

## Stress & Bullying in the Workplace

At Innervate, we see a strong relationship between stress and workplace bullying. At the 'obvious' level, being a victim of workplace bullying can be a very stressful experience. Conversely, people who suffer stress can react in ways that are perceived by others as aggressive or intimidating. This external symptom of stress is often labelled as 'bullying'. However, our research in areas, such as Social Complexity Theory, indicates some deeper and more interrelated behaviours and outcomes that have significant implications for organisational leaders.

To illustrate this, let us first consider a 'victim' of workplace bullying. We believe it is their level of personal power (self-efficacy), control and value (self-esteem) that determines their reactions to a bullying situation - whether it is real or perceived. With little understanding of the thinking and behaviour that leads to this 'bullying situation' and few tools to reduce the resulting symptoms of stress, their reactions will be unhelpful in terms of both performance and wellbeing. Simply understanding the effects of these core beliefs, coupled with some strategies to build them and reduce stress can be a powerful tool for change.

Next, let us consider the work-place 'bully'. One of the features of workplace bullying is that it is often carried out by people who are in a position to get away with it. This can be through holding a formal position of power, having expertise that the organisation does not want to lose, or simply by being overtly intimidating. Similarly, bullying behaviour can be attributed to a low sense of power, control and value as well – using aggressive strategies to counterbalance feelings of insecurity.

This puts the 'victim' at a huge disadvantage. Unable to challenge the problem at source and feeling unsupported by the organisation, the victim may deflect their powerlessness onto co-workers - further exasperating the problem. This results in a bullying culture. Fuel the eroding power, control and value beliefs with a range of situational and organisational stressors and the problem can

dramatically escalate outside the organisation into people's personal lives with serious consequences to health, relationships and financial affairs.

In our work across all sectors we also notice an additional factor at play that we refer to as a 'parallel hierarchy'. This is particularly common in technical and specialised-based organisations where individuals have specialist skills, affirmed by qualifications and formal recognition.

An example of this would be interactions where qualified 'experts' assume that less qualified colleagues will do what they tell them without question and with no need for explanation. For example, *"I am an OT and you are a care-worker so therefore your job is to simply do what I tell you"*. These hierarchical mind-sets can slip easily into behaviours that imply a sense of 'superiority' and we can say, categorically, that you do not want to go there; unless of course you want to take change-resistance and organisational stress to a whole new level!

Effective, nimble, organisations are characterised by role-based not hierarchical cultures. You just need to look at organisations such as Air NZ, Mainfreight and Xero where everyone matters and everyone is worth listening to.

Our approach to culture change is based on a multi-faceted and flexible approach with the aims of: upskilling all individuals in personal leadership (enhancing personal power, control and value beliefs); creating awareness and skills in dealing with stress; enhancing accountability for their personal contribution to culture; building serious commitment in leaders to act and model behaviours; and working with teams to embed the ideas and tools in ways that work for them.

Bullying and intimidation creates stress and stress drives behaviours that people perceive as bullying. Telling people to stop bullying will not work. Telling people that a particular behaviour is not bullying will sound like you don't care. Building our capacity for internal power, control and value coupled with strategies to reduce workplace stress, will see a dramatic decline in workplace bullying.