

Managers crucial to stamping out bullying in nursing

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A new research report from Massey University's Healthy Work Group has outlined the management competencies needed to both prevent and manage workplace bullying in the nursing sector.

Funded by the College of Nurses Aotearoa, the report aims to address a persistent problem in the sector, as shown by a recent Waikato District Health Board staff survey that indicated 32 per cent of respondents felt bullied at work.

Report co-author Dr. Kate Blackwood says early interventions when there are signs of bullying behaviour is the key to successful outcomes.

"If you let bullying escalate and become drawn out over time, not only is there likely to be significant damage caused, but it is likely to become extremely difficult to resolve," she says.

"By the time it is formalised through Human Resources [HR], it has often escalated too far – there is likely to be a much better outcome if there is informal, low-level intervention at an early stage."

The role of managers

The ideal person to address bullying behaviour at an early stage is a team manager, Dr. Blackwood says, but unfortunately, managers can also be the source of bullying behaviour.

She says she has heard many stories where there are known [bullies](#) who get away with it in the health sector because they "get things done".

"There is a lot of managerial and non-managerial bullying in nursing which often goes unaddressed for a range of reasons, such as an acceptance of bullying in organisational culture, lack of support to deal with bullying, and fear of reporting.

"A range of interventions are required at an individual and organisational level to prevent bullying, but the competencies and actions of managers are particularly important."

Common features of healthy workplaces

Dr. Blackwood says the research findings will be useful at many levels, including for managers who want to deal with bullying better and organisations looking to recruit and promote staff with the right management competencies.

In-depth interviews were conducted with nurses and direct line managers of nursing teams for the report. Participants were asked to describe their current and past work environments, including those in which they had experienced or managed bullying and those they considered to be healthy.

The most commonly identified features of workplaces that prevented workplace bullying included managers who facilitated clear, respectful and open communication and fostered team cohesion. Other competencies included being available, having consistency in the way staff are treated and giving individual consideration to the needs of staff.

"Accommodating staff needs in nursing can be particularly complicated," Dr. Blackwood says. "Managers are not always able to say, 'Ok, sure, have that time off or swap that shift.' But it's important they are open to being flexible when they are able."

Dealing with known problems

When it came to actually dealing with bullying behaviour, the most commonly identified competency was dealing with known issues.

"In nursing and the wider healthcare sector, bullying is often normalised in organisational culture. So, when an episode of bullying occurs, often it isn't dealt with properly, if at all," Dr. Blackwood says.

"Our participants told us of many cases where nothing happened after reporting bullying, and this makes it worse. Managers taking responsibility and dealing with behavioural issues promptly is crucial if cases are to be resolved."

While the report focuses on management competencies, Dr. Blackwood stresses that this can only ever be part of the solution to workplace bullying.

"In a high-stress environment, which is understaffed, or doesn't have good HR support or structures in place to foster a healthy work environment, managers are less likely to demonstrate these competencies, or they are likely to have a lesser impact," she says.

"While managers have an important role to play, responsibility for stopping [workplace](#) bullying can't be left entirely with them."

Provided by Massey University

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