also reported a lack of consistency in processes. Workloads appeared to be unfairly distributed and some staff recall being constantly overlooked for training.

Staff said that the environment at the time was one where staff had very little trust in managers and vice versa. Some staff who reported bullying behaviours were made to feel like they were the problem. Others were not willing to raise concerns about bullying for fear that they could be targeted to exit the organisation.

The environment was conducive to bullying behaviours. The HR director joined the organisation in 2014 and said staff did not know how to respond effectively when they encountered poor and disrespectful behaviours. For example, there were instances where staff had lodged a grievance before attempting to speak to the relevant party to resolve the issue. Some of the issues raised were due to ineffectual communication between managers and their staff when managing the performance of the team.

There was also a fear of reprisals. If there was an issue related to work, staff did not report it as there was fear the messenger may be blamed. This meant minor problems were not addressed early and became major issues. The current CEO was hired to focus on customer engagement, but he soon realised he had to look internally first, and address a number of workplace culture issues.

Response and reflections

1 Every employee looking out for the organisation

The CEO recalled an incident where a substantial issue came to the surface which had a significant impact on clients. When debriefing with the senior technical team, they agreed the issue could have been avoided if it had been identified and shared earlier. In response, a risk register was created where staff were encouraged to list any issues that they thought had the potential to impact services or customers. The register had an immediate positive impact in that it meant issues could be triaged and delegated for

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action. More significantly, the register was a key step in establishing a culture where issues were openly discussed and shared. Since its creation, a large number of potential operational issues have been addressed early and there has been a significant improvement in performance.

2 Transparent and open communication during change

The CEO said there was a major push from senior leadership for better communication in the organisation. The executive leadership team actively engages with their teams to build an understanding of the vision and strategic objectives of the organisation. The CEO sends weekly email updates to staff on what is happening in the organisation, including information about restructures. He also established 'Live Chats' where staff could post questions to him directly and anonymously.

In a recent restructure, staff were provided information about the organisation's cultural vision, processes, capability, and the rationale behind the restructure through different mechanisms. For example, after the initial announcement, the executive leadership team met regularly with teams to ensure views of staff beyond the leadership team and HR were considered.

3 The impact of strong leaders

The CEO said his leadership team had made a big impact on the organisation as collaboration is fostered in the team. The CEO said the senior leaders were constantly in each other's offices and siloes were being broken down across the organisation. Leaders now do things that benefit the entire organisation, not just their area. This practice is trickling down to the rest of the organisation.

The organisation has run regular manager workshops on building staff capability, communication and performance. A leadership program is also available for technical staff without management responsibilities with a focus on the importance of building connections in developing successful careers.

4 Dealing with difficult behaviours from staff and clients

alike

The organisation has invested in training staff to manage difficult relationships with staff and clients. In the past, the organisation had many dissatisfied clients and frontline staff had to deal with this. In response to this issue, staff were trained on how to deal with challenging clients and were given resilience training. If frontline staff are exposed to poor behaviour from clients, the executive leadership team is quick to take it up with the client at a senior level. Staff were also trained on how to have difficult conversations with fellow workers and managers.

One major change made was to embed a HR member in the different areas across the organisation to support managers and monitor issues and workplace culture. The HR director said many managers had said they did not understand the impact of this change at first but it had been valuable to have a dedicated person to speak to about problems in their teams.

5 Taking strong action against poor workplace behaviour

The CEO said the organisation did not implement specific strategies to address bullying. However, he made it clear consistently and over time that poor behaviour would not be tolerated in the workplace.

The organisation had uncovered instances of misconduct, which weren't directly about bullying. The CEO took swift action if he was made aware of any misconduct or evidence that individual employees were not acting appropriately. A number of staff were either dismissed or were given warnings.

The HR director said the culture and processes in the organisation now would mean bullying behaviours would be identified and addressed quickly. Performance management plans are much more developed and include key performance indicators. If bullying were to emerge again, the organisation is better prepared to have performance discussions, provide coaching, and monitor the issue. The HR director has an open-door policy and she and her team have helped staff resolve issues of perceived bullying or misconduct before the matter escalates.

6 Investing in staff

The HR director said that at one time, there was little investment in the growth of staff. When new projects were implemented, the organisation would hire new contractors rather than look to developing the required skills in-house. Now the organisation has a commitment to upskill current employees.

Current situation

The organisation is now seeking to engage new clients for the first time in several years and the organisation is growing in response to increased demands for services. Employee attrition has dropped from a high of 19 per cent, a few years ago, to 7 per cent. There is a sense of excitement in the organisation, and the CEO has promised staff he will walk the floor ringing the 'new customer bell' when this important milestone is reached.

Staff agreed that positive changes have come from the highest levels of the organisation. The current CEO has brought stability and there is a clear vision about where the organisation is heading. Staff feel that their opinions matter and appreciate the CEO's regular communications.

Despite this, some staff felt that certain areas of the organisation remain unchanged, suggesting there was still work to be done to improve the workplace culture across the board. Many of the issues about uneven distribution of work and lack of access to training still existed, and some felt that the positive actions of the CEO are yet to translate through to all middle managers.

Advice to others

1 Good behaviour starts from the top

The HR director said staff found that having a CEO who models positive values and behaviours and who was a good communicator has a positive impact on the organisation. Senior leaders now treat each other with respect, something that was not

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necessarily happening in the past.

2 'Communication, communication, communication!'

The HR director said that communication at all levels was the key to managing change and building a positive culture in general. A particular focus was making sure middle managers were all aligned with the executive team's vision and what was expected from staff. These managers were critical to ensuring these messages trickled down to all staff.

3 Have patience

Changing a culture does not happen overnight. The CEO said that when he started implementing his new strategies, he did not see much change. However, the continued implementation of the change program and the positive ripples of this work is now spreading throughout the organisation.

Organisation E – Redefining the 'symbols and rituals' of organisation culture

Bullying had fluctuated in 'Organisation E' for a while but when one in three staff started experiencing bullying, the issue could not be ignored.

The main perpetrator was dismissed and the organisation was determined to learn from its mistakes. Within a year, bullying rates at the small regional organisation of fewer than 200 staff went from 36 per cent to 18 per cent.

This case study highlights the importance of open communication at all levels to create an environment of trust and respect. It is based on interviews from the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Human Resources (HR) manager, a senior director, and staff in the organisation.

The problem

The current CEO recalls coming into the organisation during a period when staff had little trust in senior leaders, particularly when it came to addressing poor workplace behaviours. The organisation was planning significant changes that would have impacted many staff members, social activities such as morning and afternoon tea had stopped, and there was also poor communication between senior leaders and staff, all of which was adding to the poor workplace culture. Staff recalled an environment where morale was low and staff were stressed.

Bullying problems came to a head in 2015. In particular, a senior manager was physically intimidating and demeaning to staff and had very little insight into the impact of their behaviour.

The catalyst

A significant bullying incident occurred at the organisation precipitating a flurry of allegations. This triggered an investigation. The organisation hired an independent industrial relations expert to look into the allegations. The investigation revealed there was substance to the allegations and the organisation dismissed the perpetrator.

Response and reflections

1 Poor communication can have significant adverse impacts on workplace culture

The CEO said part of the reason past senior leaders were not trusted was because communication was poor. The organisation was finalising proposals which would have impacted a large number of staff without any consultation with staff. The CEO received feedback that there was a disconnect between staff and leaders. Staff recall the previous CEO not being open or visible to staff. The current CEO said that a small organisation cannot afford to have poor communication channels with staff.

It had been particularly complicated for staff to report bullying to the previous senior director, with the main perpetrator having been recruited by that senior director. Staff felt that the senior director would not escalate matters and often dismissed issues of bullying when they were raised. Some staff believed this previous senior director did not have the appropriate skills to deal with poor behaviours. Staff stopped reporting issues and the problem continued to fester.

2 Rebuilding trust and respect through better communication

Upon commencement, the new CEO made it a priority to better engage with staff and build strong relationships. The CEO spent the first six months having open conversations with staff and listening to their thoughts on the workplace culture. Part of the strategy involved redefining the 'symbols and rituals' that would become part of the organisational fabric. For example, although there were no longer regular morning teas,

the CEO set up a reward and recognition program which included a regular awards ceremony. The initial uptake was slow but nominations and attendance gradually increased until even board members attended. Other key initiatives to improve communication included:

- changing the tone of monthly newsletters, highlighting positive stories and quotes from appreciative clients
- running staff feedback sessions every quarter
- ensuring the CEO's office was more accessible to staff with a clear open door policy.

The CEO said staff immediately welcomed the change in communication style. The CEO said small things made a big difference to staff, such as remembering their names, smiling and saying 'hello'. Staff said the new CEO's friendly and welcoming style has had a big impact on the organisation. The CEO is regularly seen at events organised by staff and staff believe the CEO makes an effort to connect with staff.

3 Know what behaviours are 'above and below the line'

The CEO set up an awareness strategy and staff attended sessions about what behaviours were considered acceptable and unacceptable in the organisation. These sessions were run to make it clear that the organisation would not step away from addressing inappropriate behaviours. The CEO believes these sessions encouraged staff to call out the bullying behaviours, which led to the perpetrator's dismissal.

4 Empower managers to deal with difficult behaviours early

The CEO said part of the issue was that managers did not know how to have difficult conversations with staff. The CEO brought a program into the organisation, which included training on having difficult conversations, building morale, and other leadership skills. The CEO said such programs are valuable as they allow issues to be addressed before they escalate to bullying. Staff said this has had a strong impact on the organisation, with performance management now being applied consistently across the board.

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5 Make processes clearer

Upon commencement, the CEO undertook a review of organisational processes, including a review of the grievance processes.

As part of this, the organisation simplified its reporting and complaints system. For example, processes were put in place to make it easier for staff to anonymously report inappropriate behaviour if they did not feel comfortable speaking to their managers or other staff.

The organisation also reviewed its recruitment processes as there had been a perception among staff that recruitment was not conducted in a fair and transparent way. The organisation developed a new code of conduct and the organisation's values were refreshed to align with it.

6 Workplace culture comes first

The bullying perpetrator was a high performer in many aspects of their role. However, the perpetrator was not the right cultural fit. The organisation made the decision to dismiss the perpetrator as it would have been worse for the organisation as a whole if the perpetrator had stayed.

Current situation

The current senior director advises that the culture in the organisation has changed for the better. Staff are no longer shirking away if they see inappropriate behaviours. They are also getting better at self-resolving issues and senior management supports staff with this as much as possible.

Staff said the environment is more positive in the organisation. People are more willing to speak up and grievance processes are clearer. Staff said the organisation was moving from a culture of negativity, where there was little positive feedback, to one where staff felt valued.

The CEO said the staff were a great group who worked well together but there was still work to be done as it took time to change a workplace culture. The organisation is still

building the skills of managers to manage staff appropriately.

The HR manager said more work had been done to improve culture in the past year than in the previous 10 years she has been in the organisation.

Advice to others

1 Be brave

Performance management can be really difficult and can take an emotional toll. While the perpetrator who was dismissed was good at their job, the importance of keeping a positive organisational culture is paramount in these decisions.

2 Take early action

It is important to take action as soon as problems are noticed. Delaying and not being transparent will lead to bigger problems in time. The CEO said it was important to make it clear to staff that the organisation was not 'just giving lip service' to staff wellbeing and that swift action would be taken and bullies removed, if necessary.