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Bullying is not just a school yard problem

Frequently in the newspaper we see articles on children being bullied and society insisting that somebody stops it. Yet we seem to overlook that this very unpleasant social behaviour is not confined to just the school yard. It is a real problem for adults within the workforce as well. Also make no mistake bullying is not limited to the typical stereotype of being the 'employer' or 'males,' I have assisted employers who have experienced bullying by staff members.



During the year the government department WorkSafe actually defined bullying, so we now have a guide that this is “repeated behaviour which is unreasonable and creates a risk to health and safety,” and typically takes the form of intimidation, belittling remarks, ignoring and/or excluding the person, and setting them up to fail.

WorkSafe issued its “Preventing and responding to workplace bullying best practice guidelines” in February, which took workplace bullying from just an employment issue into a health and safety issue as well. Bullying now has employer responsibilities under the Health & Safety in Employment Act. The effect of this is that the employer will have to prove they took all practical steps to prevent bullying.

What is more significant is that the employer could face tougher sanctions under Health and Safety breaches if complaints are laid – large fines and even imprisonment are on the high end of the scale.

So how do we avoid this issue?

- Make sure everyone knows that your workplace culture has a zero tolerance for bullying and include this as a workplace value
- Ensure you cover workplace values in your interview and orientation process with new staff
- The zero tolerance on bullying should be covered in your staff handbook
- Include and discuss bullying as a workplace value in your health and safety meetings so you discuss it like any other hazard management
- Create safe systems and processes for reporting bullying allowing people to seek help
- Make sure you take action and resolve bullying issues

Reiterate that business functions after hours do not change the expectations of allowable behaviour

As an employer you do not want to deal with personal grievances and bullying complaints, and when everyone knows the clear expectations on matters then you are less likely to have to.

If you have any questions or concerns around this or any other employment issue then give me a call. John Brosnan at CooperAitken, DDI 07 889 8838 or email john@cooperaikten.co.nz.