

How remote working amplifies perceptions of bullying

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 4 May 2021

Accusations of bullying are rife in the virtual workplace. This is why HR leaders need to understand how remote working can amplify perceptions of bullying behaviour and support employees in speaking up.

Allegations of bullying are never far from the headlines. Whether it's the news that Buckingham Palace is investigating claims that Meghan bullied staff, or a letter leaked to the BBC describing a "toxic culture" of bullying and harassment at Sellafield.

Remote working has done little to alleviate the issue. Arguably, new virtual working practices may make the situation worse. As many organisations continue to work remotely, now and in the future, HR leaders will need to help their organisations in navigating perceptions of virtual bullying. Employees need support to speak up and address issues before they escalate.

Out of sight

After more than a year of pandemic-related home working, organisations are finding that issues relating to conflict and bullying continue to rise to the surface. It is easier for conflict to remain hidden in a virtual workplace, as staff who don't work physically together are able to hide the warning signs of conflict. Video calls make it more difficult to read people's expressions or notice a change in behaviour and it's not possible to drop by a colleague for an informal chat.

Whilst we work from home, issues may stay hidden for longer. Even before remote working was commonplace, workers were reluctant to speak up or challenge inappropriate behaviour. A CIPD survey found that, of workers who experienced bullying or harassment in the last three years, 53% did not report it. There are many reasons for this, such as lack of confidence that action will be taken, or fear of repercussions. In current times, with many organisations struggling financially due to the pandemic, and an uncertain economic environment, workers may not take action for fear that it will affect their job.

By not addressing interpersonal issues as they arise, problems tend to continue and build up over time. Feeling bullied can be stressful and isolating, affecting productivity and health. HR teams often aren't aware of issues until complaints or grievances are made, often arriving without warning or an attempt at informal resolution.

Perceptions of bullying

Some behaviour is clearly bullying or harassment. However, perceptions of what constitutes bullying can vary from person to person. In many cases, bullying is non-intentional, although that doesn't mean its impact is any less. The remote-working environment can add new complexities to this too.

As conflict often stems from miscommunication, the reliance on technology for much or all communication between virtual co-workers paves the way for more misunderstanding. A manager who does not appear focused during a virtual meeting may be perceived as not listening or ignoring a colleague where, in reality, s/he may be juggling home schooling. The increased use of email and chat functions can lead to brief or rushed messages which can be easily misinterpreted.

How someone 'receives' a colleague's communication or behaviour is influenced by the level of trust in the intent behind it. Daily interaction in a physical workplace, particularly informal conversations, build relationships and trust but, in remote working, these opportunities are reduced or even missing entirely. With lower levels of trust, a short comment on a video call can be perceived as being brusque and a two-word response on WhatsApp can be received as rudeness.

Supporting employees to 'speak up'

Most organisations have systems to support workers who experience bullying and harassment, such as grievance procedures or whistleblowing policies. Whilst these are essential to support workers who seek help, they can also encourage formal, lengthy processes which even recommend lodging a grievance as the first step.

Many accusations of bullying can be addressed and resolved informally by speaking directly to a co-worker or with a facilitated conversation such as mediation. By supporting an 'informal-first' approach, organisations will help staff to resolve issues quickly and allow the working relationship to remain intact. By exploring issues together, colleagues gain valuable perspective and come to appreciate the other person's point of view.

Organisations can support staff in adopting an informal approach to conflict resolution by ensuring HR policies encourage informal resolution first and also that employees feel empowered to take action themselves. Staff won't speak up or address issues if the risk feels too great. Creating a culture of psychological safety, where employees feel that they can speak without fear of repercussions, is crucial and needs to be encouraged and role-modelled by leadership.

Remote-working employees and their managers also need the skills and confidence to address issues constructively and collaboratively. This can be achieved with online conflict management training or virtual self-help resources. When issues can't be resolved directly, resolution can be further supported with conflict coaching and providing access to facilitation or mediation.

Addressing bullying claims before they become 'big news', be that in actual news headlines or via complaints or tribunals, is in everyone's interests. Remote working offers many opportunities, from increased productivity to enhanced quality of life, but employees may need help managing some of the challenges it can bring.