



Eradicating ill treatment from the workplace: management responsibilities

This is a factsheet designed to help OSH practitioners to brief managers on the importance of mitigating ill treatment risk.

Case for action

Overwhelming research evidence shows that happy and healthy workers are productive workers. Studies¹ have shown that improvements of 12 per cent and greater in productivity can be achieved by ensuring that workers are happy at work. Eradicating ill treatment can help to improve operational efficiency, reduce absenteeism and help organisations to keep talented and experienced workers. The following quotes come from a UK government publication, *Healthy People = Healthy Profits*.

“AstraZeneca recognises that employees are our most important resource, and their welfare is essential to maintaining the highest standards. We believe that people are at their most productive and creative when they are in an environment where they feel positive and enthusiastic about their job, with a clear understanding of their role and confidence in their ability to meet their individual targets. Management of health and wellbeing issues is an important element in developing and maintaining such an environment.”

Sue Connelly

Global Health & Wellbeing Manager

“At Google, we know that health, family and wellbeing are an important aspect of Googlers’ lives. We have also noticed that employees who are happy and healthy, as well as respected and rewarded for their contributions, demonstrate increased motivation and productivity. From both a work-life balance as well as a job satisfaction perspective, our programmes work to ensure that Google is and remains an emotionally healthy place to work.”

Lara Harding

People Programs Manager

Definitions

Ill treatment is a broad term that includes unreasonable management, incivility and disrespect, and violence and injury. Bullying is an intense form of ill treatment. It is defined as regular ill treatment perpetrated at least once a week every week, severe bullying being at least two incidents every day.

Causes

Ill treatment is generated in working environments where stress is prevalent. That is, where:

- managers who consistently act autocratically and have low emotional intelligence prevail
- there are excessive work demands that appear unreasonable
- workers are not consulted and believe they have no say in the way they complete their tasks
- workers do not feel they are encouraged, supported or provided with adequate resources or tools to do the job
- conflict and unsuitable behaviour are not effectively managed
- roles are unclear or conflicting with others
- organisational change is not well managed.

These factors contribute to the formation of a culture where ill treatment may be nurtured.

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Table 1: Ill treatment categories

Unreasonable management
Someone withholding information which affects performance
Pressure from someone to do work below their level of competence
Having opinions and views ignored
Someone continually checking up on work when it is not necessary
Pressure not to claim something which, by right, staff are entitled to
Being given an unmanageable workload or impossible deadlines
Employers not following proper procedures
Employees being treated unfairly compared to others in the workplace
Incivility or disrespect
Being humiliated or ridiculed in connection with their work
Gossip and rumours being spread or allegations made against others
Insulting or offensive remarks made about people in work
Being treated in a disrespectful or rude way
People excluding others from their group
Hints or signals that they should quit their job
Persistent unfair criticism of work or performance
Teasing, mocking, sarcasm or jokes which go too far
Being shouted at or someone losing their temper
Intimidating behaviour from people at work
Feeling threatened in any way while at work
Violence or injury
Actual physical violence at work
Injury in some way as a result of violence or aggression at work, or damage to personal property

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Aspects of a good system

A good system for mitigating ill treatment risk usually includes a policy and associated procedures. This must include a single senior manager who will be accountable for the implementation of the policy and clear responsibilities assigned to other managers. A good system should mitigate the causes of ill treatment and will include:

- a clear declaration that ill treatment of fellow workers will not be tolerated
- the means of educating management and workers about ill treatment, its causes, how to report incidents and how they will be dealt with
- a confidential reporting procedure that includes times for responses and descriptions of actions at each stage of the process. Independent case management must be provided by someone of appropriate authority who is not a stakeholder in the outcome
- the means of evaluating the prevalence of ill treatment in the organisation. Any ill treatment survey must guarantee the anonymity of participants
- worker involvement in the setting and review of policy and procedural arrangements.

Leadership

Leadership often aims to develop diverse teams where mutual respect, trust, a strong sense of loyalty and self-belief are usually actively encouraged. Using progressive leadership to build a positive working environment where mistakes are learned from and success is celebrated by all will safeguard against many causes of ill-treatment. Realistic management of workloads and clear task prioritisation will also help.

Manager responsibilities

Management responsibilities may be defined in local legislation. In general, management must support their occupational health, safety and human resource specialists in creating management arrangements for eradicating the causes of ill treatment. Operational line managers must be fully engaged with the policy and procedural requirements. They must work actively to mitigate the causes of ill treatment and stress in the workers they manage. This may mean reviewing the content of other associated policies (for example, grievance and disciplinary procedures, codes of conduct, dignity at work, diversity policy, stress management).

Management must ensure that any complaint of ill treatment is promptly dealt with. This may include providing training to better enable individual managers to 'have the difficult conversations' when a complaint is made. All employees will require training, appropriate to their responsibility, in the ill treatment policy and the organisation's procedures.

Checklist tool

As with all things, it is difficult to manage what you don't understand. Organisational leaders require the means to ascertain how prevalent ill treatment is in their workplaces. What form does it take? Is it perpetrated by or targeted towards any group or category of employees? Are matters getting worse or are they improving? Without measurement, using some form of assessment tool, organisational leaders will not know where they are or what demands their attention first.

The *IOSH Ill treatment checklist tool* provides the means to evaluate the scale of the problem in the organisation. A copy of the Ill treatment checklist tool, the relevant research reports and further IOSH guidance are available at www.iosh.co.uk/ill-treatment.

Reference

- 1 Oswald A, Proto E and Sgroi D. Happiness and Productivity, *Journal of Labor Economics*, 2014