

Management Checklist

Managing the bully

This is an excerpt from a [Chartered Management Institute](#) checklist providing practical advice and guidance enabling managers to check out how to do a range of tasks quickly and efficiently using concise, tried and tested information.

Introduction

Bullying at work damages the health, self-esteem and morale of both those who feel they are being bullied and those who see it occurring. Bullying can also have serious effects for employers, possibly through legal cases, but also as a drain on resources that will undermine productivity and performance. If undetected, one bully can increase staff stress levels and resignations, causing associated costs in absenteeism, recruitment, and job training.

No current law deals directly with how employees are treated at work, but a range of legislation can be relevant to bullying cases (including discrimination, harassment and health and safety law). Breach of trust or confidence may be claimed where employers fail to act on complaints about bullying. This checklist focuses upon dealing with bullying at work from a managerial perspective, at team, department or organisational level.

Definition

There is no legal definition of bullying, but in the Chartered Management Institute's [Bullying in the Workplace Guidance for Managers](#), it is defined as: "offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, or abuse or misuse of power, which violates the dignity of, or creates a hostile environment which undermines, humiliates, denigrates or injures, the recipient."

Action checklist

1. Create a preventative context

Make it clear by your actions and example that there is no place for bullying in your team. Look out for factors which can contribute to bullying attitudes, such as discrimination or prejudice, unrealistic targets or deadlines, poor management skills, inappropriate appraisal or performance management systems.

2. Establish an understanding of workplace bullying

Opinions and sensibilities differ about what constitutes bullying behaviour. In essence, if someone complains about feeling bullied, their case needs to be sympathetically investigated and, where possible, resolved. It may be worthwhile to discuss understandings of bullying within your team, as these can be so varied. Some examples of specific behaviours which may cause or contribute to complaints of bullying are: aggressive behaviours involving shouting, swearing or abuse, lack of interpersonal or communication skills, giving people either too much or too little work, threats relating to job security, sarcasm and ridicule.

3. Develop a policy

A policy on workplace bullying will help to communicate the message that bullying is not acceptable. It should also help to raise awareness of the issue, and prevent mishandled responses to complaints. Policies should include:

- ✓ examples of unacceptable behaviour
- ✓ a statement from senior management making bullying behaviour a disciplinary offence

- ✓ guidance on the steps complainants should take, including contact details for a trained contact officer for complainants who are uneasy about approaching their manager
- ✓ other possible contacts, including trade union and health and safety representatives, where relevant
- ✓ a summary of informal and formal procedures, including investigation stages and timescales

4. Handling complaints

Managers need to be clear about how to proceed if an employee complains about being bullied at work. An informal approach at the start can help to clear problems related to poor communication or lack of personal awareness. Important questions that need to be asked straight away include: What happened? Who was involved? Where did the incident take place? When did it take place? How did the complainant/s act at the time? Were there any witnesses? Was this the first such incident, or part of a series of similar things? Have they discussed the bullying with anyone else? Have they taken any action to stop further harassment?

If the complaint is not recorded through unofficial procedures, mediation, whether with an internal, trained officer or through an external, independent service, can be a useful second resort, before calling upon the organisation's official grievance procedures.

If a case clearly and unambiguously involves serious bullying, however, or may relate to specific protective law (such as sexual, racial or other harassment legislation) then it will be necessary to take legal advice, and use the official procedures.

5. Dealing with the bully

Where perceived bullying has not become extreme, the situation allows for unofficial steps, so if the complainant still feels able to face and talk with the bully, it may be possible to resolve the issue yourself, or through a mediator, to the satisfaction of both parties.

Whatever course is taken, the complainant's feelings will need to be a primary consideration, and the employer's concern to protect complainant well-being needs to be indisputable, unless and until the case is investigated and/or resolved.

At the same time, the accused person/s should also be treated with respect, and no assumptions or judgements should be made, however well you may think you know either party. Remember that the complaint could be one of the few resulting from deliberate malice, or on the other hand, could just relate to mistaken perceptions or poor communications on either side. You do not know until you investigate, so establishing any facts you can is the most important thing you have to do.

6. Train managers and the main contact personnel

It is important to provide training to help managers and other relevant personnel to deal with the possibility of workplace bullying in an appropriate way. This will raise awareness of the issue, ensure that people understand what to do when complaints arise, and reduce the risk of mishandled complaints and legal cases.

The full Management Checklist is part of a series 'CheckPoint' service offered by the Chartered Management Institute. Focusing on issues relating to people management and personal effectiveness, further information can be viewed at www.managers.org.uk/checkpoint or by calling (0)1536 207 373 to request a sample of what Checkpoint has to offer.