

Tackling Bullying and Harassment: Acas advisory and training work at the Mersey Regional Ambulance Service NHS Trust

A case study describing how Acas helped an NHS Trust develop and implement new bullying and harassment procedures and trained staff in how to use the new procedures.

The issue

In 2001, Acas was commissioned to undertake advisory work in the Mersey Regional Ambulance Service NHS Trust. The Trust has 1,100 employees located across a number of sites. Acas advisers first became involved in a collective issue around bullying and harassment. Once they had helped resolve these immediate issues, Acas officers met with managers and representatives from the two unions recognised by the Trust to discuss what further help Acas could offer. Managers and representatives recognised that the existing policy around bullying and harassment was not working effectively and needed revising. Following these discussions Acas agreed to help them develop a new policy, and a strategy for implementing it.

How did Acas help?

The first step in this process involved Acas staff running a series of workshops attended by large numbers of employees, who worked to identify issues around bullying and harassment in the Trust, and the shortcomings of the existing policy. A Joint Working Party was then established in early 2002 comprising managers, union representatives, and interested employees. Over a period of months, they drafted a new "Dignity at Work" bullying and harassment policy. Once approved by senior management, the working group designed a strategy for raising awareness of the policy throughout the workforce and for appointing a group of "Fair Treatment Advisors". Seminars were then held for senior managers and senior union representatives in which the subject of Bullying and Harassment was discussed and the new procedures were explained.

Positions for Fair Treatment Advisors were advertised within the Trust and staff who were interested in the position were interviewed. Ten advisors were selected. These advisors are beginning to play a crucial role in implementing the new policy by educating staff about the procedures, and providing them with support and advice in the event of a bullying or harassment incident.

Through its Workplace Training function, Acas then trained around 70 managers, Fair Treatment Advisors, and trade union representatives in the new procedures. These training sessions were developed by a small working party, facilitated by Acas advisers, who were charged with devising strategies for ensuring that the policy was implemented throughout the Trust. The Trust itself has since used the Acas training

material to develop a new training syllabus and workshops for both operational staff and new managers, and have incorporated training on Dignity at Work procedures into their induction programme for all new employees. Members of the working party have developed and distributed widely a leaflet explaining the procedures, and regularly highlight issues relating to Dignity at Work and the role of the Fair Treatment Advisors in staff newsletters.

Outcomes: Changing behaviours

On evaluation of the project in late 2003, those involved described how the revised policy represented a marked improvement on the former policy. Union representatives felt that the new procedure set out a process which was more “dignified” for employees. Importantly, the new policy enables those subjected to bullying to opt for tackling problems internally, through an informal route, by asking the person to stop their behaviour, and explaining the effect their behaviour has on them, with an option of taking a colleague with them for support. The informal process also includes the option of seeking help from a manager to set up a meeting with those concerned. It was reported that many staff have indeed opted to take complaints through the informal route, with the benefit that problems are resolved quickly and not “left to fester”.

One manager described the Trust’s former, little-used policy as a “bottom drawer” policy which staff used in an adversarial fashion to “score points against the policy”. The new policy, however, was used more often, and in the more positive context of raising dignity issues that needed addressing. It was felt that in the past, certain managers had little understanding of the impact that their behaviour had on employees’ dignity at work. Now, through employees alerting managers to their behaviours by using the informal process, they were being made more aware of the repercussions of such behaviours.

Outcomes: The impact on employment relations and workplace climate

Fair Treatment Advisors reported that employees are now generally more willing to report bullying and harassment, as they know that they will not have to deal directly with the individual who is bullying or harassing them. An important outcome is that grievances are now being raised that would not have surfaced in the past, when the Trust had a culture which did not encourage staff to raise issues. According to managers, this meant that such issues were suppressed and usually worsened over time. Because of the focus on early intervention in the new policy, one manager described how “much pain can be taken out of a problem”.

While all involved acknowledged that it is difficult to change entrenched attitudes among managers, the growing confidence of the Fair Treatment Advisors means that they are increasingly able to challenge managers on their behaviour. In the period since they had been appointed and trained, Advisors recounted many instances



of contact with people over issues of bullying, and discussion with many more employees around the Advisors' role, and issues around bullying more generally. Advisors also reported that staff are now more generally aware of the impact of their behaviour on others, and were highly receptive to the new policy. And managers described how Fair Treatment Advisors now serve as an important "temperature gauge" of staff opinion and morale, each of which are strongly linked to dignity issues.

Managers at the Trust acknowledged that it was difficult to make a definitive link between changes in performance measures or other outcomes and Acas' involvement in the bullying and harassment initiative. Despite this, one favourable outcome was reflected in the findings of the most recent NHS national staff survey conducted in October 2003. The issue of bullying and violence is one of critical concern to NHS workers, and the national staff survey data showed that the Trust was in the top 20 per cent of organisations in terms of staff satisfaction with measures taken by the Trust to tackle bullying and harassment. Managers believed that the positive response to the national survey signalled a strong increase in satisfaction with the Trust's efforts to address bullying and harassment issues.

The revised policy has played a pivotal role in reinforcing the new culture of openness and receptivity to different viewpoints that managers are trying to encourage within the Trust. The process of using a joint working group to consult with stakeholders and develop procedures was so successful that managers now intend to use joint working and early problem-solving to tackle a wide range of policy development and operational issues, rather than waiting for problems to emerge and then "having to clean up the mess at the end". This contrasts with the past, where the tendency was for managers to impose solutions on the workforce that were not always well-received.

Managers and trade union representatives described one of the key strengths of Acas' involvement as its role as an "independent honest broker" which had the respect of both parties. They considered that if the Trust had paid consultants to facilitate the process, staff and union representatives would have been wary that "there was a catch to what management is saying", in terms of their promotion of change within the organisation.

This case indicates the growing importance of Acas' role in tackling workplace bullying and harassment through its advisory project and workplace training functions in organisations which are becoming increasingly aware of the costs of not addressing bullying in terms of employee turnover, sickness, morale and poor relationships in the workplace.

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