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Embedding Psychological health and wellbeing at work

A brief guide to the Psychology of
Conflict, bullying and harassment

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Case study

Despite individual informal complaints against a head of department stretching over 9 years no action by top management was taken to investigate or resolve the complaints. Instead top management indicated their support for the head of department. So terrified were the individuals concerned, both men and women, that they didn't realise that each member of the department had been individually affected. They had kept every harmful event to themselves. Eventually, and only because someone was found hysterical in the toilets one day, did the individual complaints merge into a collective grievance; staff having overcome their fear of reprisal by deciding to act together. Over the 9 years the department had reduced in numbers from 15 to 6, with a large amount of absence due to sickness, and the impossibility of replacing staff who left. The reputation of the department was shattered, and the costs incurred in failing to deal with the problems were massive, making the department at risk of closure, thereby diminishing the overall success of the organisation.

The organisation widely published a statement of values that incorporated concern for the health and wellbeing of staff and students.

Outcome

Within three days, with our help, the conflict was resolved. The head of department was salvageable but not as head of the same department. He decided to leave. The top management were heavily criticised by us for failing to take action, and underwent a training programme in managing people.

The department is back to full strength and working well after a period of six months.

Brief guidance

- 1) Conflicts, bullying and harassment at work cause significant psychological distress to those involved and may create a 'ripple effect' of psychological distress for those working adjacent to the conflicting parties. Sickness, absence and staff turnover increases, and the general level of performance of staff deteriorates leading to poor organisational performance.
 - 2) In cases of bullying and harassment the psychological distress felt by 'the victim' can lead to serious mental ill health, whilst 'the bully' may have sensations of happiness and power that resemble psychological health and wellbeing. Managers need to be aware of these symptoms of conflict.
 - 3) Many staff in conflict with managers hide their concerns to themselves for fear of retribution and deepening level of conflict against them. This often leads to disruption, long periods of absence, and the turnover of staff. The costs involved are massive in human and financial terms. Managers need to develop trusting relationships with staff to enable events, such as these, to be exposed and dealt with immediately.
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Our role

- OrganisationHealth resolves conflicts quickly – normally within 3 days. This minimises the continuing disruption to staff, and the performance of the organisation, and enables the organisation and its staff to recover from the deeply damaging situation.
- Our approach is to adopt the role of investigator, and through this role we interview everyone concerned, examine all correspondence, review all policies and processes involved in the case, and form a view about the most appropriate way forward. We do not make a judgement about the conflict itself, merely report what we have established by corroborative evidence, and make recommendations as to the action to be followed.
- Upon acceptance of our recommendations, we provide the services (training, coaching, counselling, mediation, legal and consultancy) that support the implementation of the recommendations.