What Can You Learn About Workplace Bullying from Raab's Resignation?

By Zara Chechi

Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab's resignation has sparked conversation about the scope of workplace bullying after a damning report found he acted in an 'intimidating' manner. Raab maintains that the inquiry has set a dangerous precedent by setting the threshold for bullying so low.

For SMBs, these conversations can be a cause for concern, especially if you have not yet officially implemented any anti-bullying policies at your business. Now might be the perfect time to start putting an anti-bullying policy in place, which can be a powerful statement in managing your company's reputation. While bullying is typically associated with school, the recent news has highlighted that it can also be found in workplaces of all types and sizes.

If you haven't had to deal with bullying claims, you might not be aware of what it looks like and how to deal with it. Workplace bullying can leave victims with physical and mental health problems, including panic attacks, stress, and high blood pressure. The continuation of this behaviour will leave your workforce depleted, stressed, and, most likely, on their way out. A survey by the Workplace

Bullying Institute found that 25% thought the best solution to stop bullying was to quit.

One in four UK workers have reported being bullied at work, with the same number reporting that they feel left out in the workplace. With such high numbers, it's important for businesses to develop an anti-bullying culture and ensure that this behaviour is dealt with quickly to prevent its normalisation.

What does workplace bullying look like?

Patti Wood, a human behaviour expert, spoke to us about what bullying can look and sound like.

She says there are physical cues to look out for, such as a head jutting forward, teeth baring, and space invasion. It can look like vocal intimidation, *"Raising the volume of the voice, lowering the voice, speeding up or slowing down, punching certain words, or growling"*.

It can also include targeted jokes, threats, humiliation, unjust criticism, and continued denial of requests without a valid reason. Workplace bullying can often be subtle and can include 'gaslighting', which is where a bully engages in abusive behaviour but then denies it occurred. It's important to be aware of both overt and subtle bullying behaviours to identify them.

Patti says you can identify bullying by noticing how you feel in the presence of someone else. If you feel bullied, pay attention to what the other person is saying or doing that could make you feel targeted.. A lot of workplace bullying can be subtle, so this can be a practical way for your employees to identify bullying.

Another marker employers can look out for is a change in workplace behaviour. This can include increased absences, low morale, and changes in performance. There may be other reasons behind these changes, but noting them and enquiring can help managers monitor the early warning signs of workplace bullying.

What to do when you come across workplace bullying:

Dealing with workplace bullying effectively is a key factor for employers who want to provide a healthy and cooperative workplace.

- **Act on bullying quickly:** acting quickly sends a signal to the wider business that bullying won't be tolerated. Generally, the longer it goes on, the more normalised it can become and the deeper a bullying culture can become embedded in your company.
- **Take the claim seriously:** whether the bullying was spotted by another staff member or reported by the victim of the bullying themselves, every claim should be taken seriously. This helps cultivate a culture of anti-bullying and provides victims with the support they need.
- **Keep it confidential:** to prevent gossip and further escalation, ensure the matter is kept confidential and not shared outside of the necessary parties.

- **Avoid bias:** it's important to remain impartial during this process to ensure each side is fairly represented and given a chance to prove their claim. Neutrality also helps prevent any bullying towards the accused.
- **Provide support:** during the process, explain to each party what options are available to them for support. This could look like being able to bring someone else during these meetings to give them extra support.
- **Communicate clearly:** each party should be clearly told your company policy (if you don't have one of these, keep reading as we delve into how to create this) the length of the process and what the potential outcomes may be.
- **File accurate reports:** keep clear records of the claim, meetings, outcomes, and any relevant information pertaining to the claim.

We spoke to Hanne Wulp, a leadership communication and conflict resolution skills specialist, on how to deal with workplace bullying. She says, "*Motivating someone to be honest and caring can be done by holding up a mirror to, or linking, their manipulative or bullying behavior to their core values.*

"*Your core values are honesty, respect and community). How do you rhyme that with the behavior I've just watched, when you singled out X, and you said XYZ to them?*"

Hanne goes on to say, "*A person can only change their ways when they become aware of it , and then use skills to act differently.*

"*Addressing bullying is really teaching them about how their behavior is viewed and what they can do to become better aligned with themselves, and, with that, a pleasant person to be around.*"

How to create an anti-bullying culture in the workplace

Cultivating an anti-bullying culture is key for your employees to thrive in a healthy and supportive environment. We've put together a list of our top recommendations to help you shape your workplace.

- **Be realistic:** Rahul Vij, CEO of WebSpero Solutions, says, "*Honestly, it wasn't an overnight process, but we started by setting clear expectations and guidelines for acceptable behavior in the workplace.*" Cultivating a culture happens over time, so don't expect an instant shift in behaviour. However, the quicker you start, the sooner you'll see the change.
- **Develop a clear anti-bullying policy:** define what bullying looks like. Provide physical, verbal, and emotional examples of bullying. Outline how incidents should be reported to ensure employees are clear about who they should speak to if they're the victim, or if they've noticed bullying. Specify what the investigation process looks like and the potential outcomes.
- **Communicate the policy:** your anti-bullying policy should be communicated to everyone in the business. Jonathan Elster, CEO of EcomHalo, says that while they've never had reports of bullying, their workforce is diverse and they're aware of the potential for incidents. Once their policy had been created, an educational video was created and sent out to employees explaining how to recognise bullying and deal with complaints.
- **Provide training:** Training should work alongside your anti-bullying policy to make it a reality, instead of just a theory. Martina Genao, Director of Operations at the Emergency Plumbing Squad, recommends "*regular training and education for employees, encouraging them to recognize and address bullying behavior. Additionally, promoting open communication*

and creating a positive work environment can go a long way in building an anti-bullying culture."

- **Teambuilding exercises** and social clubs: Samantha Odo, the COO and Sales Representative at Precondo, says, *"Creating a positive and respectful work environment through team-building activities, employee recognition programs, and open communication channels can help prevent bullying from occurring in the first place."* Focus on building a cohesive and collaborative team by providing opportunities for team-building and bonding exercises and activities. This could be in the form of socials, professional development, or social clubs, like sports or book clubs.
- **Lead by example:** leadership should set the tone for workplace culture and showcase the kind of behavior they want to see.
- **Define and communicate your company values:** clearly define what values your business stands for and communicate these to your employees. This sets a standard for employees to interact with each other and will avoid vagueness around accepted workplace behaviour.
- **Values-based hiring:** one key way to avoid bullying in the workplace is by hiring candidates who are aligned with the values of your business.. This means it can take a little longer to hire, but it can help avoid incidents down the road.

Workplace bullying leads to a sense of isolation and stress, causing more absences and a potential drop in job performance. Creating a culture of kindness, empathy, and support will help tackle any workplace incidents and ensure your employees feel safe to report or deal with workplace bullying.

While cultivating a culture takes some time, we recommend working on an anti-bullying policy by providing training, team-building exercises, and leading by example as some of the best ways to provide a healthy, supportive, and co-operative environment.