



Bullying and workplace aggression

The Office of the Ombudsman has listened to many visitors, often in tears, who come to tell their stories after a long period of suffering. They have shared with us how an ongoing difficult situation has deeply impacted them.

We hear that they felt humiliated, targeted, excluded from meetings and emails, isolated, micromanaged, their authority undermined, accused of demonstrating no effort and being constantly criticized by their supervisors.

Also these are never “just incidents” that happened once or twice on a “bad day”; these dynamics are often present in the office for months or even years. Most of the time, the conflict is between a supervisee and supervisor but the devastating impact on the team morale is felt by the whole office. Inevitably, the stress level rose to a point where they felt that they were no longer able to perform their daily tasks. As a result, many of them developed serious medical conditions, which meant more time away from work and less overall productivity at the workplace.

It is not unusual for visitors to tell us that when the bullying first started, they assessed the situation and thought they could manage it by

themselves. Over time, however, the impact of the abrasive behaviour becomes so overwhelming that by the time visitors reach out for help, by contacting the Office of Ombudsman, for example, they often feel devastated, hopeless and psychologically destroyed. They are in shock and unable to comprehend what has happened to them and why they feel the way they do.

The Office of the Ombudsman also receives visitors who have been accused of bullying or workplace aggression. In most cases, it is the first time that they have had to speak to someone about their behaviour. Often they hear of the allegations of bullying against them through office gossip, an anonymous letter or in an investigation report. They often struggle with the accusation and even sometimes see it as mobbing or retaliatory behaviour for a bad performance review or strong criticism.

The question they often ask is “who is making these allegations?”, “Why don’t they come to talk to me first?”

In the majority of cases, the harasser is unaware of or underestimates the effect that his or her behaviour is having on the workplace. In some cases the harasser could be aware of the effect

his or her conduct is having on colleagues but feels that it is justified. At the Office of the Ombudsman, we never make judgments about who is right or who is wrong; rather we listen to the visitor and with her/his permission to the other party and try to co-create and facilitate an informal process to help to resolve the conflict.

In both cases the Ombudsman faces many challenges in finding ways to intervene. Often visitors that are subject to bullying prefer not to give permission to the Ombudsman to talk to the other party because of fear of retaliation. Therefore, neither mediation nor shuttle diplomacy is an option. Coaching seems to be the most meaningful and helpful immediate intervention. In coaching sessions, our initial focus is to help the visitor to understand the psycho-dynamics of workplace bullying. Rarely do we see that targets of bullying feel ready to engage with bully directly. However, if they do consider it an option, we would explore together what approach may work in the specific scenario.

In disputes involving workplace aggression and bullying, the Ombudsman usually has to assess with the parties whether informal resolution is a viable option. Often it depends on what the parties want. There are some visitors who would like to formally report the unacceptable behaviour, hoping that raising awareness of it would stop the behavior from occurring for example. The Ombudsman Office does not have the mandate to receive such reports or to formally investigate misconduct. In such instances the Ombudsman will direct the visitor to the appropriate Office. It is important to mention that once a formal complaint is launched the likelihood that a conflict will be

resolved informally gradually diminishes because parties become entrenched in their positions and the outcome of the formal complaint is out of their control. In addition workplace bullying is often difficult to document since in a great many cases it takes place indirectly or through verbal exchanges making it difficult to provide direct evidence in an investigation process.

Clearly, workplace bullying is not an easy situation to manage and facing it down can require an enormous amount of courage. The Ombudsman always guarantees confidentiality and provides a safe place where visitors experiencing difficulties with bullying or aggression can come forward and talk about their concerns with an independent, impartial, conflict-management professional.