

# Book Review

## **Bulling: From Backyard to Boardroom**

Editors: Paul McCarthy, Jane Rylance, Robin Bennett, & Helga Zimmermann

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Workplace bullying has been estimated to cost Australia between \$6b and \$13b in financial terms annually. The costs are only estimates with the difficulties in reaching a more definitive figure being caused by problems in data collection and particularly by the difficulty in defining the impact workplace bullying has on such matters as staff absenteeism, resignations and replacements as well as performance outcomes. Of equal, if not greater concern however, is the fact that workplace bullying has consequences for individuals that go way beyond the financial, and which are increasingly perceived as inimical to personal and organisational health.

This is the second edition of the book that was first published five years ago. The editors note that in the interim “a more sophisticated awareness of the complexity and heterogeneity of bullying experiences has emerged...” As an overall comment it can be argued that the book serves to: (i) amply illustrate the relationship between the legislated obligations of workplaces, as might be required by occupational health and safety statutes or through anti discrimination legislation as well as (ii) demonstrating the need for organisations to recognise the existence and consequences of workplace bullying and to introduce strategies to combat the problem.

The book is a compilation of thirteen chapters from researchers, writers and practitioners across a range of disciplines and professional areas. As such it is not readily possible to provide a succinct statement that adequately describes it. The strategy I have adopted for this review is, therefore, to provide a brief, yet hopefully accurate and useful statement about each chapter and to frequently quote from what I perceive to be a core element of the chapter under discussion.

In the introduction to the book titled “The Bullying Challenge, the point is well made that while research into workplace bullying in Australia has been somewhat limited it is an area of considerable importance to organisational well-being. Nonetheless it is also stated that “notwithstanding the extent of guidelines available, the great majority of Australian organizations have yet to put in place policies that specifically mention bullying ... For most, bullying remains an optional concern within the domain of self regulation. Mostly, bullying is not directly accounted for ...

Chapter One provides an informative analysis of the bullying phenomenon in schools and the link between this and workplaces generally. In this regard it is argued, in terms reminiscent of conclusions being reached in research into workplace bullying in other organizations, that bullying can “be most effectively addressed when there is general agreement that: (i) it really does

constitute a serious problem for a substantial number of people and (ii) there are sensible and constructive things that can be done about it.” The research into school-related bullying emphatically demonstrates that its reduction will only be achieved when everyone in the school community works to prevent it. Such would also seem to be the case for other workplaces.

Chapter two deals with the widespread research carried out into workplace bullying in Europe. While emphasising the point that different data collection and interpretation methods have been used, “European studies ... indicate between 1% and 4% of respondents experience serious bullying” in their workplaces or in the wider community. Importantly, causes of bullying behaviour are not seen as being restricted to an individual person or group of persons. Rather, the phenomenon is seen as frequently existing as a problem of organisational structure. This appears to be particularly so in the human service industries and the cause may be perceived as being “related to more difficult career dynamics” than those that exist in other career areas.

“Bullying in the Helping Professions” is the theme of the third chapter. The main, albeit tentative conclusion from this chapter, is that findings from the research in this area, “indicate that the images of the ‘caring’ ‘empathic’ person who chooses to work in the helping professions needs to be balanced with a recognition that some workers can also behave abusively. Alongside the valuable and respectful work done by many in these professions, inappropriate and destructive behaviour also exists.”

Chapter four is to do with “Systems Bullying” and is presented by a discussion of police cultures and drawing explanations of systems bullying from sociologists such as Foucault. The chapter provides an absorbing discussion of police culture and the individual stress that exists in Australian police services that emanate from system and other forms of bullying and abuse.

Chapter five addresses bullying within “Cultures of Secrecy” and provides both personal and institutional strategies for helping to combat the problem. For example it is recognised that to be “free of bullying or abuse, some level of personal autonomy is required.” Bullying is recognised as involving a “culture of abuse in which its conventions, practices and languages can be used within a group or an organisation to mistreat, malign and revile members.” Simply being aware of such concepts and the nature of bullying helps provide the drive to “challenge abusive and bullying behaviours.”

A nascent issue of considerable concern for workplaces surrounds the theme “Bullying Using Organisational Procedures” contained in chapter six. The chapter is effectively opened by the statement that the greatest difference between bullying in schools and in other organisations is the scope for “boardroom bullies to demean other people using organisational procedures.” In essence the boardroom bully exercises positional power. A range of bullying types along with the situations under which the particular form of bullying is carried out are identified and discussed in this chapter. One major area of concern in contemporary working environments is expressed in the following terms: “The behaviour of organisations in stress-prevalent situations may be that, at the highest level, some organisations and jurisdictions are legitimising and validating the bullying option as a frontline or fall-back strategy for coping with problems forced on those organisations, industries, or jurisdictions.” The author concludes that it is only when there is an understanding that the organisation itself is the bully that bullying behaviour can be effectively addressed.

Chapter seven, “The Reluctant Executioners” addresses the problem of workplace bullying from the perspective of organisational downsizing, and in particular from the perspective of those in the organisation given responsibility for retrenching other workers. In this regard it is worthy of note that nearly 3.5 million people have been retrenched in Australia during the period 1996 to 1998. This has undoubtedly come at a great cost in terms of “emotional, physical and financial costs for the victims and survivors of the process.”

Chapter eight is titled “Epiphany: A Model of Analysis for Workplace Violence.” Here epiphany, perceived as understanding achieved through “manifested knowledge and enlightened awareness” is utilised as a methodological strategy to better appreciate the “inordinate power differentials in the workplace [that] have been framed as both workplace bullying and workplace violence.”

“The Bullying Syndrome: Complicity and Responsibility” is the title and theme of chapter nine. The author here examines implications for responsibility stemming from the construction of bullying at work perceived in terms of a discourse. He concludes that an understanding of the limits of the discourse “suggests responsibilities for further change, given the risks of retribution and costs to persons speaking out about bullying, confronting their perpetrators, and taking action in tribunals or courts.”

Chapter ten concerns “Health and Safety Guidelines to Address Bullying at Work.” It is noted in this chapter that bullying is frequently used as a management tool to achieve organisational ends. The consequences, or impact of bullying are discussed and employers’ common law and legislative obligations to prevent bullying are emphasised.

“Bullying of Victims by Present Injustices in the System” is the title and focus of chapter eleven. Here it is emphasised that “it will not be too far in the future where people who are victims of bullying will be represented by lawyers in their case ... The author continues by discussing possible legal remedies that are potentially available to reduce the problem of workplace bullying.

Chapter twelve, “Eliminating Professional Abuse by Managers” emphasises the need for managers to be more knowledgeable and informed about bullying as well as being more skilled in its prevention. The point is well made that workplace bullying and abuse is unprofessional. Thus managers must develop appropriate people management skills including ‘emotional intelligence’ in order to be considered true professionals.

Given an ageing population in Australia, the final chapter, “Bullying the Elderly” is most fitting. This chapter addresses ‘elder bullying’ from several perspectives including that of the older person still in the workforce. Arguably of greater concern, however, is the problem of dealing with bullying and abuse of those at ‘a very old age’ where the potential for ‘abuse and mishandling’ is greatest.

## **Conclusion**

It can be seen from the snippets of discussion associated with each chapter, that *Bullying: From Backyard to Boardroom* covers a multiplicity of issues to do with workplace bullying. While readers will benefit from some chapters more than others, the extent of recent research, the information and discussion provided as well as the sheer importance of the subject matter, makes

this book essential reading for anyone interested in, associated with, or responsible for preventing workplace bullying. Given the financial cost to the Australian community as well as the consequences to both victims and perpetrators of bullying this is a problem that cannot be ignored. *Bullying: From Backyard to Boardroom* provides a sound starting point for those wishing to become more informed about the topic.

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