

The Modernised Public Sector: Implications for Negative Workplace Interactions and Bullying

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Abstract

Organisations today function in complex and dynamic environments that exert continual pressure on them to change and compete. Employees are often seen as a key to success in this world, being flexible and adaptable resources; however, the quality of an employee's work life plays an important role in ensuring they reach their full potential.

The Australian Public Service (APS) has undergone significant changes in the last decade. These have impacted all aspects of work, including workplace interactions amongst employees. This paper reports an exploratory study of negative workplace interactions, also called bullying, amongst colleagues in the APS. Of special interest were the internal organisational forces that created and maintained bullying in the APS. Seven internal organisational factors of significance were identified: structure and size; policies and practices; accountability; culture and climate; leadership and role modelling; the nature of work; and generational differences.

Introduction

Psychological safety is increasingly a business issue as organisations face the challenges of today's complex and dynamic environments. External forces such as globalisation, changing legislation, technological change, increased emphasis on ethical conduct and social responsibility, and the shift to a service economy currently exert great pressure on public and private organisations alike to increase competitiveness and productivity (Davidson & Griffin, 2003).

Traditionally, the public sector has had an image of being less effective compared to the private sector (Halligan, 2005), with an emphasis on efficiency rather than outputs or outcomes (Cooper & Atkins, 2005). In this context, the attainment of organisational objectives such as timeliness of service delivery may overshadow the actual quality of the services provided. Lewis (2003: 250) reflects on Courpasson's belief that: '... the re-

emergence of bureaucracies is a sign that organisations are becoming more politically centralised and governed'. This suggests the wielding of power is a systemic issue; that power is used increasingly to achieve organisational objectives.

Hubert and van Veldhoven (2001) report that (local) government and public administration are high-risk work settings characterised by unpleasant interactions between people. The reason for this, they argue, is a lack of clarity in measuring the quality and quantity of work, thus making interpersonal relationships between supervisors and workers important in establishing one's worth and status. Conflicting interests can therefore be common in this environment. Furthermore, the hierarchical and bureaucratic nature of the public sector can result in power differentials (Crawford, 1997), creating potential for abuse. Zapf *et al.* (cited in Hoel, Cooper & Faragher, 2004) report that low job mobility coupled with high job security (Zapf, 2001) in the public sector creates fertile grounds for negative workplace interactions.

This paper reports on the findings of a study on the changing context of work in the Australian Public Service (APS) and the impact of these changes on workplace interactions. It discusses internal environmental changes in the APS and links with bullying behaviour. A model is developed to identify organisational factors that contribute to bullying in the APS environment. This paper is comprised of five main sections. Following this Introduction is a brief synopsis of the literature on workplace bullying with specific reference to the public sector. The next section will outline the methodology used in this study. The remaining sections will detail the key findings relating to the internal organisational antecedents of workplace bullying. The Conclusion will tie together the main threads and make recommendations for future action.

Bullying in the Workplace

Bowie (cited in Timo, Fulop & Ruthjersen, 2004: 38) describes bullying as '... a set of dysfunctional workplace behaviours ranging from those that adversely impact emotional well-being and stability to physical violence causing injury and harm'. A number of organisational antecedents of bullying have been documented. These include: a crisis atmosphere (Yandrick, 1999), high level of organisational demands (Wornham, 2003) and organisational size (Einarsen, 2000). Glendinning (2001) describes hierarchical organisations as breeding grounds for bullying where reward systems are limited and technically competent people get promoted to management positions where their responsibility for others may exceed their social capabilities as a leader or manager. In hierarchical organisations bullying is promoted by '... the size and length and formality of decision-making processes' (Salin, 2003: 1220), which could allow the perpetrator to hide behind processes and systems. Conversely, Hoel, Cooper and Faragher (2001) propose that flattened organisational structures promote bullying by increasing competition amongst peers for scarce promotions. All of these issues may be expected in the APS environment.

Bullying in the Public Sector

While crises, demands, organisational size and hierarchy or flatness may promote bullying in any organisation, other causes are specific to the public sector environment.

For example, a Finnish study found that an elevated rate of victimisation amongst public sector employees originated from public sector management trends of downsizing, outsourcing and the increased need for efficiency which then caused insecurity, stress and frustration amongst employees (Salin, 2001). Similarly, Caverley (2005: 401) suggests that bullying in public sector environments arises from pressures generated by 'continually shifting performance expectations and media/public scrutiny'.

One feature of the APS context is likely to be very different from other sectors. On one hand, the APS is highly regulated; many APS-wide rules govern business transactions and individual conduct, formally distinguishing acceptable behaviour from that which is not sanctioned. At the same time, individual agencies have different histories, functions and types of business and, therefore, unique cultural variations within the APS framework. The resulting tension between pressures for conformity and the need for flexibility and recognition of uniqueness requires managers to pay careful attention to standards for unacceptable interactions and to remedial actions.

Of further note in this context are the New Public Management principles that aim to transform the public service culture to one that is entrepreneurial and performance based (Anderson, Griffin & Teicher, 2002). Here, efficiency dividends have been gained by cost cutting through reduced unit costs. These dividends have been achieved through changes in wages, systems and structures, and intensifying performance management under the guise of 'performance improvement' (Ironside & Seifert, 2003: 387).

Although New Public Management principles have been widely documented, their consequences for negative workplace interactions have received little attention. The aim of this study is to explore specific causes of bullying in the public sector based on employee and manager experiences in a number of APS agencies.

Method

The findings of this paper were part of a larger study. This research was exploratory in nature, using an inductive and mainly qualitative research design with three phases. First, three focus groups involving 28 volunteers were run to develop an understanding of what APS employees consider to be 'bullying'. Next, volunteers from 11 APS agencies were asked to complete a questionnaire that aimed to collect information on their organisational context and the nature of bullying as well as detailed stories of participants' experiences of bullying. Semi-structured interviews were then conducted with a number of human resource (HR) managers and policy makers to elicit their views on the environmental factors behind bullying. Finally, unstructured interviews were conducted with 11 APS employees who had been formally or verbally accused of bullying.

Both quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were used. The survey results were analysed with descriptive and inferential statistics, while the qualitative data were subject to thematic analysis (Veal & Ticehurst, 1999); an approach based on grounded theory (Schmitt & Klimoski, 1991). The qualitative findings were used to elaborate on and provide a context for the quantitative results.

Key Findings: Critical Issues in Bullying in the Public Sector

The findings showed antecedents of bullying at four levels: external organisational; internal organisational; team/group; and individual. Some researchers maintain that internal factors such as the organisation of work and quality of leadership are the main causes of bullying (Leymann cited in Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). This section explores seven internal organisational factors: structure and size; policies and practices; accountability; culture and climate; leadership and role modelling; the nature of the work; and generational differences (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Internal Organisational Antecedents of Bullying



Source: Omari (2007).

Structure and Size

Organisational design and size influence formal and informal interactions at work (Sheehan & Jordan, 2000). Design can include factors such as arrangement and organisation of work. The study found bullying to be more common in larger organisations. Other structural factors of significance identified by respondents were:

- outsourcing of HR functions, presumably resulting in less continuity and contextual awareness of the organisation
- the advent of virtual teams, which create difficulties for interpersonal relationships
- large team sizes that inhibit team cohesiveness
- continual changes in structures, work arrangements and team composition resulting in instability, and in turn inhibiting team bonding and cohesiveness.

The qualitative data pointed to open channels of communication being considered important for reducing uncertainties and false assumptions. Continuous and accurate

information sharing creates an environment with less ambiguity, resulting in an understanding of an organisation's future direction and one's role within it. As large organisations or teams by their very nature reduce this 'connectivity', effective communication strategies become critical to developing a more inclusive environment at team and organisational levels.

Policies and Procedures

Organisational policies and procedures are mechanisms for meeting corporate objectives and therefore play a significant role in setting the 'tone' of the internal environment. Results showed the significance of two types of policy: anti-bullying policies; and more general organisational policies. Both potentially promote or prevent bullying. As well as organisational policies, all APS agencies are bound by the APS Code of Conduct that provides for Review of Action and Harassment procedures as safety-net mechanisms. Many organisations in this study had their own anti-bullying policies. By comparison, a study of the private sector in Victoria found just over half the organisations surveyed had anti-bullying policies (Sweeney Research, 2003).

While the present respondents were aware of anti-bullying policies, they found their effectiveness largely uncertain. As one HR Manager observed:

Well you might try to have a manual where it's got every type of clause in it which can cover every life condition but it will never, ever work for HR because we are dealing with people, all shades of grey.

Thus while policy may be an enabler, it is management action that sets cultural values and preferred behaviours. For such reasons managers and HR practitioners in other sectors have been considered largely ineffective in dealing with bullying (Namie & Namie cited in Ferris, 2004) and, in as much as they hold responsibility for reducing it, may actually become contributors through inaction or poor practice.

The respondents considered that organisational policies and procedures perpetuated bullying by creating an expectation that it would not be addressed as a result of a number of factors including:

... inconsistent supervision, change of supervisors all the time. Inconsistent expectations on both parties, constant criticisms, no recognition of progress made, inconsistent work plans, inconsistent follow-up, continual monitoring, checking, watching, communication problems, constant pressure.

Performance management policies and traditions in particular appeared to present a major problem. Some authors, including a former State Premier (Goss, 2001) and Anderson, Leech and Teicher (2004), contend that performance management systems developed in the private sector are not readily transferable to the public sector. As noted earlier, public service traditions have not focused strongly on performance (or linked it to pay) and front-line managers often lack the cultural values and specific skills for conducting performance management in a positive manner.

Despite these problems, there has been some progress towards better anti-bullying policy with the APS Commission now actively reviewing preventative measures and compiling educational resources. However, many agencies appear to lack data on the incidence and causes of bullying that could provide benchmarks and inform policies. Agencies could increase education and move towards modern management practices that treat staff with greater dignity and respect. However respondents believed that policies alone would not reduce bullying and that leadership and individual role-modelling were also required, as discussed below.

Accountability

Accountability relates to the notion that an employee must be assessed on precise criteria, usually quantitative and output-related, and rewarded or punished accordingly. It usually has a top-down flavour; staff must increase responsiveness to managers' concerns, but managers are not obliged to increase responsiveness to staff concerns. The problems of transferring private sector principles to the public sector, as noted above, are found not only in performance management but also in the underlying cultural values and attitudes. Stories from some respondents who reported bullying clearly revealed how a culture of accountability allowed vocal staff members to be labelled as trouble-makers when rejecting excessive organisational demands. Respondents saw this as an intended consequence of an unspoken policy of pressuring 'difficult' staff in the name of accountability.

This culture of accountability sits in a high-pressure work environment characterised by increasing performance targets, performance-related pay and the need to deliver services with fewer resources. Yet while managers were assessed on their capacity to deliver to the agency and the public, the APS had not addressed the resulting negative interactions. Culture is by nature stable, and especially so given the low turnover in the APS, so that old and new values were in conflict. The APS therefore faces the challenge of reducing the negative aspects of accountability and keeping it within the spirit of its Code of Conduct and Values. This will be further expanded on in the next section.

Culture and Climate

Organisational climate gives an insight into the social atmosphere in the organisation, and therefore the context within which bullying may arise (Omari, 2007). Organisational and national cultures provide a frame of reference for employees' interpretation of behaviours. Bullying appears to be more prevalent in organisational cultures with less of a clan emphasis (less cohesion), less adhocracy (less risk taking and innovation) and a more hierarchical nature (rule bound and highly structured) (Omari, 2007); characteristics typical of many public sector organisations. While the new public sector management philosophy promotes values considered responsible for success in the private sector - accountability, performance and outputs - implementation can create a general rigidity in interpersonal interactions. It appears that such cultures promote bullying.

This rigidification arises, as noted earlier, especially when staff are employed under the 'old regime', in which the power of the hierarchy was focussed on compliance to the detriment of flexibility. One policy maker interviewee put it this way:

In the previous decades there was also a culture formed in some agencies of 'returned service people' who were managers. APS people can see that as bullying behaviour because they are used to giving orders, you know, do this and that type of stuff.

Such inflexibility cannot produce sustained high performance and empowerment according to modern management theory (Samson & Daft, 2005). Further, the current generation of young employees have higher expectations of being consulted and involved in day-to-day decisions of an organisation (Kramar, 2006). They are more likely to reject the old mentality and may rebel against managers or organisations enforcing it.

Difficulties were reflected not only in the organisation's cultural values, but also in interpersonal climates. Bullying appears to be higher in climates of low recognition and support (Omari, 2007). Other aspects of a negative work climate include hostility (Neuman & Baron, 2003) and negativity in managerial behaviours. Such factors were reported by some victims:

This management does not encourage any form of job satisfaction, so most people are frustrated and they take that out on each other.

A lot of pressure placed on employees top-down, a lot of changes, too few staff, people forming groups to exclude others.

Kick you while you're down, a plan to make you resign for your own good rather than they sack you.

Respondents gave many illustrations of how lack of cohesiveness, risk taking and innovation, and flexibility led to bullying when combined with a greater emphasis on accountability, performance and outputs, and a lack of attention to human factors such as support and training. Accountability, performance and output focus were perceived to increase managers' individualism, power-distance and aggression. These cultural values created interpersonal climates in which employees experienced high levels of hostility, lack of attention to emotional satisfaction, unclear interpersonal boundaries, excessive politics, undermining language (such as through humour), clannish behaviour, infighting and inappropriate use of pressure.

While an organisation's culture may be more difficult to shift than its climate, leadership and management behaviour provide keys to both. Cultural audits should be a central part of the strategic planning process in agencies to identify areas of organisational strength or weakness. HR policies and practices may then be developed to support (instead of work against) the agency's strategic goals. However, a significant issue here for the APS is the outsourcing of HR functions, which brings the danger that consultants can suggest generic policies and practices not appropriate to the APS context. HR manager respondents saw conflict and a fundamental disconnection between policy and practice resulting from outsourcing of HR functions. Therefore, insourcing of these functions may be a first step to ensuring synergy between organisational cultures, policies and practices, and in turn moving some way towards improving climate.

Leadership and Role Modelling

The significance of leading by example was discussed earlier in this paper. Therefore, the need for leaders to model good behaviour cannot be overstated. The following quote from an HR manager highlights this point:

So if we model the behaviour that we can bully then others will bully too, and it continues on ... Sometimes it's about power. It's about: I'm a more senior manager so I command that level of respect and the only way I'm going to get it from you is to bully you into it and I will do it that way ... [and] managers not knowing how to lead, and that's because we have promoted people very quickly up the ranks.

Victims of bullying felt that inaction showed a lack of leadership, in that managers valued corporate success too much when it required them to sacrifice respect and dignity as core interpersonal values. The following quote from a victim highlights this point:

The [boss] ... pleaded with me to stay but I said that the perpetrator had to be moved. The ... [boss] knew of this individual's bullying behaviour with colleagues but felt he was too valuable in terms of corporate knowledge to lose.

Leadership is in many ways antithetical to the APS cultural emphasis on rigid top-down codification of power, worker control through 180-degree performance management and corporate values raising accountability, high performance and outcomes above interpersonal relations. The current political environment seeks to 'empower' individual agencies, but has done so without regard to their ability to deal with the resulting interpersonal issues. This is essentially a leadership issue and could be addressed with better understanding of and training in leadership concepts and skills, as noted above in relation to other findings. Such interventions would need to be systemic, not restricted to a small group of senior staff already highly empowered as managers, and may need to prioritise significant culture change away from managerialism.

Leadership is increasingly seen as critical to setting organisations' values, directions and standards of behaviour, since leaders provide role models for others. Leadership is different from management in this regard: managers may or may not have the personal qualities to engage or inspire others, and others who are not managers may influence staff by showing leadership qualities without being managers. However, when managers do not address bullying they condone it by modelling avoidance. This lack of leadership can be seen behind an observation of the Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Dr Shergold (2004: 4): '... the public service has been tarnished by politicisation, intimidation and demoralisation'.

Work Organisation

Poor work organisation was reported to promote bullying by a number of respondents in terms of methods of controlling work timing, workloads and the suitability of work to workers' skills. These issues may reflect a lack of awareness of modern trends in work organisation. Research shows high levels of features such as variety, goal clarity, worker-control and social and/or emotional satisfaction, along with moderate levels of demand, produce high levels of productivity, satisfaction and psychological well-being

(Hackman & Oldham, 1976 cited in Samson & Daft, 2005). The absence of such features can produce a wide range of negative behaviours and, ultimately, psychological illness.

As with the previous issues, it may be that the APS's focus on increased accountability, performance and outputs has led to neglect of how work can be organised to mitigate psychological problems such as stress and bullying. It appears that such changes in the APS environment have been at a superficial level, with little attention to underlying human factors. For example, respondents noted that while new technologies have refined work practices, there has been little consideration of the human factors of affected jobs. This creates a disconnection between what workers are asked to do and what they can achieve, adding pressures which may have been remedied by more appropriate job design. Such pressures adversely affect staff through disputes, dissatisfaction, conflict and bullying.

Generational Differences

There has been much discussion relating to the different values and interests of various generations. Here, younger employees were less tolerant of the rigid, quasi-military styles of older managers in sections of the APS. This generational conflict in values was perceived to be a source of bullying. The study produced many such references to generational differences in values and behaviours as antecedents of bullying, exemplified in phrases such as 'old school behaviour' and 'old world culture'.

HR managers saw this generational gap quite clearly. One such perspective is worth quoting at length:

I think that when I joined the Public Service... 30 years ago... there was... a big Public Service boom... There were all these new services which were being created for the first time and the generation that was recruited at that time had a certain set of ethics and values. I call them white, Anglo Saxon Protestant kind of work ethic values. And that essentially was the Public Service... it was a career service and that people used to say well you don't get paid much money but the superannuation is good. They set expectations that they want to make it their career and they would therefore do the sorts of things that would enhance a career. Do the sorts of things that would mean ... you get some certainty ... Now you have a situation where generation X and generation Y say, 'that if you want me to come and work for you, well I'm prepared to do that, but it will be on my terms'. Which is that, 'sure I've signed the contract with you but you need to understand that I have a life as well'. So that, 'you impose your occupational strictures on me, you need to understand that I view them in the parameters in my life and whether or not I feel you're being overly restrictive. And if I think you're being overly restrictive because I'm taught at school to question that, I will question that. I won't sort of sit back and cop [it] like, you know, you used to do. We're not going to do that now. You're going to sit there and if you want me to do something you have to tell me why'. We've got to try and set up the dynamics so we can work within that. It is a new workplace culture. I don't think there has been anywhere near enough work done on how to deal with that tension.

Such generational differences pose problems for any organisation; however, in the APS they are exacerbated by low mobility and long service of senior managers. The remedy seems to be education of existing managers to understand the requirements of new generations of employees. In return, new entrants to the APS must also be given a realistic job preview to help them understand the environment, ethos, required behaviours and standards of conduct. In the current context of low unemployment in Australia - 4.8 percent in July 2006 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) - young people have many employment choices open to them and many would leave an employer that is not meeting both work and personal needs. As the demand for labour intensifies, the APS can ill afford to ignore these generational issues.

Technology

Information technology (IT) permeates all aspects of life and is a major work tool. New technology seems to have been recruited to aid bullying as much as its more recognised uses. Moyle (2004) identifies the inappropriate usage of emails in the Australian public sector as a contemporary workplace issue. Our respondents also voiced concerns about the use of email for bullying:

... person's responses via e-mail contained accusations, inflammatory comments and indications of retribution and payback - victim

I received daily inflammatory e-mails – coloured letters, bold prints, lots of exclamation marks – demanding immediate action on a raft of issues and explanations, explanations of explanations, and then explanations of explanations of explanations - HR manager.

In response to publicity about abuse of IT and email systems, internationally and in Australia, most APS agencies have policies that clearly articulate appropriate use of the email system. The APS Code of Conduct and Values also details the required standards of behaviour as an APS employee. Such issues should also form a fundamental component of managerial and supervisory training programs and be fully discussed in induction programs. Periodic reinforcement through newsletters or publications can also help.

Conclusion

The antecedents of bullying are complex. They do not often simply involve a 'mean' person picking on a 'victim', as one popular stereotype suggests. Evidence from this study shows organisational context to be a particularly influencing factor. Of particular significance in the APS is the government's reform agenda, which may be seen to allow room for bullying by focussing on financial and structural issues at the expense of human factors.

All agencies face significant challenges from constant and rapid changes, and from tensions created when modern management practices clash with older ones. Conflict is also produced by the different agency environments and histories. The APS environment is a fairly unique mix of agencies affected by similar external and internal forces and regulatory mechanisms, yet with individual charters and local variations in culture. While it

is difficult to untangle the causal web, it appears that the APS environment is a significant contributor to bullying, directly and indirectly, through its corporate ethos, procedures, practices and policies.

The causes of bullying can be seen in a number of areas. Rigid work practices combined with selective interpretation of rules of conduct by managers create conflict in a rapidly changing work environment. The new legislative framework gives managers considerable discretion, thus magnifying disagreements or personality clashes. Organisational procedures such as performance management are expected to resolve these issues, but are often so poorly implemented that they create an environment that actually facilitates bullying. Changes in industrial relations have also led to conflict and bullying by eroding conditions of service and giving greater power to local decision makers.

Furthermore, changing societal values create new expectations from APS clients and place additional pressures on staff to deliver faster and more effective services. A major theme emerging from this study was that increased workloads and monitoring of work had increased bullying and in turn resulted in other negative behaviours such as absenteeism. These work practices derive from new management principles aimed at creating a more professional and accountable public service.

It appears, therefore, that more effective leadership and change management are required to reduce bullying. The evidence suggests that these are often poorly addressed, with a strong focus on outcomes and less attention to the human implications of change. New technology exacerbates this and although the net result is greater service efficiency and reduced low-level administration, there are negative consequences for job design and workloads. Inability to cope with such pressures often leads to disengagement, absenteeism and poor performance. The study found that many of these influences on bullying were interrelated and had a compounding effect, creating organisational settings that perpetuated bullying.

This study suggests the currently high occurrence of bullying in the APS results from recent profound changes. At the macro level, global developments underpin economic and legislative pressures on the APS, leading it to have to function at an increased level of flexibility, responsiveness, accountability and transparency. The pressures further challenge systems established in another era. These changes constitute a 'new world order', a major shift for a public service that by nature and legislation has been stable for most of the last century. They challenge older APS cultural values, especially in regard to power, and lead to increasingly toxic workplaces and a quest for survival by some through the use of negative behaviours such as bullying.

These competing interests and consequent conflicts are exacerbated in the APS. Most agencies in the APS are large organisations with hierarchical and rule-bound cultures, employing large numbers of staff across three generations, posing challenges of its own.

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