

## **Bullying and Ostracism at the Workplace**

*by Ing. Norman Zammit*

Bullying and ostracism are two forms of emotional and psychological abuse of a person and these forms of abusive behaviour have been commonly identified in most workplaces.

In an article that appeared on UBC News website, Professor Sandra Robinson, of UBC Sauder School of Business, indicated that *“Being ignored at work is worse for physical and mental well-being than harassment or bullying, says a new study from the University of British Columbia’s Sauder School of Business. Other researchers also found that while most consider ostracism less harmful than bullying, feeling excluded is significantly more likely to lead to job dissatisfaction, quitting and health problems”* (The University of British Columbia, 2014).

This is also subscribed to by Baumeister and Leary as well as Leary and Kowalski, who argued that *“Thwarted belongingness can interfere with one's ability to contribute to the organization. When one is deprived of a sense of belonging it can cause significant stress, anxiety and depression”* (O'REILLY, 2009, pp. 1-7)

Nevertheless, *“Bullying can be an insidious problem that is difficult to spot amid the everyday concerns of running a business. But where it exists within the workplace, it can be costing money, lowering quality, and, perhaps worst of all, pushing talented employees into the arms of the competition”* (Estime, 2015). This notion was also emphasised by Fox and Spector where they also described workplace bullying as a particular type of *“counterproductive work behaviour”* (Suzy Fox, 2005, pp. 151-174).

Theories and empirical studies on the workplace bullying research domain also showed a relationship between bullying and conflicts. Analysing over 800 bullying incidents, Leymann, in 1996, concluded that most bullying cases originated from escalated conflicts, which he referred to as ‘critical incidents’ (Leymann, 1996, pp. 165-184). Other similar studies supported this idea and showed that a large number of conflict incidents were linked with being a target of workplace bullying (Baillien E., 2009, pp. 207-226).

This phenomenon of aggressiveness, of the bullied target, becomes even more pronounced by the tendency of co-workers to show reluctance in coming to the aid of a bullied target even

though the person could be defined in the parameters of being ‘*a good person*’. This rationale was elaborated by Parks and Stone in an empirical study on the topic of this behaviour. “*This study demonstrated counterintuitive hostility to a generous group member who either makes others feel bad by comparison or appears threatening by virtue of her or his virtue. The benevolent other is not motivated to create either experience for group mates. This matches closely the experience of bullied targets ostracized by co-workers*”. (Parks & Stone, 2010, pp. 303-310)

The connection between leadership or management style, on the one hand, and perceptions of bullying was also addressed in an article that appeared in the British Journal of Management. In this article, Hoel, Glasø, Hetland, Cooper and Einarsen, conclude that “*in order to prevent workplace bullying, organizations need to acknowledge that particular styles of leadership may be perceived as bullying by subordinates. In addition to clarifying management's position on the issue, e.g. in a policy document, an understanding of leadership as a potential source of the problem needs to form part of any management training programme. This is also a consequence of the fact that bullying only thrives when it is condoned, directly or indirectly, by management.....Whilst those managers most in need of changing their leadership style may be unlikely to consider this a problem in the first place, and thus need to be helped to change, other managers would have a more open and self-critical approach to their own management style*” (Helge Hoel, 2010, pp. 453-468)

Hence, the understanding of these phenomena and the importance of ethics in HR is extracted from considering some contemporary real-life dilemmas faced by HR managers in this field. HR managers face dilemmas all the time with the critical ones involving questionable senior management behaviour.

In an article written by Kathleen Holmes about workplace bullying, Kathleen identifies a list of “*Fifteen signs of workplace bullying*” that HR manager should be aware of. In this list there are a number of ‘particular signs’ that are of high relevance and these include:

- “*Continually undervaluing effort. Recognition of effort is an important motivator for every employee. Without it, people tend to decrease effort, have little desire to be in to work on time, or perform their work to the best of their ability. By undervaluing an employee’s efforts, an exceptional employee can quickly become a problem employee*”.

- *“Over-monitoring with malicious intent.* Micromanaging with the intent of finding problems undermines the ability of an individual to do their job and do it well. Over time this approach can increase the mistakes a person makes. Micromanaging can make someone feel as though their every move is being monitored and judged. It can make them nervous and take their mind off of their work, increasing stress levels and developing into health issues”.
- *Removing areas of responsibility or promising projects and not following through.* In particular when there is no reason or explanation. By taking away responsibility or not following through on a commitment to an employee, the employee loses trust, motivation and starts to question their own ability.”(Holmes, 2010)

At the core of these ethical dilemmas lies the ability of the HR manager to be able to judge when a manager’s approach in decision-making becomes unethical. But this is not a straightforward process. There are many facets and hence approaches to an ethical dilemma. Apart from the HR manager’s own moral codes there are also different levels of experience in HR and business contexts that would affect the individual’s perspective on each case.

*“The ethical behaviour of an HR manager is necessarily limited by the ethicality of senior management and organisational culture. Empirical work by Wiley found that ‘regardless of gender, position or company size, employment managers’ ethical behaviour is influenced most by the behaviour of senior managers and their immediate supervisors’. HR managers who continue to take an ethical stance in an unsupportive organisational environment are risking negative personal and professional consequences. When an ethical conflict becomes too great, it is likely to be resolved by the HR manager resigning. A feature in this is the level of influence that HRM has in the organisation, the level of relevance and power attributed to the HR manager and the HR function. Foote and Robinson found that ‘the extent to which HR professionals were able to influence organisational ethics was highly contingent upon the culture and structure of the organisation’”.* (Greenwood, 2007, pp. 562-587)

Poor standards of conduct emanating from the senior management of an organisation affect an employee’s motivation, commitment to organisational goals and consequently have serious repercussions when it comes to employees’ turnover. This is more problematic when the organisation is small with few number of employees.

Due to the circumstances that evolve an organisation may suffered the loss of persons that are key to the organisation due to their knowledge and experience as well as the history of the activities of the organisation. In the case of the HR manager, the ethical conflict between being loyal to the senior management and being loyal to the ethical stance of fair treatment of all employees, makes the route to resignation as the only plausible solution not to trade off one's integrity.

There are, therefore, a number of measures that could be implemented within an organisational structure to prevent the situation from deteriorating in this manner.

The senior management should allow for the implementation of the 'whistle blower' policy. This policy would have given the opportunity to any employees to report any wrong doings that might be affecting him/her personally or the organisation. It is important to note though, that in small organisation, the implementation of the policy should be sustained by senior management commitment not to end up with situations where 'whistle blowers' are victimised and ostracised for their initiative leading to their isolation within the company.

Furthermore, the selection of personnel to occupy senior management posts need to follow a strict set of criteria and once selected, these persons would need to undergo further training to ensure that the behaviour follows the basic principle of ethics and morality. Some persons selected for senior management posts often consider as a threat any employees whose competence exceeds theirs. This is all attributable to the senior manager's insecurity and lack of competence in leadership. No senior manager is expected to be knowledgeable in all spheres of the organisation but it takes a leader to be able to empower the people in the organisation and hence allow them to be fulfilled in the work environment.

Some organisations in Malta still fail to value the importance of having a human resources management function. Furthermore, there are also organisations that although have this management function, the function is not fully empowered to be able to manage and harness the human capital for the benefit of the organisation. This omission inevitably leads to situations where the HR managers are faced with ethical dilemmas that cannot be addressed in the proper manner to avoid conflicts.

As a final recommendation, the term '*and any other duty assigned by the line manager from time to time*' should be eradicated from the job descriptions since it is the main source of abuse

when it comes to overloading employees with duties that should otherwise have been handled by additional resources. Any organisation should find other means to reduce its financial expenditure rather than be being under resourced to deliver its mission statement.

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