

Poor management the biggest risk factor for workplace bullying

August 30 2022



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Organizational structures, not individuals, are to blame for workplace bullying, which affects 10% of employees, according to a new Australian study citing "poor management practices" as the root cause of bullying.

For the first time, University of South Australia researchers have developed an evidence-based screening tool that identifies nine major risk areas for workplace bullying embedded in day-to-day practices, putting the onus on organizations to address the problem.

In a paper published this week in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, lead author UniSA Professor Michelle Tuckey and colleagues from the Center for Workplace Excellence, the University of Queensland and Auburn University in the U.S. offer a new way of tackling bullying at work.

They analyzed 342 real-life bullying complaints lodged with SafeWork SA, 60% of them from [female employees](#). The highest number of complaints were from health and [community services](#), property and business, and the retail sector. The complaints revealed the risk areas for bullying in organizations.

"Workplace bullying predominantly shows up in how people are managed," Prof. Tuckey says.

"Managing work performance, coordinating working hours and entitlements, and shaping workplace relationships are key areas that organizations need to focus on.

"It can be tempting to see bullying as a behavioral problem between individuals, but the evidence suggests that bullying actually reflects structural risks in the organizations themselves."

The major organizational risks have now been identified and built into a screening tool that has been validated in a hospital setting.

"The tool predicts both individual-level and team-level [workplace bullying](#) risks that jeopardize the psychological health of employees," Prof. Tuckey says.

The researchers say that existing strategies, such as anti-bullying policies, bullying awareness training, incident reporting and investigating complaints, focus on behavior between individuals and overlook workplace structures.

"Workplace bullying undermines the functioning of employees and organizations alike. It leads to [mental health problems](#), post-traumatic stress symptoms, [emotional exhaustion](#), poor job satisfaction, high staff turnover, low productivity, sleep problems and even suicide risks.

"To prevent bullying, organizations must proactively assess and mitigate the underlying risk factors, like other systematic risk management processes. Only then will an organization thrive," Prof. Tuckey says.

More information: Michelle R. Tuckey et al, Workplace bullying as an organizational problem: Spotlight on people management practices, *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1037/ocp0000335](#)

Provided by University of South Australia

Citation: Poor management the biggest risk factor for workplace bullying (2022, August 30) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-08-poor-biggest-factor-workplace-bullying.html>

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