

Inappropriate behaviour
and workplace bullying
are not acceptable in the
work community



Vaasan yliopisto
UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Inappropriate behaviour and workplace bullying are not accepted at the University of Vaasa. Each member of the University community is responsible for his or her own behaviour. Each superior is obliged to interfere in inappropriate behaviour and workplace bullying quickly and without hesitation.

The employer (superiors) must according to the law actively examine and observe the conditions in the workplace and to avert also such dangers threatening the worker's health and safety for which there are no detailed instructions.

Occupational Safety and Health Act

Section 28 – Harassment If harassment or other inappropriate treatment of an employee occurs at work and causes hazards or risks to the employee's health, the employer, after becoming aware of the matter, shall by available means take measures for remedying this situation.

Section 18 – Employees' general obligations, Subsection 3

Employees shall avoid such harassment and other inappropriate treatment of other employees at the workplace, which causes hazards or risks to their safety or health.

What is inappropriate behaviour and workplace bullying?

Inappropriate behaviour is usually behaviour that is against the norms of good conduct. It can for example be inappropriate criticism of the individual's work, slander, isolation from the work community and repeated inappropriate behaviour such as taunting and shouting.

Workplace bullying is defined as a situation where one or more members of the work community are repeatedly victims of systematic negative or hostile behaviour. Workplace bullying may be practiced by anyone from among employees or superiors and anyone can be the victim.

The experience of being bullied is individual. The borderline between joking, everyday conflict resolution and bullying might be subtle. Even if the person may not consider himself or herself guilty of bullying, the feelings of the other person must not be underrated.

For the person bullied the situation can be oppressive, humiliating and frightening and it can cause physical and psychological symptoms. Bullying that is long lasting can result in a collapse of psychological and/or physical health and cause social isolation. Because consequences can be serious, the superior has to evaluate the situation for everyone separately and to intervene in such conduct.

Bullying can take for example the following forms (which however have to be repeated and regular):

- ▶ the individual's opinions are disdained and the expression of opinion is restricted
- ▶ the individual's greetings are not returned
- ▶ allusions and malicious insinuations
- ▶ the individual's common sense is questioned
- ▶ the individual's isolation from the work group or community
- ▶ the individual is criticised or ridiculed
- ▶ malpractice or exploitation by the superior
- ▶ the individual is given work assignments and schedules which are inordinate
- ▶ the individual is given work assignments which are below the level of his or her knowledge and skills
- ▶ and also any discrimination (age, religion, gender, sexual orientation or other reasons)

Bullying is not involved in the following occasions:

- ▶ work assignments and their organisation (in general issues that belong to the sphere of the right to supervise work)
- ▶ work-related problems of which all agree are discussed in the work place, although some members of the work community may find it distressing
- ▶ an employee is referred to Occupational Health Care, e.g. assessment for work capacity
- ▶ a grounded sanction or notice is imposed on an employee

Workplace bullying must be distinguished from normal situations of conflict. The members of the work community must be capable of working together in an appropriate manner, and everybody must comply with the norms of good conduct.

What can you do if you consider yourself to be a victim of bullying?

An employee who experiences inappropriate behaviour or workplace bullying must (himself or herself) clearly express if he or she finds that another person's behaviour is insulting or provocative. The superior/ employer must be informed, so that the employer can tackle the problem.

- ▶ Tell the person who is behaving impertinently/harassing in a matter of fact way that you do not like his or her behaviour. Ask him or her to stop it. If you do not dare to speak yourself, your superior is obliged to interfere with it at your initiative.
- ▶ In the first place inform your nearest superior, but if it is not possible, contact the superior of your nearest superior.
- ▶ Keep a record of the bullying and collect evidence.
- ▶ Do not neglect your work assignments; then you cannot be blamed of refusal to work. It is important that also during the process you see to your own work and treat others in an appropriate manner.
- ▶ If inappropriate behaviour and bullying cannot be solved in the work community, you can contact for example the industrial safety manager, industrial safety delegates harassment contact persons, occupational safety and health representatives, your trade union or if necessary the labour protection inspector of the industrial safety district of your region.
- ▶ Discuss the matter with someone you trust (e.g. a colleague, friend or family member). Often it is important to talk about bullying with somebody. When

you tell about your own experiences to somebody, they become easier to handle. If you do not find a support person from your immediate circle, you can discuss the matter e.g. with the occupational health care nurse.

- ▶ In case the situation turns threatening, the injured party can leave a report of an offence. Harassment can constitute an offence, such as coercion, illegal threat or defamation mentioned in criminal law. It is a case of complainant offence and for the matter to proceed the victim of harassment must report of an offence.

The liabilities and duties of the University and the superior

The responsibility for occupational health is always with the employer and the nearest superior as the representative of the employer. If the superior is prevented, the responsibility is transferred to his or her superior.

Recognition of bullying and inappropriate behaviour in the work place can be difficult. However, the superior is obliged to tackle the incident immediately when he or she notices or is informed of inappropriate behaviour or bullying. When situations prolong, they become more complicated and harder to settle and solve.

After becoming aware of the matter the superior shall immediately invite the parties to the conflict to discuss the matter. Nobody should be labelled a workplace bully on the basis of mere charges. Fraudulent and groundless charges for workplace bullying are as serious a violation as bullying itself. In the discussion, the course of events is clarified and agreement sought with respect to future behaviour. A memorandum of the discussion is made (following for example the model of early intervention and discussion).

The superior must follow up the situation. If the measures agreed on do not help and the situation continues, a follow-up plan has to be made. The superior is responsible for informing e.g. the Director of Personnel. If necessary the employer must impose sanctions. Such sanctions include oral notice, written notice and even discharge as a final outcome.

When the bully is a student or a person from outside the University

If a student or a person from outside the University community behaves inaptly or bullies a University employee, the instructions above are followed to the extent possible. If the object of inappropriate behaviour or bullying is a student, a different set of instructions is followed.

The employer does not always have opportunities to intervene in bullying inflicted by a client or an interest group. Employees can be supported for example by dealing with the incidents in the work community and by training employees for such situations.

Prevention of workplace bullying

The best way to prevent inappropriate behaviour and workplace bullying is to see to the functional capacity and openness. At the common meetings of the work unit, the members should discuss the code of practice and shared rules of their own unit as well as the necessary improvements and changes.

Not even a well-functioning work community can avoid conflict. Difference of opinion is quite normal in any workplace. Conflicts must, however, be handled so that they are not prolonged, personified or expanded.

Indiscreet behaviour and workplace bullying can be prevented in advance, e.g. so that

- ▶ every member of the work community is aware of the goals for one's work and the community
- ▶ the principles for the division of work and responsibilities are clear and fair
- ▶ in the work community the atmosphere remains open and also difficult matters can be tackled
- ▶ meetings are held on a regular basis and members are well-informed on common matters
- ▶ development discussions are conducted regularly
- ▶ adequate introduction to work is provided.

Contact persons:

- ▶ your immediate superior
- ▶ the industrial safety delegate
- ▶ the deputy industrial safety delegate
- ▶ the harassment contact person
- ▶ the head of labour protection
- ▶ the director of personnel
- ▶ the occupational nurse and occupational health care professionals

Useful links

- ▶ Equality and Diversity Plan
- ▶ The Model of Early Intervention
- ▶ Gender Harassment and Inappropriate Treatment
- ▶ Development Discussion Instructions
- ▶ Familiarization pages

These instructions have been accepted in the Labour Protection Committee of the University of Vaasa on 20 September 2013.