Intervening early to address negative workplace interactions

The educational video *Workplace Bullying* addresses the different forms of bullying, risk factors, prevention and response measures.

Bullying can develop over time when negative workplace interactions are allowed to continue. It is therefore important to recognise conditions in the work environment that may contribute to negative interactions and to intervene early before they escalate and potentially become entrenched.

Professional disagreements can be part of healthy discussions and do not constitute bullying. **Bullying** is repeated behaviour that is generally likely to cause distress to the person subjected to it. If disagreements are left unresolved, there is a risk that they may become personal and, in some cases, develop into bullying.

Recognising the Risk Factors

Bullying does not occur in a vacuum. Clear roles and responsibilities, appropriate support and feedback for employees, and positive workplace communication lay the foundation for a healthy work environment.

However, when work organisation, management and workplace communication are inadequate, conditions may arise that contribute to negative interactions which, in some cases, can escalate into bullying:

Work organisation and management

- Unclear roles and responsibilities
- Unclear division of tasks and priorities
- Demanding tasks under time pressure without adequate support
- Lack of support and feedback
- Lack of clear standards and follow-up
- Workplace changes and inadequate communication of information

Workplace communication and culture

- Unresolved disagreements that become personal
- Negative workplace interactions that are allowed to continue
- Lack of trust and psychological safety

Let´s stay alert

Negative workplace interactions can start small. At first, the behaviour may seem harmless, but if no one intervenes, it can cause distress and become entrenched.

Rather than waiting for difficult workplace interactions to escalate, we should seek to understand and address their underlying causes before this happens.

By treating one another with respect and kindness and addressing difficult interactions early, we help foster a healthy workplace culture. Examples of behaviour and workplace interactions to be aware of include:

- **Repeated jokes at an employee's expense, even if the person laughs along, as this may feel safer than speaking up or objecting.**
- **Repeated negative talk behind someone's back, gossip or ignoring someone.**
- **Social exclusion, for example when an employee is repeatedly left out of informal conversations where information is shared, such as when team members meet for coffee or socialise after work.**
- **Unequal treatment in day-to-day management, for example when tasks or responsibilities are repeatedly taken away from the same employee without objective justification, while others in comparable positions are not treated in the same way.**
- **Disagreements that become personal, when professional disagreements are left unresolved.**

Intervening early – examples of preventive measures

Risk Assessment of the Psychosocial Work Environment

Conducting a risk assessment of work organisation, management and workplace communication can help identify, at an early stage, factors that may negatively affect employees' safety and well-being. The risk assessment must be followed by measures to address identified risks and appropriate follow-up.

Effective work organisation and proactive management

Clear roles and responsibilities, appropriate support from managers and colleagues, along with feedback and follow-up, can reduce the risk of negative workplace interactions. Managers play a key role and must lead by example

Addressing disagreements early

It is important to address disagreements before they become prolonged and personal. **Facilitated discussions** can be a useful way to provide employees with an opportunity to share their experiences of workplace interactions and other aspects of the work environment.

Trust builds the foundation of healthy interactions

When there is trust in the workplace, employees are more likely to feel confident discussing difficult workplace interactions, seeking support and raising concerns or suggesting improvements. A **workplace communication agreement** can be a useful tool for managers and employees to establish shared standards for communication in the workplace

We all have a role to play

Each of us is responsible for our own behaviour, and it is important to treat one another with respect and kindness. Employees should speak up if they experience or witness inappropriate behaviour or negative workplace interactions. Managers must lead by example, provide support, take concerns seriously and ensure that issues are followed up on.

When bullying is suspected

When bullying is suspected, prompt and effective action in accordance with the workplace health and safety plan is essential. Employees must always be able to raise concerns or submit complaints within the workplace.

[Read more about the procedyre for handling cases]

Let´s start the conversation in the workplace

The educational video *Workplace Bullying* can help managers and employees initiate discussions about workplace culture, what is working well and what could be improved. Examples of useful questions to discuss include:

- How do we communicate with one another, and what characterises our workplace culture?
- Are there conditions in our work environment that may contribute to negative workplace interactions?
- Do employees receive adequate support from managers in carrying out their work?
- How do we address disagreements and difficult workplace interactions, or do we allow them to escalate without taking action?
- Is there sufficient trust in the workplace for employees to feel confident discussing difficult workplace interactions, seeking support and suggesting improvements?

From discussion to action

Let´s use these discussions to identify what is working well and where improvements can be made. Following the discussions, managers and employees should work together to assess which areas require further attention, who will be responsible for addressing them and how progress will be followed up.

A healthy workplace culture is one of the most effective ways to prevent workplace bullying. Let us work together to foster a healthy workplace culture where bullying is not tolerated.

Á vef Vinnueftirlitsins má finna nánari upplýsingar og hagnýt verkfæri um sálfélagslegt vinnuumhverfi, áhættumat, viðrun, samskiptasáttmála og forvarnir og viðbrögð við einelti á vinnustöðum.