



**Victorian
Public Sector
Commission**



Bullying myths and facts

There are some common Victorian public sector myths and facts about bullying.

It is intended to provide line managers with answers to some of the questions they may have about responding to complaints of bullying in the short term, and preventing its occurrence in the long term.

It complements the Victorian Public Sector Commission's resources: [How Positive is Your Work Environment?](#)

Managers have a duty of care to provide a working environment that is reasonably free of risks to health and safety. Bullying is one of those risks. It has been shown to have a number of negative outcomes for an organisation including increased staff absences and turnover, lost productivity and costly litigation.

[WorkSafe Victoria](#) defines bullying as repeated, unreasonable behaviour directed at an employee or group of employees that creates a risk to health and safety.

The information provided here is a guide and does not replace professional advice or information in any enterprise agreement or organisational policy.

Victorian legislation

Myth 1. Everyone describes bullying in the same way.

People describe different types of behaviour as bullying, but only some of these may meet the WorkSafe definition. A reasonable management action or a one-off event are

not examples of bullying. However, any inappropriate behaviour, regardless of its label, should be addressed.

Myth 2. Bullying is only an occupational health and safety (OHS) issue.

No, while bullying is an OHS issue, it may also be a criminal offence if the behaviour involves threats or actual physical assault. Bullying that is sexual in nature may also breach sexual harassment laws, and bullying behaviours that target someone because of their personal characteristics may breach anti-discrimination laws.

Myth 3. Bullying is not a criminal offence.

People who engage in serious bullying can now be prosecuted under the [Crimes Act 1958](#) for the offence of stalking, that includes:

- making threats to the victim
- using abusive or offensive words to, or in front of, the victim
- performing abusive or offensive acts in the presence of the victim
- directing abusive or offensive acts towards the victim
- acting in a way that could reasonably be expected to cause physical or mental harm to the victim, including causing the victim to self-harm (including suicide).

Bullying behaviours

Myth 4. Bullying is usually just a personality clash and the individuals involved will sort their differences out.

No. Bullying may cause physical and psychological harm to the individuals concerned. Bullying places the people involved at risk and also affects anyone who witnesses the behaviour.

Myth 5. Bullying only affects the individuals directly involved: the perpetrator and the target.

No. The effects can be pervasive. Witnessing bullying has similar effects to being bullied. Witnesses are less likely to be satisfied with their job or proud of their organisation. They

are more likely to think about leaving their organisation.

Myth 6. People are only bullied by someone senior to themselves.

Not so. People can be bullied by their manager, peers, staff, clients or any other person they come into contact with at work.

Myth 7. Bullies are born, not made.

Anyone is capable of bullying but most people don't. It is often environmental factors that cause people to bully others. For example, if a person's poor behaviour goes unchecked, they may believe it is acceptable.

Myth 8. If someone's behaviour unintentionally harms another person, then it's not bullying.

Even though the person's behaviour may seem innocent to them, it is important to consider its effect on others. The test is whether a reasonable person would consider it to be bullying.

Myth 9. A tough performance management conversation does not amount to bullying.

It depends. Providing constructive feedback to a staff member is a reasonable management action. Providing feedback in a way that demeans or humiliates them could involve bullying.

Taking Action

Myth 10. Employers have primary responsibility for ensuring a workplace that is free of bullying.

It is a shared responsibility. Employees must cooperate with actions their employer takes to comply with occupational health and safety laws. They also have a duty to take reasonable care of their own health and safety and that of others in the workplace.

Managers must take appropriate action to ensure acceptable standards of behaviour are understood and observed. Everyone must speak up if they witness bullying and report all inappropriate behaviour.

Myth 11. Managers can only act on a written or formal complaint.

Managers have a duty of care to act on all inappropriate behaviours that they either see or hear about that can potentially cause harm to another employee. This includes bullying.

Myth 12. If it is not reported, then it can't be serious.

Definitely not the case. VPSC data indicates that staff may be bullied, believe they have been bullied or witness bullying, but few instances are reported. There are many reasons for non reporting but, as a minimum, employers must ensure that employees can report such behaviour with confidence – irrespective of whether it is eventually found to be bullying.

Myth 13. People will complain to someone in authority if they are bullied.

Not always. Reporting bullying behaviour depends on the reporting processes and the confidence employees have in those processes. People may fear retribution or that their complaint will not be taken seriously. Some may simply choose to leave their employer rather than confront the issue. This leaves an unresolved problem for the organisation and the cost of finding a replacement.

Myth 14. Managers don't need to address behaviour that doesn't meet the WorkSafe definition of bullying.

Not so. A one-off event might not meet the definition of bullying but may still affect the individual involved and be a pre-cursor to bullying. Any form of inappropriate behaviour that lowers morale and productivity must be addressed.

Myth 15. Bullying is hard to detect.

Not if people speak up and managers monitor their workplace. Early indicators of a problem may be an increase in staff absences and turnover or a decrease in

productivity.

Myth 16. Bullying is hard to prove.

Not necessarily. Look for evidence such as voice mails, emails, a diary of events and any other written documents, and the support of any witnesses.

Myth 17. The perpetrator and target can be readily identified.

Not necessarily. Perpetrators and targets may switch roles, retaliate and blame one another. They may both see themselves as victims.

Myth 18. People accused of bullying deserve less support than the alleged victims.

People accused of bullying, whether found guilty or not, can suffer psychological damage. It is therefore critical that all parties are treated with respect and offered confidential counselling and support.

Myth 19. Relationships will be restored once the bullying stops.

It takes time for people to think more positively about their work if they have been bullied. While their perceptions of the organisation and their manager improve, even after 12 months, they are less positive than someone who has never been bullied. The bullying may undermine their confidence and self-esteem, making them more sensitive in interactions with others.