

Bullying and Harassment - What's the Difference?

Bullying and harassment are terms that are used interchangeably by organisations, with bullying often regarded as a type of harassment. There are, however, some notable differences, which are particularly important to bear in mind if you are drawing up an anti-bullying policy. This article gives an overview of what these main differences are.

Defining harassment

Definitions of harassment tend to refer to behaviour which is offensive and intrusive, with a sexual, racial or physical element.

ACAS defines harassment as:

'Unwanted conduct that violates people's dignity or creates an intimidating hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.' [1]

Harassment is covered in law by acts such as the Sex Discrimination Act, the Race Relations Act, the Disability Discrimination Act and the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, as well as the laws of common assault.

Defining bullying

There are many ways to define bullying, with no single definition used across the board. ACAS, again, suggests the following:

'Offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means intended to undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient.'

The Andrea Adams Trust defined bullying as: [2]

- Unwarranted humiliating or offensive behaviour towards an individual or groups of employees.
- Persistently negative malicious attacks on personal or professional performance typically characterised as unpredictable, unfair, irrational and often unseen.
- An abuse of power or position that can cause such anxiety that people gradually lose all belief in themselves, suffering physical ill health and mental distress as a direct result.
- The use of position or power to coerce others by fear, persecution or to oppress them by force or threat. It has been identified as a more crippling and devastating problem for both employees and employers than all the other work related stresses combined.

Whereas many types of harassment are unlawful under current legislation, at the moment there is no specific legislation against bullying in the workplace, a fact that calls for the need for a coherent anti-bullying policy.

Harassment v Bullying

An examination of the differences between harassment and bullying will help to isolate those qualities unique to bullying which should be included in an anti-bullying policy.

Harassment	Workplace Bullying
Has a strong physical component – e.g. contact, touch, intrusion into personal space, damage to possessions and sabotage of target's work.	Almost always psychological, except in rare cases with male bullies.
The perpetrator tends to focus on individual difference as the object of harassment (e.g. sex, race, sexuality).	The target is usually discriminated against because they are competent or popular.
Harassment may occur once or several times, but the target is usually aware that it	The target may not realise they are being bullied for weeks or months. Often the target will have a light-bulb moment, when they realise that a

is harassment right from the beginning.	series of often seemingly insignificant incidents amount to intimidation and victimisation.
Offensive vocabulary often used.	Tends to be characterised by a series of minor criticisms or false or unfair allegations. Offensive words are less commonly used than in harassment.
The aggressor attempts to possess the target.	Often, a bully will start by attempting to control and dominate the target. Later, they will try to drive them to break down or leave the organisation.
Harassment often takes place in public as a means of peer approval or image building.	Usually bullying takes place in private without witnesses.
Target seen as easily victimised.	Target seen as a threat that must be dominated.

Summary

As the above comparison shows, people who bully and those who are guilty of harassing their colleagues, tend to operate in different ways.

Bullies are often devious, operating out of sight of witnesses, and engaging methods which, when viewed in isolation, can seem fairly harmless. A pattern of behaviour will usually have to be identified in order to prove that bullying has occurred.

An employee who is guilty of harassment will use individual difference as a means of victimising others. Their behaviour tends to be much more obvious, e.g. they may use offensive language, or harass the target in front of others. Harassment is, therefore, often easier to identify and confront.

An anti-bullying policy should be clear about what bullying is and detail the types of behaviour that are unacceptable under the policy. If you are drawing up a bullying **and** harassment policy, this should acknowledge the differences between bullying and harassment and give clear examples of each type of behaviour. It should also offer relevant advice to both victims of bullying and harassment on how best to tackle their tormentor.

[1] www.acas.org.uk

[2] The Andrea Adams Trust closed in 2009.

[3] While a direct complaint cannot be made to an employment tribunal about bullying, an employee may be able to raise a complaint under discrimination or harassment laws, for example on grounds of sex, sexual orientation, race, disability, religion or belief, or age.

Related Items

Related Resources

- Everything You Need to Know About Bullying (But May Have Been Too Afraid to Ask)