

Upwards Bullying – Prevention and Management Strategies:
An Interview Study

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Recently, the assumption that only those in lower levels of the organization are workplace bullying targets has been questioned, suggesting that the targets can sometimes be managers and the perpetrators can sometimes be staff members (Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001; Salin, 2003; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel, & Vartia, 2003). However, research that has explored ‘upwards bullying’ (i.e. staff bullying managers) as a phenomenon has been overlooked, possibly because research repeatedly indicates that upwards bullying is not as common as other forms of workplace bullying (as indicated in Hoel et al., 2001). Nonetheless, we argue that upwards bullying can have short- and long-ranging impacts for the individual targets, the workgroup and organization as a whole (Branch, Ramsay, Barker, & Sheehan, 2005). We suggest it is important to investigate how to prevent and manage upwards bullying. Similarly, if we are to find *‘the way forward’* and understand how to prevent and manage the phenomenon of workplace bullying, it is vital that all forms of workplace bullying be explored.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the prevention and management strategies that emerged as recommendations in an interview study with 24 managers. Unstructured interviews were conducted with managers who had either experienced or witnessed a case of upwards bullying (N=15; 12 males, 3 females), as well as managers who discussed the general managerial work environment (N=9; all female). Although many different issues emerged from the interviews, the central issues of strengthening the organisational system, the need for better training and the provision of support will be discussed within this paper.

Findings from the interviews found that staff use covert and overt behaviours to bully managers. Passive aggressive behaviours such as the use of “evasive behaviours” (as described by Tehrani, 2003, p. 282), sometimes in combination with verbal and physical threats, appear to be used by staff to get their own way. A further tactic was the apparent mis-use of organisational processes, in particular the grievance system. In total, 23 of the

managers in the present study reported that staff used accusations or a formal grievance as a form of payback, or in order to avoid any disciplinary action or mediation initiated by the manager. Issues in relation to the mis-use of the system by staff to bully their manager (and potentially used between colleagues in the form of 'horizontal bullying') were strongly reflected in prevention and management strategies proposed by the managers.

A clearly outlined workplace bullying policy is commonly referred to in the literature as one strategy for prevention and management of workplace bullying (for example, Hubert, 2003; Richards & Daley, 2003). Richards and Daley (2003) suggest that fair procedures should be in place to ensure a just hearing for all parties, including a provision for action due to malicious complaints. Similarly, ten interviewees indicated that there should be consequences for frivolous or malicious grievances and accusations. Referring to a policy from a local council, Richards and Daley (2003) indicate that if the investigator considers the complaint was malicious, then disciplinary action should be taken. However, as one manager in the present study explained, it is not that easy to discern if someone has made a malicious complaint. Although this would suggest a need to strengthen the disciplinary and grievance systems, such strengthening of the system would require balancing the two issues of encouraging legitimate targets of workplace bullying to come forward and developing a system that reduces the occurrence of malicious and frivolous claims.

A number of interviewees indicated that training for all staff in relation to the nature of bullying or discrimination may assist in reducing the number of frivolous grievances and accusations. In other words, there would be a decreased use of the term 'workplace bullying' to categorise all forms of interpersonal conflict indiscriminately. This suggestion is supported by a number of researchers who assert that all employees should receive training about the nature of workplace bullying, its impacts, the relevant organisational policy and management strategies to address bullying at work (Richards & Daley, 2003; Vartia, Korppoo, Fallenius, &

Mattila, 2003). Again, if there is better understanding of workplace bullying and other forms of anti-social behaviour, the number of frivolous claims may be reduced.

The present findings indicate that support by a number of individuals, especially with regard to advice and the development of coping strategies, appeared to assist managers when faced with abusive or bullying behaviours by staff. For example, Linda, who received significant support from HR during an incident with an abusive staff member said, *“the right thing I did was getting help from HR... because I don't think I could have handled that situation by myself”*. Correspondingly, it appeared that a lack of support from the organisation and senior management was a significant concern for managers. As a result, 11 managers expressed the view that the provision of support by senior management and HR or encouraging managers to seek support would assist in managing situations where abusive or bullying behaviour was occurring. Ideally, the provision of support to all parties involved in a conflict should be made available (McCarthy & Mayhew, 2004; Richards & Daley, 2003). However, possibly due to concern over how it may impact on their career or their personal standing in the organisation, managers appear to be concerned about seeking support when being bullied by a staff member. As Annie who reported an experience of upwards bullying said, *“I suppose I never thought to go to [HR] to talk about it because I felt that there would be a negative perception about me, that I wasn't handling my job”*. A clearly articulated policy and training program that emphasises to both management and staff, the need for early intervention and the seeking of support may help to reduce the number of cases of upwards bullying and indeed workplace bullying.

Further prevention and management strategies that emerged included: recognising upwards bullying; grooming and training successors; enhancing relationships and communication between staff and management; and acting early and not letting the behaviours continue too long. If we are to find *‘the way forward’*, greater emphasis on

investigating the usefulness of these suggestions in helping to prevent and manage workplace bullying is required in the future.

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