

Interventions to Address Workplace Bullying: How well does the New Zealand public sector stack up against 'good practice'?

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Key research findings

- 72% of formal bullying complaints were found to be unsubstantiated (sample of 15 Public Service Departments).
- Bullying complaints are generally viewed/interpreted as performance management, relationship or behavioural issues.
- Other than the development of anti-bullying policies, primary-level anti-bullying interventions are generally limited.
- Legalistic and compliance orientated policies; lacking 'humanistic' element.
- Poor managerial skill seen as a key driver of bullying complaints.
- Organisational anti-bullying policies rarely reference trade unions, however, in practice, unions seem to play several important roles in dealing with public sector workplace bullying.
- Mediation is used in resolving bullying complaints, and for repairing workplace relationships following the resolution of a complaint.

Is bullying a problem?

Much research indicates that it is:

O'Driscoll et al., (2011)

17.8% NAQ, across govt, education, hospitality and health sectors

PSA – 2013 VUW Workplace dynamics survey (Plimmer, et al., 2017)

32.4% "within the last 6 months"

SSC 2013 integrity and conduct survey

25% "personally experienced bullying or harassment in the last 12 months"

28% had observed bullying

23% abusive or intimidating behaviour

PSA – 2016 VUW Workplace dynamics survey (Plimmer et al., 2016)

13% shortened NAQ survey (twice per week over 6 months criteria)

Plenty of poor behaviour – "sometimes" withholding information (58.5%), gossip (46.9%), exclusion (34.4%)

But few complaints are substantiated.

Crimp (2017) MCOM thesis

72% of complaints from 2010 to 2016 in 12 core public service organisations are reported as un-substantiated

Why? Because inquiries are biased? Or because many true targets don't complain?

Public Health Model

Primary

Primary interventions are proactive in preventing the occurrence of harmful phenomena

Secondary

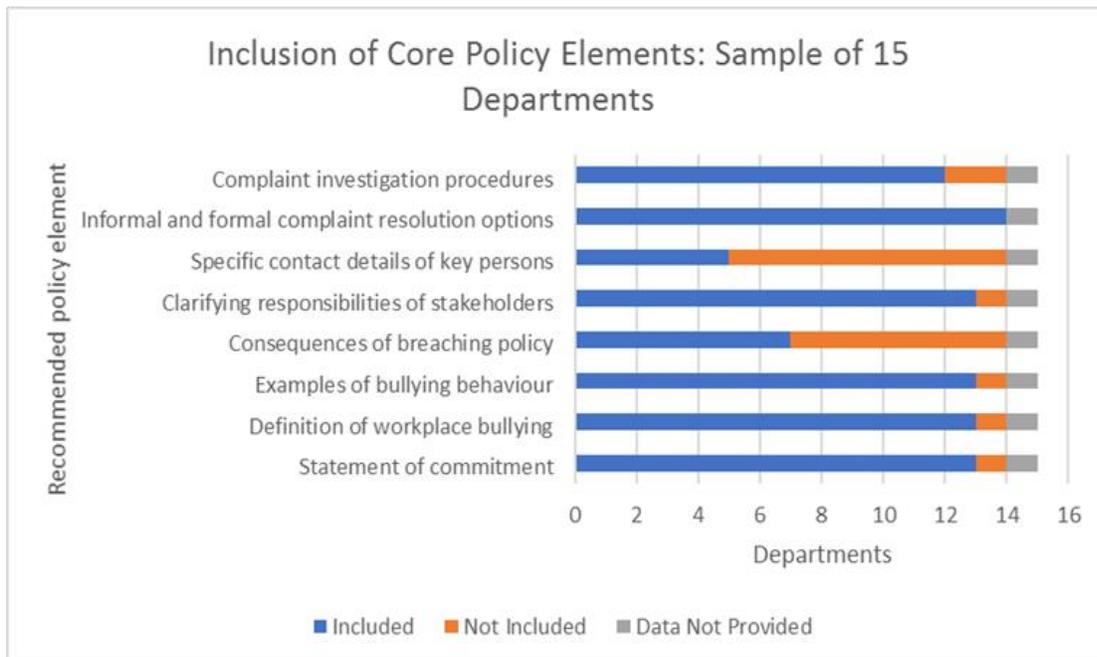
Secondary interventions slow, reduce or reverse the progression of events, prevent recurrence, and provide individuals with effective coping resources

Tertiary

Tertiary interventions aim to reduce negative impacts, and restore health and wellbeing.

Primary

Policies often meet the criteria for good practice, but are very focussed on secondary interventions. Primary and tertiary need more attention.



A range of primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions are required to effectively prevent and manage workplace bullying – A policy in isolation is NOT enough

	Recommended best practice - from literature	What happens in practice – from current research	Potential actions
Primary - Prevention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development and implementation of an organisational anti-bullying policy • Staff and management training in a range of areas including bullying recognition and reporting, conflict management and interpersonal communication • The identification of bullying antecedents • Use of selection policies to screen-out applicants with undesirable traits (use with caution!) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of policies generally following best practice (see table on previous page) • All Public Service Departments involved in study had integrated bullying/harassment policies • Policy content focused on secondary intervention, few specific preventative measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly update policies in line with changes in recommended best practice. • Provide training on ‘what does workplace bullying look like in our organisation?’ - High numbers of unsubstantiated complaints could stem from a poor understanding of bullying behaviour. • Focus on the development of managerial skills in the delivery of effective performance management - dealing with performance concerns in a timely manner, having ‘courageous conversations’, and ensuring consistent intra-organisational performance standards. • Involve unions from start of any anti-bullying initiative and pursue a ‘partnership approach’. • Training to mitigate investigator bias in complaint handling - if managers and investigators expect that most bullying complaints are unsubstantiated, there is a risk that this perception could influence formal investigations..

Secondary - Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of formal complaint investigation process • Mediation for resolution of low level conflict • Provision of social support services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal investigation processes generally sound • Mediation for complaint resolution; not always successful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stronger emphasis on consequences for perpetrators of bullying, and negative workplace behaviours more generally.
Tertiary - Ongoing management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated counselling programs • Inpatient treatment for victims • Physiotherapy and physical exercise • Monetary and non-monetary forms of redress • Group recovery programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of MBIEs mediation service as a means for restoring workplace relationships following the resolution of a conflict situation; useful where participants are required to work together again. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued support for affected parties following 'resolution' of the bullying situation, to avoid conflict re-escalation. The use of MBIE's mediation service as a tool for repairing workplace relationships following the resolution of conflict may be useful here.

Note: There is a fine line between intervention levels, and some contention amongst researchers as to which level an intervention is best classified. For instance, the development of an anti-bullying policy is a primary intervention, however much of policy content, such as complaint investigation processes, are secondary in nature.

Informal processes

Interventions are bureaucratic, formal and legalistic, but

- In ambiguous situations informal/tacit rules really count
- Bullying allegations can be:
 - A counter – attack in a performance management scenario
 - A marker and consequence of poor management skill
- Investigations can be tied up with judgements about perpetrator intent
- Unions provide unrecognised innovation, filtering and informal resolution role.

Key implications for practice

A range of primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions are required to effectively prevent and manage workplace bullying – A policy in isolation is NOT enough.

Questions

- Why do so few formal investigations substantiate bullying allegations?
- What are barriers to meaningful primary interventions?
 - selection – training – performance management
- Do bullying policies work adequately?
- What tertiary interventions are needed?

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