

Impact not intent

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Abstract

Purpose – This case study aims to describe a consultancy project where managers in a distribution centre of a major logistics company were developed to give them confidence to implement a new harassment and bullying policy.

Design/methodology/approach – Included within the design was an action research project using a five-stage scale defining the development of harassment and bullying. The new policy, the background to it and the development scale were introduced using group training methods.

Findings – The study finds that during the follow-up discussions and reports after the action research, managers reported that they could distinguish “good humoured banter” from harassment. They also distinguished more serious examples of harassment and bullying. In a four-week period there were 21 incidents in the two lowest stages of harassment development and seven were in the higher stages. These even are of the level that may create a reportable incident. Follow-up three months after the programme is also described.

Originality/value – This paper will be of value to directors, strategic managers and human resource professionals who want to discover a way to enable managers to handle harassment and bullying issues with more confidence.

Keywords Harassment, Bullying, Conversation, Distribution centres, Personnel administration

Paper type Case study

Dramatic incidents of bullying and harassment are reported in the newspapers. We breathe a sigh of relief that in the organisations we work with there are no incidents of new starters being stripped naked and knocked around as an initiation ritual. The trouble is we have less confidence that something similar may not happen in the future. Further we normally do not have any indication of what the chances are of something like this happening.

Behind the headlines and gross accounts of harassment and bullying, there is a whole range of incidents that are not so dramatic. On their own, they may not amount to much. However a repeated pattern of minor incidents can become a culture of harassment. For an individual it can become unbearably stressful. Do minor incidents build up and precipitate a major incident? Are there quite serious incidents going on that are not being reported, or worse are being ignored and not managed? The normal returns may not indicate the full extent of the problem as this case study shows.

A project started in 2005 and followed up this year throws some light on these questions and suggests a solution.

The project in outline

The company we worked in is a distribution centre employing about 900 staff. It is part of a large logistics group. The operation is open 24 hours per day, seven days a week – except Christmas day.

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There was a policy called Harassment and Bullying, which had been written three years before. The policy had not been fully implemented and had not been reviewed in that time. Senior managers were a bit uneasy about what might be going on but there was no evidence of any serious problems when the project was first discussed.

As well as improving the culture of the company we also wanted to assess the level of harassment and bullying that was going on. An assumption behind this project is that the figures for the amount of harassment usually reported in a company are based on those incidents that result in a formal investigation. Incidents of harassment dealt with informally may not be recorded. We wanted to get below the tip of the iceberg.

Further, employees may put up with harassment, as one person said to us during this project “because that’s what goes on here”. The effect on performance and attendance may be quite significant if harassment and bullying are common but just accepted and not reported.

The project included:

- A rewrite of the policy and the design and development of training programmes to implement it. We used the definitions from the ACAS web site to define harassment and bullying (see Appendix 1). Although there is a difference, for practising managers it is not too important. Their task is to manage harassment and bullying. Their actions are much the same in each case, and they need confidence to do it.
- The new policy was to be communicated through briefing and notice boards to all staff.
- Managers were trained. As part of the project we wanted to help managers to identify the difference between good humoured banter and harassment. We also wanted to help managers who had become cautious about talking to staff about low performance because they were almost invariably accused of “harassment”.
- Some managers were selected for counselling training to deal with serious cases and cases where managers were themselves accused of harassment.
- Some warehouse staff were selected for training as “supporters” to advise and support those who felt they were being harassed or bullied and wanted to speak in confidence about what to do.
- Managers and supporters attended the same training programme at the same times.

As it happens a very serious incident of bullying emerged as the project was developing. This was the only serious incident of harassment in the previous 24 months. No minor cases of harassment had been reported during that time.

Harassment – how it starts and develops

To help put some structure on minor incidents of harassment, course members were introduced during the programme to a five-stage scale of how harassment develops. This is summarised below.

Harassment has a way of growing. Some choose to ignore it in the hope it will go away. Often unfortunately ignoring it leads to it growing worse and happening more frequently. If we stand back for a moment we can see a series of steps that illustrates how harassment can develop.

Stage one – bad light

The person (or group) to be harassed is singled out. A few seeds are sown. The individual (or group) is identified and thrown into a bad light. This can be done in many ways. Commonly they are described behind their backs in insulting terms. Here are some examples:

- They can be given a nickname like “motor mouth” because they talk a lot. They may be referred to as “lazy”.
- They are forever the subject of trivial faultfinding.
- Others know about this harassment but the person being harassed may be unaware that it is going on deliberately and that they are the target.

Stage two – isolation

The harassment becomes open. The person being harassed becomes aware of it. It is often subtle and low key. Here are some examples:

- The term “motor mouth” is occasionally used in front of the person being harassed.
- When the summer barbeque is announced it is made clear to them that they should not put their name down for it.
- They are the subject of jokes.
- Their previous friends stay silent. They are sent to Coventry.
- They are treated differently than others. They are given a bigger share of the boring or dirtier work.
- They are set unrealistic deadlines and targets, which are changed without notice if they ever get near to achieving them.

Stage three – low level aggression

The aggression starts with words and gestures. Here are some examples:

- Sarcasm and demeaning remarks are made regularly to them.
- They are put down and their ideas ignored.
- The person being harassed is shown cartoons about themselves, which are unfair or untrue.
- Unpleasant and threatening e-mails are sent through at Christmas time.
- Others can come back from lunch a bit late and nothing is said. But they are told off in front of colleagues if they are a minute late.
- They are the subject of unjustified criticism. They are blamed for things that have nothing to do with them.
- They are shouted at and threatened.
- They are closely monitored and the team leader is “always on their back”.
- Their application for holidays is refused or allowed only at inconvenient times.

Stage four – high level aggression

The range is very large here. It can start with aggression towards their property. Here are some examples:

- Their lunch box can be contaminated.
- The swing doors in the corridor are left to swing into them as they pass through, often with a false apology.
- Others are joining in the bullying or mobbing, pushing past them in the dinner queue. There may be group laughter at the discomfort of the person being harassed.
- Physical aggression can occur like being “felt” in their private parts.

“ Harassment has a way of growing. Some choose to ignore it in the hope it will go away. Often unfortunately ignoring it leads to it growing worse and happening more frequently.”

- It could be straightforward punching and pushing over.
- The person being harassed may be hit by a forklift truck, which may be described as “an accident”, but which everyone knows was in fact deliberate.

Stage five – getting rid of them

There are two ways here:

1. The person being harassed is told to leave or else. They may choose to resign rather than face the threat.
2. Alternatively the company’s disciplinary procedure can be used. The person being harassed is set up for a serious disciplinary offence, perhaps to do with safety. They are then investigated and enough people speak against them. In due course the company applies the summary dismissal procedure.

The effect of the harassment extends beyond the original place of work. The person being harassed tries to join another company. The references from their previous employer are unsatisfactory. The person being harassed now finds it difficult to get another job.

How the information for this article was gathered

As part of the design, those attending courses had a choice of two projects. The projects were intended to help them implement their learning in the reality of the work place. A total of 22 people attending courses chose the project that has lead to this paper. The project work was completed within four weeks after the main training and before the follow-up.

The course members who chose this project were given a brief about the objective, the method of gathering information and how it would be reported. In essence course members looked out for evidence of harassment during two to three periods of time, usually of one to two hours each period over ten days while doing their normal work. They categorised their observations using the five-stage model above.

The results are presented in Table I.

Discussion

Not surprisingly, most of the incidents reported are in the lowest stages of harassment development and over half of them were observed as banter or good humour.

Table I

<i>Five-stage scale of how harassment starts and develops</i>	<i>Incidents judged as banter or good humour</i>	<i>Incidents judged as may have been unwelcome</i>	<i>Incidents which were judged as unwelcome</i>	<i>Number of incidents reported by managers</i>
1 Bad light	42	12	20	64
2 Isolation	11	2	1	14
3 Low level aggression	14	4	6	24
4 High level aggression	1	0	1	2
5 Get rid of them	0	0	0	0
Totals	68	18	28	114

Perhaps the most significant figure on the table is the 28, bottom of column four. What this means is that about one quarter of all incidents were judged by managers to be unwelcome. Of these incidents, 21 were in the two lowest stages of harassment development and seven were in the higher stages. These seven are of the level that may create a reportable incident.

Extending these observations of seven incidents to a 364-day working year of 24 hours per day, we could predict nearly 400 incidents of low level aggression and over 65 incidents of high level aggression in that time. (Details of the calculations are in Appendix 2.) Any of these could give rise to a complaint. Given these figures, what is surprising is that so few complaints arise. It is a measure of how people put up with harassment of a serious nature and accept it as part of working life.

The new supporters will record their meetings using the same scale. As time progresses, therefore, further evidence for comparison will emerge.

These figures suggest that the skills of the supporters will be in demand. It will be interesting to see if that proves to be the case. A review in a year's time is recommended. The figures do not suggest any other procedures need to be put in place at this stage.

An area of concern for management from these figures is the impact of harassment on productivity. Where banter is good humoured it could be said to be motivating and I agree. Where the impact is unwelcome then we can expect increased sick absence and lower levels of motivation and productivity. Changes in the culture of the organisation would need a strategic decision. If this predicted level of harassment turns out to be confirmed by returns from Supporters in a year's time, then there would be a case for an alteration in the culture of the business.

Conclusion

These results show that one of the aims of the project has been met. Course members have learned to differentiate banter from harassment. They were able to distinguish the impact in 84 per cent of their observations. They have learned that it is the impact that matters, not the intent. This is a major message of the course.

Another aim of the project has also been achieved. We have been able to estimate the amount of minor incidents of harassment and show that less serious incidents are occurring and they seem to be accepted as part of the culture. At the same time we were able to make a count of the number of more serious incidents that may potentially spark a complaint.

The scale of five stages of harassment work well enough for these purposes.

Follow-up

We have been able to discuss the project with a senior manager four months after these development activities. What had happened? Had the predictions come true?

The serious incident of harassment and bullying had been settled, without going to Tribunal.

The policy document had not at that point been briefed to staff. New notice boards are being put up and the policy will be put on the notice boards and briefed at that time.

There had been no reported incidents of harassment or bullying. That is much the same as before the development activity.

“By being able to recognise it they will have more confidence in tackling it. Instead of being worried about harassment they can see it as part of their management job.”

More intriguingly, neither the supporters nor the counselling managers had been called on even once to perform their role. Does this mean that people being harassed did not know of the supporters' services? This was thought unlikely, as they were well known at the time of the development last year. Were the managers dealing informally and more confidently with harassment and bullying and stopping it at a low level before it could build up? Possibly, although there was no direct evidence. Had the serious incident had such an effect on the management that they are aware of the potential for disruption that they are now pay more attention to the problem? Again there is no direct evidence. The senior manager we talked to thought it was a combination of everything that had gone on last year.

A question that hangs in the air is "How do we keep the skills of supporters and counselling managers fresh when they do not have anything to do?"

And finally

This project shows that it is possible to make an impact on how managers view harassment and bullying. By being able to recognise it they will have more confidence in tackling it. Instead of being worried about harassment they can see it as part of their management job. If they are able to handle it informally they will improve attendance and productivity. They will save some individuals from a daily torment. They may even be able to help those who perpetrate harassment to work without the need to bully others.

A lot is written about dignity and respect at work. The first step is to know just what is going on. This project tackled that issue.

Appendix 1

Definitions taken from the ACAS web site:

Bullying may be characterised as offensive, intimidating, malicious, or insulting behaviour, . . . intended to undermine, humiliate, denigrate, or injure the recipient.

Harassment is unwanted conduct affecting the dignity of men and women in the workplace. It may be related to age, sex, race, disability, religion, nationality or any personal characteristic of the individual.

Appendix 2. Calculations

The figures in the Table I of this report arose from 22 managers each observing for approximately six hours. So 114 incidents were observed in 132 hours. Extending them will give an annual figure.

The warehouse operates in a year for 364 days × 24 hours, i.e. 8,736 hours. Divide by 132 and multiply by 114. In that time then we can predict 7,544 incidents. The figure per year predicted for unwelcome incidents is 28 divided by 114 and multiplied by 7,544: So 1,850 of these would be unwelcome. Now to determine how many of these would be in the stage of harassment development called "verbal aggression" and how many in the stage called "physical aggression".

Six divided by 28 and multiplied by 1,850 gives the number of unwelcome incidents that are "verbal aggression" in a year, i.e. 396. One divided by 28 and multiplied by 1,850 gives the number of "physical aggression" incidents in a year i.e. 66.

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