

PREVENTING AND MANAGING BULLYING IN THE AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE ORGANISATION

A Paper for the 15th Women, Management & Employment Relations Conference by Mr Jim Porteous, Defence Equity Organisation, Department of Defence, Canberra.

What drives the Australian Defence Organisation (ADO) to address bullying in the workplace? Firstly, we believe in the precept that everyone has the right to work in an environment that is free from discrimination and harassment. Secondly, we must not only be, but must also be seen to be a law abiding corporate citizen, which requires compliance with Federal laws and regulations. In relation to equity and diversity, at the Federal level there is a range of anti-discrimination statutes. We not only comply with, but exceed Federal requirements.

The ADO has established the Defence Equity Organisation (DEO) to inform, educate, encourage and ensure that equitable policies, processes and practices form an integral part of doing business in Defence as the basis for a fair and inclusive work environment.

Since the mid-1990s, we have been effectively preventing, managing and eliminating unacceptable behaviour, which includes bullying, in the ADO. In order to do this, we developed a strategic approach to equity, diversity and unacceptable behaviour, which recognises that the changes required in the organisation's culture must be driven by integrated structural, behavioural and attitudinal strategies.

How did we put this approach into practice? We recognised that structural changes are necessary before behavioural and attitudinal change strategies can be put into place. To this end, the ADO introduced free-call telephone advice lines and a network of Equity Advisers, along with a communication strategy and unacceptable behaviour management procedures.

Behavioural change has been addressed through policy instructions, training and focussing on leadership. Attitudinal change is perhaps the most difficult change to achieve but we believe that it is most successfully driven through effective leadership. Leaders need to set behavioural standards, align their actions and decisions with those standards, and consistently reward appropriate behaviour and correct unacceptable behaviour. This form of leadership can change behaviour and gradually influence people's attitudes.

As a result of recent bullying incidents in the Australian Army, it became apparent that strong emphasis must be placed on combating bullying within the ADO. However, to combat bullying, we had to be clear on what it is.

We have defined workplace bullying as the persistent treatment of any person in the workplace that is harmful, intimidating, humiliating or embarrassing and which is aimed at making the complainant feel miserable, demoralised and lacking in self-confidence. It is an aggressive form of harassment with a deliberate desire to hurt, threaten or frighten someone with words or actions.

Having defined what constitutes bullying, we have updated our policy instructions and procedures and developed a comprehensive communications strategy. This strategy includes briefings to our commanders and managers, a brochure explaining bullying and our policy, which is available to all personnel, and utilising our Equity Adviser network to promote these changes.

Further to these initiatives, we have developed bullying awareness training, which can be completed through on-line training or facilitated lectures and discussions. Participation in bullying awareness training is mandatory for all personnel.

Despite education, individuals will still behave as bullies. Also, our organisational culture may include and reward bullying behaviours. We believe that the answer involves demonstrating leadership commitment and accountability, education, comprehensive policies and ongoing evaluation.