What Leaders Need To Know About Bullying In The Remote Workplace

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 20th Nov 2020

A manager stares impatiently at an empty Zoom screen and thinks: "Late again for our catch up. Typical! And why haven't they provided the information I requested? Working remotely makes it easier for them to avoid me." The line report hovers over the 'join meeting' icon, with an impending sense of doom. "I can't face this today. I am going to be undermined and disrespected…again. Such unrealistic expectations. My manager is a bully and wants me out!"

The above scenario is how two parties described the same incident at the start of a workplace mediation. And this is not an isolated case. It exemplifies how easily behaviors can be misinterpreted and how quickly conflict can escalate when working from home. Accusations of bullying are never far from our news feeds either; Whether it's Dominic Cummings exiting Downing Street, Donald Trump leaving the White House, or the recent report that Priti Patel had broken rules on ministers' behavior.

As many team members continue to work remotely, business leaders need to understand how this may escalate perceptions of bullying behavior and give employees the means to voice and address issues before they get out of hand.

Understanding bullying in remote teams

Remote working often hides conflict, and workers can suffer alone until productivity declines, health suffers, and grievances are lodged. The virtual world makes the warning signs of conflict harder to spot. Managers are less likely to detect behavior changes when they're not sitting near team members every day. It's more challenging to read reactions and body language over the phone or on a video call than in-person. Staff can also feel uncomfortable about approaching a manager for help if they feel uncertain about their jobs. In a recent CIPD survey, 53% of bullied or harassed employees did not report the latest incident in the last three years.

Non-intentional bullying is also more likely when we are working virtually. Leaders unfamiliar with managing virtual teams may be unaware of the impact of their actions (or inaction) and how these may be interpreted. Overreliance on email communication can lead to email micromanagement, and a hastily typed message can be easily misinterpreted. With increased business pressures due to the pandemic, it is easy for managers to be task-focused rather than people-focused.

Working at home can also impact people's perceptions of bullying. After working remotely for many months, goodwill is wearing thin. What might be seen as 'straight-talking' in the office can be misunderstood online. The warmth and trust built up in informal water-cooler moments are now missing, so a casual comment can fall on stony ground and be dwelled upon in isolation.

Giving employees a voice

While organizations need to have established procedures for staff to raise concerns, many allegations of bullying can be addressed informally in the first instance. Organizations may be inadvertently 'training' workers to deal with conflict formally rather than seeking an informal route. Many workplace mediation parties cite being told, "Well, if you don't like it, put it in writing." Organizational policies tend to further support this. Employee handbooks often direct staff to raise a grievance or complaint as the first step in dealing with bullying and other behavioral issues. For those employees who don't want to make a formal complaint, the conflict doesn't disappear either and festers away unresolved, affecting morale, mental health, and often storing up problems for the future.

Leaders should enable staff to speak with each other directly and informally first. This can be supported with conflict management training, coaching, mediation and self-help resources. By addressing issues early and directly, concerns around bullying can be explored, and relationships can be repaired. In some cases, it may even strengthen a conflictual relationship.

 So, when leaders hear someone grumbling about a colleague turning up late for a call, say: "Have you asked how they are?" If a team member hasn't responded to multiple emails, reach out, and find out what is going on. Remote working can have its challenges, but with the right support from leaders, formal processes can be avoided, and relationships can grow.