Positives from Negatives: Building A Positive Workplace Environment
Framework to Counteract Bullying

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ABSTRACT

Organisational interventions aimed at the reduction of workplace bullying generally emphasise the identification of negative employee behaviours and the punitive consequences associated with the manifestation of these behaviours at work. While such interventions raise awareness of the importance of bullying, we argue that they risk endorsing a ‘compliance’ approach aimed solely at dealing with bullying after it has occurred rather than developing strategic initiatives aimed at proactively promoting workplace wellness. This paper details a project within the Victorian public sector in which a proactive framework and intervention for preventing workplace bullying was developed using theoretical principles positive psychology.

BACKGROUND

While organisational investment in bullying interventions continues to grow, there has been little empirical evidence of any reduction of bullying behaviours (Harvey, Heames, Richey & Leonard 2006; Hoel & Beale, 2006). A key difficulty associated with bullying interventions is a perception that organisations have to implement them to ensure legislative compliance in managing a minority of offenders (Lewis, 2004; Hoel & Beale, 2006; Rayner & McIvor, 2006; Salin, 2003). Consequently, organisational practices and the broader framework in which bullying events occur have been largely ignored (Walton 2005) and development of strategic initiatives, such as changes to organisational culture and structure, which promote workplace wellness may have been largely overlooked (Rayner & McIvor, 2006; Salin, 2003). Rayner, Hoel & Cooper (2002) argue that once entrenched, workplace bullying is very difficult to remedy as is becomes ingrained in the overall functioning of an
organisation. Recent studies have adopted new approaches to study and prevent workplace bullying. For example, Heames and Harvey (2006) use a cross-level approach to explore interaction between individual, group and organisational levels and how such interaction contributes to bullying. Rayner and McIvor (2006: 75) use a similar tri-level approach but expand on this by developing a typology that enables organisations to determine their current practices used to prevent and manage bullying in comparison to where they would like to be. We draw upon this approach and also argue that when combined with principles of positive psychology an even greater opportunity to transform organisations so as to prevent bullying from occurring exists. In developing this paper we therefore shift our emphasis from how to reactively manage bullying to a focus on proactively developing a positive work environment, which, we believe, makes an important contribution to current bullying prevention practice. This view of workplace bullying recognises that it is likely to be symptomatic of deeper endemic cultural issues that requires holistic, positive change (Rayner & McIvor, 2003). However, despite demonstrating considerable face validity (in other words it makes sense that confident, happy workers are more productive), the little empirical evidence regarding this shift towards a focus on the positive is still received with scepticism by some academics and practitioners who continue to view positive organisational behaviour and dignity at work as merely “feel good altruistic fluff” and the latest managerial fad (Luthans, 2002a, p. 695). As this shift towards a more positive, organisation-wide emphasis in workplace bullying research is in its infancy, this exploratory study aims to promote action by providing framework for the development of a practical and systematic approach to the issue.

A Positive Work Environment (PWE) refers to an organisational culture that promotes a rewarding, healthy and productive workplace. International research is conclusive that the most successful workplaces are those in which all individuals – from senior executives to all levels of employees, work well together to create a positive work environment (Bagshaw, 2004; Dutton & Ragins, 2006;
Rennie Peyton, 2003). Perhaps surprisingly, given the range of individuals involved in a single workplace, there are several common features within the literature that are thought to make a PWE. For example, there is explicit recognition that relationships and interactions at work require a high degree of individual self-awareness of our beliefs and behaviours and how these can be monitored to suit the needs and characteristics of others (Bagshaw, 2004; Dutton & Ragins, 2006; Rennie Peyton, 2003). Thus, it is arguable that an emotionally intelligent workforce is a key ingredient for the development of a PWE. Achieving a PWE is clearly an ongoing process, rather than a short-term initiative, that requires an understanding and development of the procedures, policies and behaviours needed to deliver it at all levels of the organisation. In this sense, the PWE concept extends beyond human resource management themes such as loyalty and commitment, and extends to all individuals within the workplace playing their part (Parsons & Newcomb, 2007). With this in mind, this paper discusses the background to the development of a framework aimed specifically at proactively minimizing bullying and harassment through a PWE-based intervention.

THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

The State Services Authority (SSA) of Victoria leads the Victorian public sector in improving services and standards. The 2006-2007 work plan for the SSA included a project to develop and support positive work environments in Victorian public sector workplaces. The objective of the project was to promote policies and practices that effectively diminish the risk of bullying by conducting research into the factors that influence the incidence and perceptions of workplace bullying and harassment, and identifying the most effective means of managing risks of bullying to organisational effectiveness and productivity. With these objectives in mind, the SSA contracted the authors to work on these issues in mid 2007. The project team set out a three-stage program which aimed to the following: 1) prepare a PWE framework through synthesis and analysis of existing contextual data; 2) develop a toolkit/intervention focusing on how to approach and prevent bullying through emphasis on a PWE; and 3) to refine and trial the PWE intervention with the SSA and
volunteer public sector organisations. This paper presents the results of Stage 1 of the research project.

**Reviewing the Evidence**

In reviewing literature surrounding bullying interventions, we interpreted that an attitude of compliance with legislative requirements for preventing and managing bullying exists. Consequently, organisational practices and the broader framework in which bullying events occur may have been overlooked. With this in mind, the aim of Stage 1 of the project was to review and work with existing SSA data and practices already in place so as to avoid imposing an ‘academic’ model that may not have addressed specific characteristics of the Victorian public service. The materials supplied to the project team to undertake are discussed below.

1. **Workplace Bullying Research Report**

This report provided the SSA’s review of largely government generated literature, comprising predominantly of reports from various workers compensation organisations from Australia and New Zealand. These reports primarily considered both the drivers and moderators of bullying. The key insight generated from this material was the rejection of the broader model of bullying as a procedural matter. Instead, the need for a systems view of bullying – that is, bullying as a symptom of organisational and cultural issues – was advocated.

2. **The People Matter Survey**

Section 74 of the Public Administration Act requires the SSA to submit an annual report to the Premier including issues such as adherence by public officials to the public sector values and employment principles as outlined in the Act. The *People Matter Survey* (PMS) is one such reporting requirement and has been undertaken annually since 2002. As demonstrated in Figure 1 below, bullying within the Victorian public sector has been documented, thus providing a compelling prompt for action. For the past three years 21% of employees have reported that they have personally
experienced bullying in the workplace. These rates generally compare unfavourably with bullying reports across the state of Victoria at 14-15%, across Australia at 17-19%, in New Zealand at 20%, and the United Kingdom at a rate of 11-15%.

**INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

The 2006 PMS data (2006) covered 153 responses from 266 Victorian public sector organisations with 71 having an organisation-specific response rate of greater than 30 per cent. Of significance within this data were responses to questions surrounding a variable focusing on “Respect” (for colleagues and members of the Victorian community). Within the survey, exploration of the variable ‘respect’ included questions about presence and tolerance of bullying and harassment within respondent’s workplaces. In exploring the data further, it was evident that those who indicated that higher levels of respect, and positive treatment by/of workplace members (including management) was present within their workplaces reported lower levels of bullying. This clear association between the variable of respect and occurrences of workplace bullying was one of the most important findings for the research team.

### 3. The Public Sector Organisation Survey 2006

This survey is a self-assessment survey questionnaire, which measures the efforts of public sector organisations in applying and promoting the values and employment principles, which underpin and sustain an ethical, high performing and trusted public sector. The 2006 survey was distributed to 219 Victorian public sector organisations with 20 or more employees and achieved a 100 per cent response rate. Chief executives provided an assessment of their progress in establishing structures, systems and processes to embed the values and employment principles. The findings revealed that the majority of organisations (97 per cent) reported having taken some form of action to minimise the risk of bullying and victimisation of employees. However, there was suggestion that a strategic and systematic approach to bullying should include formal identification of organisational risk factors,
assessment of their significance and development of specific prevention strategies. This should include factors such as the quality of management and accountabilities for people-related outcomes at all levels of management.

4. Selected Organisational Interviews

The SSA also conducted a series of interviews to explore issues of bullying further. Key findings from the interviews was that participants agreed that re-focusing on bullying prevention through the use of both positive language and through the promotion of more positive workplace environments was necessary. A request for the use of language that could be considered meaningful to the organisation was thought to be necessary for the promotion of PWE. For example, terms such as “healthy workplace”, “a sustainable workplace” and even “safe” and “healthy” work environments were used. The importance of senior executives in the development and promotion of a PWE was highlighted in terms of the need to “walk the walk” in any organisation serious about preventing bullying. Further, data from the interviews revealed a common perception that visible, high profile activities integrated with clearly articulated values, defined behaviours and performance objectives, actively managed at the top of organisations were critical components in the development of a PWE. Interview participants also called for swift and unbiased action in addressing unacceptable behaviours.

The interview data also flagged variation in the perceptions of what constituted bullying behaviour as well as a diversity of strategies and interventions for managing it within each organisation. It was very clear that while most were interested in developing a PWE, organisations were at very different stages. For example, some organisations felt that they did not need assistance with PWE development, while others were very interested in “how to do this better”, rather than “what to do”. This variation was an important variable to take this into account in developing a strategy that was applicable to all organisations yet able to be tailored to suit the various needs and stages of a PWE.
5. The SSA Model

The model and sample report below (refer to Table 1 and Figure 2), represent SSA analysis and synthesis of the results of the material above. Table 1 presents a high level model with a three stage process whereby organisations define the elements of a positive workplace; establish the critical success factors underlying each to enable the measurement of their level of risk and the identification of priority areas for improvement.

**INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

Table 1 also proposes that organisations evaluate themselves against seven critical success factors which determine their areas of risk and need for further action. Divided into the drivers and inhibitors, and factors which either ‘Contribute’ or ‘Detract’, these establish the basis for action and are linked to existing human resource functions. The synthesis of materials in Table 1 provides a foundation for the development of a set of generic tools that can be used to develop interventions/create PWE’s, which are featured further in Figure 2.

**INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE**

The seven elements can thus be measured against the critical success factors to provide organisations with a ‘temperature chart’ view of where they are at as well as providing comparisons before and after specific interventions. A clear aim of Table 1 and Figure 2 is to provide the basis for the development of a generic framework responsive to the diversity within the Victorian public sector and which makes clear linkages to existing sources of information.

From the five information sources reviewed, we interpreted a diverse range of PWE contexts in which organisations are currently operating at. We also determined that the success of developing PWE interventions and tackling bullying problems relies upon an integration of current workplace practices and public sector information with emerging management theories. Combined, the
materials provided valuable insight in terms of the “bigger picture” in which bullying issues exist within the public sector providing us with a sound basis from which a framework for action could be developed.

Embedding these findings within the wider literature reveals workplace bullying as an issue of concern amongst the public sector in general (see for example Namie & Namie, 2000; Hockley, 2006; Hadikin & O’Driscoll, 2002). European literature in particular demonstrates that bullying behaviours are particularly prevalent within the public sector and community organisations and suggests that the historic “macho” culture of the public sector presents an interesting context in which to examine the issue and link psychological findings (Strandmark et al., 2007; Salin, 2003). A number of arguments have been presented within United Kingdom and Australian literature in order to explain the underlying factors behind this claim (for example Hoel and Cooper, 2000; McCarthy et al., 1995; Guest and Conway, 2004; Lee, 2000; and Lewis, 2000). The common themes amongst this research suggest that the increased demands and higher expectations placed on most public services inevitably increases the stress and work pressures of all members of staff. In addition, the public sector has seen radical changes in the past decade in relation to cost reductions, restructuring, increased workload and the emergence of a generally more aggressive style of management which have facilitated negative behaviours within the sector. These appear to support the State Services Authority’s PMS results illustrated earlier in Figure 1 as well as offering further supports a preventative systems- wide approach of positive workplace environments (Burnes & Pope, 2007).

BUILDING A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

Our findings from the review of the information sources resonate with existing PWE literature (Adams, 2007; Dutton and Ragins, 2007; Parsons and Newcomb, 2007) that indicate of a need to shift the focus away from a solely reactive approach to managing bullying. Further, both the data and the literature call for a balanced, multilayered approach (Heames and Harvey, 2006; Rayner and
McIvor, 2006) to developing a PWE. Dutton and Ragins (2007), and Bolton (2007) note that a common misperception of PWE is that it is only concerned with strengths and ignores problems or weaknesses whereas a strength of the method is its’ ability to deal with some of what are often considered the difficult and hard to deal with areas such as the emotional labour requirements of work and the existence of toxic emotions. A key aim of our framework is to develop a strategic focus on organisational responsibility for work environments which create - both directly and indirectly - the aberrant behaviours of workplace bullying and harassment. This aim is underscored by a major strength of PWE, the emphasis on individuals developing an awareness of, and taking responsibility for, their own actions (Parsons & Newcomb, 2007; Sutton, 2007; Sweet, 2005).

One of the key features central to the success of organisations in many studies of bullying (see for example Bolton, 2007; Rayner & McIvor 2006:24) was the acceptance of bullying and harassment as something “most likely to occur when ordinary people are working in negative environments” – and acknowledgement that the problem belonged to and should be owned by the organisation, not the individual. This “no-blame” mentality is reinforced within the larger notion of PWE by an individual acceptance of self-responsibility. It is indicative of the deep cultural base necessary for PWE to be achieved, where these are beliefs and practices really be embedded in the organisation and clearly raises the issue of support systems for the individual. By explicitly placing the SSA material into a framework of the broader context of the PWE and embedding it in the structural foundations of the three levels suggested independently by Heames and Harvey (2006) and Rayner and McIvor (2006), the model illustrated in Figure 3 significantly and explained in terms of underlying operational factors identified in Table 2, enhances the original view presented in Figure 2 and Table 1.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

In line with the wider literature and specifically building on the typology suggested by Rayner and McIvor (2006), the model illustrated in Figure 3 first isolates and then brings the varying workplace interests perspectives together to reveal the interplay between the role of managers, the systems in
place in an organisation and the often neglected role of individual factor of support. A key feature is
the dynamic nature which encourages organisations to see their involvement in this issue as an
ongoing process where the focus of bullying moves from being individually oriented to becoming a
strategic, organisational one. This is illustrated in Table 1 and provides the basis for organisations to
assess their level of PWE development in terms of the four key stages of development: beginning,
emerging, consolidating and established. The stages set out in Table 2 are broad but allow
organisations to determine their current position and their desired future state. The framework
therefore provides a starting point for organizations to develop their own strategy for minimizing
bullying, while simultaneously promoting ongoing employee participation. We highlight the various
starting points for organisations in Table 2 starting with “Beginning”. We suggest that organisations
as this stage may not recognize issues pertaining to bullying, or may not consider their organisations
as experiencing bullying problems. However, we also argue that the beginning stage reflects factors
such as high exit rates and the other significant costs, which may indicate either a failure to recognize
problems within the environment, or a reluctance of staff to report problems.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

The second stage of the framework identifies the ‘Emerging’ stage in which the organisation
recognizes bullying problems and has taken some action to work towards prevention. However, such
action may be ad hoc and fragmented in nature and therefore, unconvincing to employees. For
example, development of policy in compliance with OH&S legislation may be apparent but proactive
strategies are not. Consequently, it is unlikely that organisations in this stage would see any
reduction in exit rates or other costs. ‘Consolidating’ organisations are likely to be engaging in many
of the PWE type of activities, which typify strategically focussed organisations, but need
development in two specific areas. First, they maintain an individual rather than broader
organisations focus, thus could seek out individual traits that link to bullying behaviours. Second,
clearly integrated systems and support are lacking within the organisation so, while the expenditure may be as great as the fourth type of organisation, ‘Established’, the benefits are not all there. The ‘established’ organisation considers bullying to be an organisational issue rather than an individual problem. Further, they adopt a strategic approach that evaluates measures and reviews organisational practices at least annually through broad and representative communication channels to all levels in the organisation. They set out to proactively identify problems and then to resolve at an early stage, which an ongoing focus on trust and respect at all levels of the organisation.

**CONCLUSION**

Organisational interventions aimed at the reduction of workplace bullying tend to emphasise the identification of negative employee behaviours and the punitive consequences associated with the manifestation of these behaviours at work. While such interventions have raised awareness of the importance of this issue, the strong emotions the topic of bullying engenders have often made it easier to promote a ‘compliance’ approach aimed at dealing with offences rather than a strategic initiative aimed at broader workplace wellness. This paper detailed the background and first stage of a project within the Victorian public sector in which a proactive workplace bullying intervention from a PWE perspective was developed. In summary, we suggest that Table 2 articulates the PWE framework implicit in Figure 3 such that the three perspectives of organisational, managerial and individual factors involved in dealing effectively with workplace bullying emerge provide an explicit and workable model for change. The framework avoids a *one-size-fits-all* approach while providing a structured organisational development structure which is articulated in terms of communications emphasising that this is part of a larger, long term strategic approach – that PWE is far more than just about prevention rather than cure. It is about what makes work a meaningful and positive part of all of our lives.
REFERENCES


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Critical Success Factors</th>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Tips</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Consultative, models values, self aware</td>
<td>Autocratic, inconsistent behaviour</td>
<td>Management training, <em>Leading the Way, Capabilities Card Set</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisational cohesion</td>
<td>Compelling mission, clear direction, collaboration, focus on whole</td>
<td>Competition, professional segregation, focus on parts</td>
<td>Team building, reward system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Open, informal, accepts and adapts to different styles</td>
<td>Hierarchical, expects conformity</td>
<td>Feedback, discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workflow management</td>
<td>Autonomy, flexibility, support, challenge</td>
<td>Tight time frames, limited resources, poor skills match</td>
<td>Business planning, job design, performance management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change management</td>
<td>Involved, planned, informed, win-win</td>
<td>Uncertainty, constant inexplicable change, win-lose</td>
<td>Planned change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk management</td>
<td>Accepts risk: learns from mistakes</td>
<td>Risk averse: blames</td>
<td>Risk assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace disputes</td>
<td>Raise safely, most solved informally</td>
<td>Adversarial, issues not raised</td>
<td><em>Redress Guidelines</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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Table 2: Framework of Positive Work Environment (PWE) Characteristics from Three Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Characteristics</th>
<th>Beginning</th>
<th>Emerging</th>
<th>Consolidating</th>
<th>Established</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ORGANISATION</td>
<td>Negative work environment accepted as part of the culture and not seen as a problem</td>
<td>Recognition that the environment is negative or has problems causes concern, but overall approach is passive and focussed on individuals as the cause of the problem</td>
<td>Values of PWE recognised with coherent and well articulated policies but focus remains on the ‘individual’</td>
<td>Consistent &amp; coherent, well-articulated policies, procedures &amp; PWE practices embedded in organisational culture. Any negative behaviours seen as organisational problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANAGERS</td>
<td>Manager consistently reinforce negative behaviours through inaction, complacency or neglect</td>
<td>General management approach is to avoid, be complacent or ignore although occasional positive actions do occur</td>
<td>Managers take some responsibility and actions to achieve a PWE</td>
<td>Responsibility for achieving and sustaining a PWE starts with managers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INDIVIDUALS</td>
<td>Individuals reinforce negative behaviours through inaction, complacency or neglect</td>
<td>Individuals take action but only when there is a problem</td>
<td>Some individuals take responsibility for achieving a PWE</td>
<td>All individuals take responsibility for achieving and sustaining a PWE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1: Reported and observed incidences of bullying in the Victorian public sector


Figure 2: The SAA Model -
Building a positive work environment to prevent bullying

sample report
Figure 3: Model: A Framework of the Positive Work Environment (PWE) Characteristics from Three Perspectives