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Designed by aDesign

Printed by TCM/Vail

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THE ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS

# Beat bullying in the workplace

A guide for trade  
union representatives  
on tackling bullying  
and harassment  
at work

  
at WORK  
DIGNITY

*The Dignity at Work Partnership is a project set up in 2004 by Amicus the Union (now part of Unite) to raise awareness of workplace bullying and harassment, and the damaging effect they have on employees and organisational development.*

Funded by Amicus and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), the project aims to identify the most effective ways of dealing with bullying and harassment, and to encourage employers to adopt best practices in tackling the problem.

Organisations are invited to join the partnership and to sign a voluntary charter expressing commitment to pursuing dignity at work values. In return they receive a package of support to help them deal with bullying and harassment.

For details of the partnership contact Mandy Telford, Coordinator, on 020 7420 8900 or visit [www.dignityatwork.org](http://www.dignityatwork.org)

**Partnership steering group members include:** ACAS, British Airways, BAE Systems, BT, Connect: the Union for Professionals in Communications, Legal and General, Remploy, Royal Mail, The Chemical Industries Association and the TUC.

➤➤ Our aim is to encourage employee representatives and employers to build a culture in which respect for all individuals is seen as an essential part of conduct for everyone in the workplace ⚡⚡

Baroness Anne Gibson  
*Chair, Dignity at Work Partnership*

*This guide has been produced by the Dignity at Work Partnership to provide trade union representatives with information, advice and examples of good practice in tackling bullying and harassment at work.*

Statistics show that bullying is worryingly wide spread. One fifth of all UK employees have experienced some form of bullying or harassment, according to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD). A TUC survey reveals two million workers said they had been bullied at work in a six month period.

### What is bullying?

Bullying can take many forms. It is generally accepted as unwanted behaviour that offends, persecutes or excludes someone. It includes treating individuals in a demeaning and unacceptable way and can be intimidating, malicious or insulting, or a misuse of power to undermine, humiliate, threaten or cause injury. Harassment is usually seen as constant interference or intimidation that violates people's dignity or creates a hostile or degrading environment.

➤➤ One fifth of all UK employees have experienced some form of bullying or harassment over the last two years..

Over one in ten employees say they are aware of others at work being bullied ⚡⚡

## Facts about bullying

Anyone can be the target of bullying and it can occur at all levels of work. It damages individuals, the performance of organisations and profitability. The cost and consequences of this are:

- ❖ time and money spent investigating and resolving complaints
- ❖ money lost through absenteeism
- ❖ loss of employees – targets of bullying and employees who witness it are more likely to leave than complain or challenge bad behaviour
- ❖ recruitment costs resulting from high employee turnover rates
- ❖ expenditure on tribunals and financial settlement.

Certain groups including black and Asian employees, women and disabled people, are more likely to be targeted – nearly one third of Asian employees, or those from other ethnic communities, report they have experienced some form of bullying or harassment, compared with 18 per cent of white employees.

Disabled employees are at least twice as likely to report having experienced one or more forms of bullying and harassment compared to non-disabled employees (CIPD).

Often employees who are bullied state others in their workplace are subjected to the same treatment. This indicates the organisation, rather than the individual, has a bullying culture.

➤➤ Anyone can be the target of bullying and it can occur at all levels of work ◀◀



## WORKPLACE BULLYING – WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT IT?

*In 2006 The Dignity at Work Partnership published findings from research conducted on its behalf by the University of Portsmouth on the effects of bullying and harassment in the workplace and the most effective ways of dealing with it.*

Key findings and recommendations include:

- ❖ **Zero tolerance:** Organisations found to be most successful at dealing with bullying and harassment adopt a zero tolerance approach
- ❖ **Business case:** There are significant costs associated with the failure to deal with bullying and harassment at work and financial benefits to having a zero tolerance approach. This is best demonstrated through the development of a clear business case
- ❖ **Policies:** These set standards for acceptable behaviour and make it clear to individuals what their responsibilities are towards each other
- ❖ **Strong leadership:** Actions of leaders and senior managers are crucial. They must take the lead in tackling bullying and harassment to show employees they take the problem seriously
- ❖ **People focus:** UK workplaces are increasingly target driven environments with a shift away from people focused management towards command and control cultures
- ❖ **Intervention:** Early and informal action to resolve complaints and conflicts is core to effective intervention. The earlier an issue is resolved the better for all parties concerned
- ❖ **Training:** Awareness raising programmes and training are important in achieving change, but need to be mandatory and interactive to be effective
- ❖ **Trade Unions and HR:** Bullying at work is best tackled through a partnership of management, trade union representatives and human resource practitioners.

## THE ROLE OF TRADE UNIONS

*Trade unions exist primarily to represent and protect the interests of their members at work. Union representatives are often the first point of contact for employees who have problems. Increasingly they find themselves taking on the pastoral role no longer provided by today's strategically focused human resource services.*

In the push to reduce levels of bullying and harassment, the union role can be defined as helping to create a work environment where dignity and respect is afforded to all employees, where incidents are few, and those that do arise are dealt with quickly and efficiently.

Researchers found the organisations most effective in developing anti-bullying and harassment work cultures tend to adopt a zero tolerance approach; and where unionised, work in partnership with union representatives.

In more effective organisations, when incidents of bullying are uncovered or reported, support for individuals is often led by the union with management taking responsibility for the wider work culture to ensure zero tolerance.

➤➤ Organisations most effective in developing anti-bullying and harassment work cultures... work in partnership with union representatives ◀◀

## PARTNERSHIP WORKING

*Partnership working is based on agreement between individuals or organisations to work together to reach common or compatible aims. This may involve sharing resources and responsibilities, and a commitment to cooperate if the partnership is to succeed.*

The TUC describes working in partnership as delivering higher productivity, improved performance and successful changes to workplace organisation. It sees partnerships as enabling unions to play an active role in shaping an organisation's policy and strategy, and increases union involvement in organisational change.

While trade unions and employers are generally seen as having separate and sometimes conflicting agendas, the research confirms bullying and harassment is dealt with best when union representatives, human resource practitioners and managers work in partnership.

When management and trade unions are in constant conflict, there are few opportunities for complaints about bullying to be resolved unless they are brought formally – a situation that can prove costly for all concerned.

### Opportunities for partnership working

Early and informal action is core to effective intervention. The research confirms the preferred approach to dealing with unacceptable behaviour is to nip it in the bud before its effects cause wider damage.

Bullying impacts on individuals and organisational performance and profitability. Potential costs and consequences are:

- ❖ time and money spent investigating and resolving complaints
- ❖ money lost through high levels of absenteeism

- ❖ loss of employees – targets of bullying and employees who witness it are more likely to leave than complain or challenge bad behaviour
- ❖ expenditure on recruitment resulting from high employee turnover rates
- ❖ expensive tribunals and financial settlements
- ❖ low morale, underperformance, insecurity, ill health and unstable working relationships; all of which impact on productivity and profitability.

Where organisations are committed to change, potential for partnership working opportunities emerge:

- ❖ **Policy formulation:** Policies lay down visions, aims and guidelines for behaviour. They provide the premise for an action plan which spells out how the policy will be implemented and the aims achieved. An inclusive approach to policy development which involves every layer of an organisation, including trade unions, encourages engagement and commitment across the board. It also maximises the likelihood of meeting the needs of the workforce and becoming embedded in workplace culture

- ❖ **Data collection:** Quantifiable data is needed for effective employee management systems. This includes information on complaints, sickness, absence, and on individuals leaving the organisation. It also includes time spent by those, including union representatives, providing support to employees involved in bullying and harassment situations.

Due to their close contact with workers, union representatives are often privy to incidents and information that managers are unaware of. This gives them the opportunity to collect data which could be fed into a more strategic approach to dealing with bullying and harassment.

Data may also be collected by union representatives conducting their own surveys to establish the extent and nature of bullying experienced by members. Information derived is useful for monitoring and evaluation

- ❖ **Communication:** Policies need to be communicated to employees. Union representatives can support management efforts by reinforcing key messages and developments through trade union newsletters, magazines and other media

- ❖ **Informal enquiries:** These tend to occur when an employee feels disquiet or distress about the situation they find themselves in. Claims of bullying or harassment are unlikely to have been made at this stage, but the employee feels sufficiently concerned to seek advice and validation of their feelings. Where their first point of contact is the trade union, representatives have the opportunity to clarify, mediate and help resolve the problem informally. In this way situations do not escalate unnecessarily and productive work can resume as soon as possible

➤➤ Representatives have the opportunity to clarify, mediate and help resolve the problem informally ◀◀

- ❖ **After the event:** Following the resolution of a formal complaint, both the complainant and accused employee need to be reintegrated into the workplace. This presents an opportunity for working together whereby a member of HR and the trade union representative meet with team members prior to the parties returning, in order to pave the way. At this meeting the team could be given permissible and necessary information to reduce the possibility of rumours and gossip interfering with their return to work.



## CASE STUDY

*The Children's Society is a Christian charity which employs just over 800 people and works with around 50,000 children and families in England each year.*

*It acknowledges that bully is a complex, innate human behaviour, but believes it is in everybody's interest for the organisation to have a zero tolerance approach to it. It also accepts that, although figures vary between studies, in the vast majority of cases it is line managers who are, wittingly or unwittingly, the perpetrators.*

*On a business level bullying affects productivity, which impacts on the quality of support the society can provide to the children and young people it serves. Recently, it emerged that there was a need to revamp both its policy and procedure in order for the organisation to have a deeper understanding of bullying issues. This was due partly to recent cases, but also because the local union branch and management at the Children's Society signed up to the Amicus/DTI Dignity at Work initiative.*

*A working group was formed in 2006 facilitated by the local Amicus branch secretary, Fergus Roseburgh. It includes the local Amicus branch chair, two directors and the most senior personnel and policy managers, which shows commitment to the policy from the union and the highest level of management within the organisation.*

*A rise in complaints is expected immediately following the launch of the new policy as staff become more aware of bullying issues. But training will be given to key managers, HR employees, union representatives and staff who volunteer to be anti-bullying and harassment advisers for a new confidential helpline.*

*When the policy is launched, a letter will be sent from the chief executive and the union branch secretary to all staff, expressing the joint commitment of the organisation and the union to the expected standards of behaviour and a zero tolerance approach to bullying and harassment.*

## THE WIDER ROLE

*The role of unions in the drive against bullying and harassment extends beyond the remit of partnership working.*

As a bare minimum, union representatives can be expected to help raise awareness of workers' rights, the damaging effects of bullying, provide advice, represent members when they lodge formal complaints, ensure they are treated fairly and correctly, and assist in the resolution of disputes.

They are also expected to:

❖ **Listen:** People who have been bullied at work need to be handled with care and sensitivity. Bullying has an impact on the health and well-being of the individual. It can cause low self-esteem, demotivation, stress, anxiety, depression and ill health. In severe cases it can lead to mental health breakdown. Taking time to listen to what they have to say is important for their sense of well being and for understanding the issues

- ❖ **Clarify:** Although an employee may complain about the way they have been treated, they may not recognise the behaviour as bullying. Helping them to make sense of what is happening helps clarify what needs to be done next
- ❖ **Give advice:** Targets of bullying need to know what options are open for resolving the situation they find themselves in.

➤➤ In severe cases it can lead to  
mental health breakdown ◀◀



Trade unions also have the role of supporting their representatives through:

- ❖ **Provision of training:** This is essential for awareness raising, informing, educating, challenging and changing behaviour. Unions have a responsibility to provide and ensure their representatives have access to relevant training which will help them fulfil their role successfully. Only 22% of trade union and other employee representatives are trained in tackling bullying and harassment (CIPD). Researchers also found it rare for union representatives to be trained in conflict resolution
- ❖ **Campaigning and awareness raising:** Spreading awareness of the effects of bullying and campaigning in support of dignity at work, through their own publications and using external media.

➔➔ Only 22% of trade union and other employee representatives are trained in tackling bullying and harassment ↵↵

Adopting progressive approaches to dealing with bullying and harassment is the responsibility of trade unions and employers. Representatives also need to know when it is appropriate to act informally, to prevent bullying and harassment; for example if a representative sees a situation that could potentially escalate it is entirely appropriate to intervene informally. Where there is a healthy partnership, levels of trust between employers and trade unions tend to be high and the potential for informal intervention is greater.

Without cooperation, encouraging a culture of dignity at work becomes harder to achieve.

## REFERENCES AND INFORMATION

### **Beat bullying in the workplace:**

A report on research findings on tackling workplace bullying and harassment (2006). Published by and available from the Dignity at Work Partnership.  
Telephone: 020 7420 8900

### **Managing conflict at work:**

A CIPD survey of the UK and Ireland (2004), Chartered Institute of Personnel Development.  
Telephone: 020 8612 6200,  
[www.cipd.co.uk](http://www.cipd.co.uk)

### **Harassment, bullying and violence at work:**

A. Ishmael, Spiro Press

### **Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service (ACAS)**

Telephone: 08457 474747  
[www.acas.org.uk](http://www.acas.org.uk)

### **Amicus the Union** (now part of Unite)

Telephone: 020 7420 8900  
[www.amicustheunion.org](http://www.amicustheunion.org)

### **The Andrea Adams Trust**

Telephone Helpline: 01273 704900  
[www.andreadamstrust.org](http://www.andreadamstrust.org)

### **Department of Trade and Industry**

Telephone: 020 7215 5000  
[www.dti.gov.uk](http://www.dti.gov.uk)

### **Dignity at Work Partnership**

Telephone: 020 7420 8900  
[www.dignityatwork.org](http://www.dignityatwork.org)

### **Employment Tribunals**

Telephone: 0845 795 9775  
[www.employmenttribunals.gov.uk](http://www.employmenttribunals.gov.uk)

### **Health and Safety Executive**

Telephone: 0845 345 0055  
[www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)

### **Trade Union Congress**

Telephone: 020 7636 4030  
[www.tuc.org.uk](http://www.tuc.org.uk)

### **The UK National Stress Network**

Telephone: 07966 196033  
[www.workstress.net](http://www.workstress.net)

*Other leaflets in the Beat Bullying in the Workplace series:*

- ❖ The role of leaders
- ❖ The role of human resources
- ❖ The business case

