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## IS BULLYING AN INDICATION OF LEADERSHIP FAILURE?

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*'That person is always complaining. They are not performing and they are trying to use this bullying as an excuse. There is definitely nothing happening'*

*'They are being a victim and don't try to help themselves. This is the problem with people these days, everyone is oversensitive.'*

I am an experienced HR consultant and those statements represent the point of view of some of the leaders I have worked with. I have found myself wondering - ***have we failed as leaders when we find ourselves in a situation where there is real or even imagined bullying?***

I am keen to help leaders create positive work environments where all feel that they are able to achieve their best. One of the most successful ways that we can do this is by pre-empting and mitigating common triggers and de-escalating interpersonal difficulties at an early stage.

### Identify Triggers

*'They have got it in for me. They treat me differently. They are very subtle so that they won't get caught out. I know it is happening. I have tried to ask for help but they don't listen.'*

*'They give me unreasonable deadlines and kept me in the dark. They are not allowing me to perform.'*

I thought it would be helpful to expand on what people perceive as bullying. I have highlighted a few common themes that are cited in bullying accusations below:

- Overload individuals with work
- Unfair treatment or treat differently
- Regularly undermine someone
- Ignore and exclude someone's contribution
- Denial of training or promotion opportunities
- Exclusion from meeting, social events
- Unwelcome sexual advances
- Verbal insults
- Rumour spread
- Job security threat
- Humiliation
- Overly critical





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### **Impact on business and people**

Staff will take steps to avoid the situation (taking time off sick or resigning) and once a member of staff goes off work with stress or anxiety, it becomes much more difficult to handle the situation for everyone involved.

Bullying and harassment real or perceived is not good for the organisation. It does not just affect the individual but often affects the wider business in terms of credibility, trust, productivity and morale. Other staff notice, will have to cover additional work, may feel under pressure and it takes energy to replace a member of staff. In the most critical, an insidious culture leads to court cases and impacts reputation.

People find it difficult to admit that they are being bullied at work and think that if they were to complain, the process will be unfair and make matters worse. This means that issues that could have been addressed earlier end up bubbling under the surface with the person trying to repress their anger and then erupting over a seeming innocuous trigger. Once an accusation of bullying is made both parties tend to be defensive and focused on being right and it is difficult to learn and deescalate from that position.

### **Spot the early signs**

What are the early signals that indicate that staff are unhappy? Staff might try different strategies to alleviate their problem; working longer hours, micromanaging their staff, taking longer to get something done because they are stressed and checking their work. They also might feel defensive so will document and double check their work. You can look for changes in contribution and personality. Are they staying quiet when they usually contribute or the opposite? Is their energy and contribution negative? These are conditions where bullying or harassment accusations can escalate. Stepping in at this point to show that you notice their change turn around the situation leading to a positive and motivating impact on them. Some organisations as part of employee wellbeing and performance development offer their staff access to a HR professional to help coach them.

### **Assess the Environment**

Look objectively at the culture and environment. Is it made up of ambitious staff which can easily lead to hostility, as employees start to step over others to 'survive' or 'progress'. Are the mixture of personalities types leading to problems.

### **Proactive Interventions**

To create a positive culture and abate future issues, address the following areas:

- Design appropriate, realistic systems of work
- Develop interpersonal skills in staff and leadership
- Bring in an independent expert to mitigate and resolve conflict early
- Be proactive in communicating standards of expected behaviour

