

REPORT

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Charity Leaders Network

Centre for
Mental Health



In plain sight

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Workplace bullying in charities and
the implications for leadership

Rob Fitzpatrick and Laura Thorne

Executive summary

Introduction

Following revelations over recent years about the sexual exploitation and abuse of beneficiaries within the international aid sector, as well as reports of abusive organisational cultures within this sector and more widely, there has been a rise in public, political and sectoral concern about the possibility of misconduct taking place within charities in England and Wales, including bullying behaviour.

In response, government, the Charity Commission and umbrella organisations have initiated urgent work to address immediate safeguarding challenges as well as to prepare for longer term developmental and awareness-raising activity to strengthen the health of charity workplace cultures. As a result, charities in England and Wales are now undergoing a process of significant revaluation - of values, systems and organisational cultures.

Bullying cultures demonstrate clear breaches of trust and values upon which charities depend, both for their legal status and for their credibility. This report seeks to shine a light on what wrongdoing can look like in this context and using the data to inform an understanding of how charities might inadvertently facilitate an abusive culture.

Our investigation draws upon the voices of victims of bullying in charities to describe the conditions in which it occurs and might persist and to provide analysis and recommendations for what charity leaders should do to create safer working cultures. By listening to detailed narrative accounts, we have sought to gain insight into the extent to which current policy and guidance supports victims and organisations to deal with bullying.

This report is intended to be read by staff, managers and leaders within the charity sector, policy makers, as well as the victims of bullying who participated in the online survey and interviews.

The investigation involved a review of relevant literature, a detailed anonymous online survey

returned by over 500 respondents, in-depth interviews with 20 victims of bullying in charities plus two sector specialists, and a process of evaluation and analysis.

Results

The survey results do not tell us anything about the prevalence of bullying within the charity sector. However, where bullying has been experienced, victims rated its personal and emotional impact as being severe.

Where respondents provided detailed survey data, approximately 87% of responses cite social bullying; 78% verbal bullying, 25% cyber bullying and 7% physical bullying, with a significant overlap between social and verbal bullying. Bullying was reported formally in 58% of cases with complaints considered to have been satisfactorily addressed in just 3% of cases, and not resolved or resolved unsatisfactorily in 68% and 29% of cases respectively.

The majority of those answering the question about who bullied cited chief executives and senior managers as perpetrating or being involved in the bullying (45% and 57% respectively). Co-workers were reported in 27% of cases, with the chair and other trustees cited in 17% and 18% of cases respectively.

We asked survey respondents if they felt the bullying behaviour contained elements of prejudice or discrimination. Of those who provided detailed data and descriptions, approximately 22% reported prejudice or discrimination on grounds of age, 13% disability, 30% gender, 7% race, 2% religion and 3% sexual orientation.

Following bullying, 67% left their organisation, 27% stayed in their same role and 5% changed role internally. Many respondents and interviewees described an enduring impact of historic bullying which was felt financially, professionally and psychologically. In addition to the financial impact of bullying, some people's mental health was so adversely affected that they needed to seek professional

counselling support, almost always at their own expense.

In the majority of examples given, bullying behaviour was not happening in secret; rather, it was often described as ‘an open secret’. Accounts referred to victims’ incredulity at this apparent normalising of bullying and emotionally abusive behaviour and the insidious effect it has on an organisation’s culture. While recognising the obvious role played by perpetrators, most identified the conditions and culture within which bullying takes place as being the biggest factors in sustaining the behaviour. This includes instances of victims being marginalised and bullies protected within organisations, and those reporting bullying finding themselves losing their employment. In almost all cases, they described internal and external systems for dealing with bullying as unfit for purpose.

Frequently, victims described feelings of frustration, powerlessness and exhaustion at the injustice they faced when trying to tackle bullying behaviour. Often their sense was that the organisation had ‘turned its back’ on them.

Some participants also raised concerns about the use of a non-disclosure agreement (NDA). This is a legal contract which limits how information or ideas (for example commercial information) can be shared. A high number of interviewees holding senior positions had signed NDAs and clearly expressed the impact on their mental health of being trapped in secrecy, unable according to the letter of their agreements to discuss or “tell anybody at all why I left, or any of the details” or to process the traumatic incident, even in a therapeutic context.

Analysis

We have identified a number of sector-specific factors or dynamics which can combine to produce a bullying culture. These include:

1. Weaknesses in governance and senior leadership

This can happen in a number of different ways: for example where trustees actively bully staff themselves; where trustees or senior managers

fail to apply due scrutiny to organisational policies, procedures and practice leading to bullying behaviour being unchecked; where senior leaders conceal information from trustees and trustees do not challenge; or where trustees or senior managers ‘turn a blind eye’ to known or visible instances of bullying behaviour.

2. Weaknesses in organisational policies, procedures and practices

Victims have spoken with great force about how organisational policies, procedures and established behaviours can serve to sustain bullying behaviour and protect the perpetrator. For smaller charities, a lack of robust HR management procedures can result in bullying behaviour being inadequately tackled. Conversely, in larger charities, victims describe a failure of often extensive HR infrastructure to ‘take their side’.

3. A lack of information, skills and confidence within the charity workforce to identify and respond to bullying

Victims of bullying frequently identified being unaware of or lacking confidence in how to best progress their complaint within their organisation.

4. Uncertainty among victims and charities about the regulatory framework and the specific remit of the Charity Commission in relation to bullying

Many victims, particularly those in senior leadership positions, or considering options around whistleblowing or reporting safeguarding or serious wrongdoing concerns, described finding the policy provided by the Charity Commission in relation to workplace bullying to be unclear.

5. The absence of any sector-wide initiative to respond to bullying or promote healthier workplace cultures

6. The absence of internal or external recourse for victims of bullying, or for concerned charity leaders

Conclusion

Charities undertake vital work in society, but this can also at times be difficult or stressful for staff, and present risks for organisations. Our research shows the necessity for strong governance and organisational leadership, coupled with effective policies, procedures and practices to make sure that these intrinsic challenges, particularly around the expression and management of conflict, can be better understood and negotiated where they occur.

In our analysis we have presented a range of practical recommendations and measures which individual charities can adopt to help tackle bullying behaviour and to improve workplace cultures. We hope that these will also provide a foundation for longer-term activity involving volunteers, staff, managers, charity leaders and other stakeholders. The objective should be to create safer, healthier, happier and more productive organisational cultures for all who work in the charity sector.

Recommendations

The report makes six recommendations in the key areas of:

- Improved governance and senior leadership
 - Improved policy, procedure and practice
 - Clarification around the existing regulatory framework
 - A programme of sectoral cultural change
 - Improved data to inform policy
1. While safeguarding, staff wellbeing and workplace culture remain the collective responsibility of boards, chief executives and senior leadership teams, charities should nominate at least one trustee and one senior manager to lead on staff workplace wellbeing.
 2. Policies, procedures and practices should reflect charities' commitment to promoting safe cultures and fostering good relations.
 3. Non-disclosure agreements (NDAs) issued as part of employment settlements to victims of bullying can have a detrimental impact on both mental wellbeing and emotional recovery, as well as impede organisational learning and cultural change. NDAs should never be issued so as to restrict a victim of bullying from disclosing traumatic experience in a therapeutic setting.
 4. The Charity Commission should clarify how existing regulations and guidance, including those around whistleblowing and safeguarding and the reporting of serious incidents, should be understood and used by victims of bullying in charities and by charity leaders in relation to workplace bullying. The Commission should help victims understand its own thresholds for reporting bullying incidents including what is in or out of the Charity Commission's scope.
 5. Charity leaders should come together to initiate a sector-wide 'discussion' about bullying and workplace culture. They should also identify how current sectoral guidance (including The Charity Governance Code (Charity Governance Code Steering Group, 2017), Leading with Values (ACEVO, 2018) and Charity Ethical Principles (NCVO, 2019)) can be applied in order to frame a programme of collective sectoral action to address bullying behaviour and promote healthier, happier and more productive workplace cultures.
 6. We recommend that charity leaders come together to explore how data might be effectively collected in the following fields:
 - The wider experience of staff of charity workplace cultures, including a prevalence study for bullying and emotionally abusive behaviour across the charity sector in England and Wales, including sub-sectors.
 - The particular experiences of employees with 'protected characteristics' under the Equality Act (2010) - in particular the experiences of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people, of charity sector workplace cultures, and of discrimination.
 - The particular experience of junior level staff and career entrants of charity sector workplace cultures.

Resources

The following resources represent freely available sources of information, advice and support about the subject of workplace bullying and charity culture.

- [Leading with Values](#): Creating a Safe Organisational Culture - A report from ACEVO highlighting key elements of leadership for the Charity Sector for addressing unacceptable, abusive or bullying behaviour
- The [Charity Commission](#)'s work to prevent wrongdoing and harm in charities
- The [Anti-Bullying Alliance](#) Umbrella group providing resources for bullying in both school and adult settings
- Information and resources from the Tim Field Foundation about [workplace bullying](#)
- [ACAS](#) Information and advice on employment rights and bullying at work.
- [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#) information relating to rights and dignity at work
- [TUC](#) online Support, advice for anyone being bullied at work
- [Protect](#) (Formerly Public Concern at Work) Independent authority and advice line on whistle blowing.
- Information about [safety in the workplace](#), with links to articles covering bullying, discrimination and employment law.
- Information and support around the subject of workplace bullying from [Bullying UK/ Family Lives](#)
- [The Samaritans](#) - or telephone 116 123.

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Centre for
Mental Health



Centre for Mental Health

Office 2D21, South Bank Technopark,

90 London Road, London SE1 6LN

Tel 020 3927 2924

www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk

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