From counselling room to training room

Nicola Banning and **Chris Johnstone** run anti-bullying workshops that help to promote positive working environments

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Economic stress is a known risk factor for workplace bullying and this is particularly relevant in the current climate facing local authorities. We have been delivering anti-bullying trainings for a local authority in the Southwest for some years. Within the organisation, tackling bullying and harassment has been identified as an organisational priority. Staff surveys have highlighted the size of the problem; and the costs to the organisation, as well as its workforce, are significant. Workplace bullying increases sickness absence rates, and, if not tackled, leaves the organisation vulnerable to litigation. Strengthening the ability of managers to tackle and prevent workplace bullying protects both the organisation and its employees, particularly during times of economic strain. All staff can take part in promoting positive working environments in keeping with workplace policies on promoting dignity at work.

Writing on the role of counsellors working in organisations, Rennie Peyton explains: 'We have to acknowledge that when many companies have policies in place for dealing with inappropriate behaviours, they still go on. Most organisations know exactly what to do if a member of staff is caught defrauding the company in some way, yet many flounder when human beings are being treated badly by others.'[1] The value of having counsellors stepping out of the counselling room and into the training room to facilitate anti-bullying workshops is that we bring our understanding of the organisational culture from our client work and our knowledge of the shadow side of the organisation.

We train a broad range of staff, including senior managers responsible for whole departments, as well as staff from human resources, social care, legal and finance departments, library services and fire services. The management asked us to deliver

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training that would strengthen the capacity of staff to tackle bullying and harassment at work and contribute to promoting positive working environments. We set out to create a half day's training, as the brief was that time-pressured staff may be more inclined to commit to a half day's training. Whilst we recognise the limitations of a half day's workshop, we also witness the positive impact on staff if they are offered a safe and supportive training environment within which to address this complex issue.

Our aims are to:
■ contribute towards the development of a workplace culture where bullying and harassment do not occur
■ promote the cultivation of positive relationships and working environments.

to develop the skills and insights needed to tackle this problem effectively.

3 Past/current victim: a number of delegates disclosed that they had been bullied in the past, or were having current difficulties. They were reassured that there were steps they could take to tackle this issue, whilst others were interested in looking at how to recover from past bullying and prevent it in the future.

4 Vulnerable to accusation: some managers expressed concern about the risk of being accused of bullying, particularly in situations where their role involved challenging employees. One of the benefits of the course was providing a forum where the difference between robust management style and bullying could be explored within a safe environment.

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We acknowledge that these aims may sound idealistic, particularly for staff experiencing the toxic effects of workplace bullying. In this respect, the workshops provide a forum for staff to explore cultural norms within the organisation. They may re-evaluate what they 'put up with' and become clearer that just because something has become normal working practice, it doesn't make it acceptable.

Our objectives are to provide a reflective space for staff to look at how they might promote these aims, to introduce some change management skills to counter bullying and harassment in the workplace and to offer an opportunity to explore responses to challenging situations and relationships at work.

Who attends and why?
Delegates have come from a broad range of backgrounds, in terms of area and grade of work, though several sub-groups emerged when looking at the reasons for attending.
1 Confidence building: many participating managers recognised bullying as an issue they might have to deal with/had dealt with and wanted to increase their confidence in being able to tackle it appropriately.
2 Past/current witness: some delegates described situations where they had witnessed bullying but felt under-equipped to respond. This was a common motivation for wanting to attend the course, delegates saying there were few other opportunities

5 'I was sent': some delegates attended the course at the request of their team or line managers. Sometimes this was after another member of the team had attended and reported it as worth coming to or because an accusation had been made/ grievance procedures had been initiated.
6 The enthusiast: some delegates were already knowledgeable in this area, being active in the organisation's network to address bullying and harassment. They came to deepen their understanding, and also as an expression of their commitment to tackle this issue.

Workshop tone and style
It is our intention that the training environment we offer models dignity and respect at work. We aim for a balance between building the positive and tackling the negative in looking at what people at all levels across the organisation can do to promote positive working environments.

Our style is non-judgmental and we aim to offer core conditions to the group and act as a container for the inevitable emotions that will be present in the training room. We use our experience of being comfortable with what is frequently uncomfortable so that individuals may feel heard and accepted. We accept that bullying within the organisation is unpalatable but that it does go on. We observe that there is often palpable relief that we are neither trying to minimise the issue nor advocating that individuals should initiate formal procedures.

Rather, we aim to hold a reflective space where we can hear the experiences of staff, accept their reality and look at a range of responses to tackle this issue. We also direct staff to where else they might find support, resources and training available, both inside and outside of the organisation. In these respects, it is helpful that we are independent and external to the organisation yet we hold valuable knowledge and experience of the organisation's culture.

Workshop content

A way of beginning

We begin our workshop by inviting staff to write what they *want* and *do not want* from the workshop and put these on a board. This allows us to tune in to the group's needs before anything is said and it can be a useful signal to us of anything we might need to be sensitive to in our opening comments. Typically, delegates want a clearer understanding of what constitutes bullying and harassment, and how to stop it before it escalates; often, what they don't want is to be forced to share personal experience.

Opening round

Having introduced ourselves and our backgrounds, we ask the group to introduce themselves and say what brought them onto this particular workshop. For delegates traumatised by recent bullying, who may not have disclosed this in public before, this opening round can be challenging. We've had occasions when a delegate has left the room, visibly distressed, within minutes of starting. In situations like this, one of us will stay with the group and facilitate the round, whilst the other will leave the room to offer support to the individual and encourage them to return to the group if they feel able. Delegates often feed back on their evaluation forms that they 'felt really safe' and we believe that working as a two-headed team contributes greatly to the sense of safety and holding we are able to offer the group.

Confidentiality and agreements

We are sensitive to the need for confidentiality and we find it is helpful to offer clarity about what we mean by this. We ask staff to take away the learning and share it, but not to share the specifics of who said what. We see any information given by a delegate as being their property and so it should not be shared without their permission. We also add a 'health warning', asking delegates to take responsibility for what they choose to bring throughout the workshop, and we stress that we respect their choice.

We request a maximum group size of 12 delegates as this enables us to maintain contact with the group and can help create a sense of safety. We request that the course administrator circulates delegates an attendance list prior to the workshop, so that there is transparency about attendance. This allows delegates the opportunity to rebook onto another workshop if they find themselves booked on a workshop with someone who they may feel uncomfortable with. Workshops may sometimes be run specifically for a particular tier or grade of staff so that they are more likely to be experiencing similar issues or organisational challenges.

The approach

Our approach to change involves taking a step back and looking at the influence of the context around 'the problem' of bullying at work, as in systems theory. We look at how improving the context of relationships at work can form part of a larger strategy to counter bullying and harassment and how all staff can play a role in this. Keeping a balance between tackling the negative (eg bullying behaviour) and strengthening the positive (eg improving work environments), adds to the empowering impact of the workshop.

Sometimes delegates express their frustrations that, 'the wrong people are in the training room' or 'you're preaching to the converted' and that 'the bullies should be made to come on the workshop'. We accept this frustration but are not convinced that coercion is all that effective, as having unwilling or uncooperative group members can sabotage the group. We work with the willing parts of the organisation and explain that all staff can play a role in promoting dignity and respect at work.

Defining the problem – what is bullying and harassment?

For the purposes of this workshop, we use the terms bullying and harassment interchangeably in line with the organisation's policy. The delegates are often seeking clarity on what constitutes bullying and harassment and we provide definitions from both Acas (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) and the CIPD (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development) as points of discussion. Delegates quickly find ambiguities that emerge for them. We find a meaningful understanding can best be arrived at through group discussion, using the definitions to draw on individuals' experience past and present. What we always aim to stress, is that at the heart of bullying is the use, misuse or abuse of power.

We remind staff that employers have a legal duty to provide a safe place of work but we recognise that staff may not always experience this as their reality. We acknowledge that whilst there are many

cases of intentional bullying, there are also many cases of accidental bullying, which may be a product of organisational stresses for managers to drive through changes or cope with restructuring. This is particularly prevalent in the current climate of cuts and we aim to tease out the differences between 'firm management' and bullying.

There are usually discussions about how 'it's all a question of perception', and 'what is bullying to one person may be robust management to another'. Managers often own the struggles they face in managing their teams during times of economic strain and openly discuss their concerns about whether they are being perceived as bullying in their managerial style.

This is fruitful territory for discussion and to help offer clarity, we often ask the questions: what promotes dignity and respect at work and what undermines dignity and respect at work? Staff may often be uncertain about what constitutes bullying at work and we ask them to consider if their behaviour were being filmed on CCTV, how they might feel about watching the replay? We will then discuss the differences between an individual having an off-day at work, (something we're all capable of), and persistent, repetitive incidents which continue despite requests for the behaviour to stop. We encourage staff to talk about the behaviour of an individual rather than labelling 'the bullies' as a fixed group. This distinction is important, as we are interested in looking at a process of change whereby unacceptable or unwanted behaviour can be changed.

Delegates often contribute their own experiences of bullying, such as feeling sick on a Monday morning, having a sense that the bullying must be because of something they have either done or not done, and the case of a member of staff who felt so victimised they lost self-confidence and lost their voice without any physical reason. There is a deepening understanding of the perils of workplace bullying, how intangible and insidious it can be and a growing sense of support within the group as experiences are shared. At this point, delegates often communicate a sense of being clearer about what constitutes bullying and harassment. Our next exercise aims to clarify this still further.

Exercise 1 – Workplace from heaven or hell
To initiate group discussion, we invite delegates to split into two groups, one called 'Workplace from heaven' and the other called 'Workplace from hell'. We then ask:
■ What would you see in a workplace from heaven/hell?

■ What would you feel in a workplace from heaven/hell?
■ What would you think in a workplace from heaven/hell?
■ What might you witness in a workplace from heaven/hell?

In group feedback it becomes apparent that hellish environments tend to include poor communication, a lack of trust, silence, cliques, undermining comments, not being thanked, and these can often characterise environments where bullying and harassment take place. A heavenly working environment comprises hell's opposites. The discussion emerging out of this exercise draws out the differences between a positive and negative working environment much more clearly, and with greater engagement, than any talk we could give.

There is broad agreement that bullying in the workplace has a damaging effect on staff motivation, work performance, health, attendance and levels of engagement. We then ask the question: what is the opposite of bullying? And could this have a positive impact in all these areas? Using force-field analysis, we look at the behaviours or actions that can help to improve a working environment.

We are familiar with staff feeling disempowered by the wider politics within the organisation and mindful of this, we acknowledge there will be aspects of organisational life over which they feel they have no control. But we still ask the question: if you were to influence your day at work in a more positive direction, what might you do? There is often a shift in the energy at this point as staff recognise the things they already do to contribute to a positive working environment or consider the things they could do that could improve it.

Focusing on the problem
We then move on to address the problem of challenging relationships and situations at work and offer delegates the opportunity to split into groups and work on a generic scenario that would be most useful to them.

Scenario 1
A member of your team has come to speak to you 'off the record' about a relationship they are having with a colleague that is concerning them. They are obviously distressed and tell you that they think they are being bullied and have felt so for some time. They cite a number of incidents to you that have occurred over a period of months and reveal to you that there are other members of your team that feel they are also being bullied.

Scenario 2
Some months ago a new member of staff joined your team. Since then, you have started to feel unhappy at work and find yourself feeling uneasy in their presence after several occasions when they openly criticised you and your work. You find them aggressive and unpredictable, as sometimes they ignore you whilst at other times they take credit for work/ideas that you have generated. You have never experienced a working relationship like this before, and you realise that it is starting to impact on other areas of your life.

We ask both groups to consider the following questions for discussion:
■ What might be going on?
■ What skills or qualities might you bring to managing this problem?
■ How would you manage this situation?
■ What support might be available to you?

These scenarios encourage delegates to work in self-selected groups and to think about their responses, which can often evoke significant discussion and disagreement. In scenario 1 we use the words 'off the record' with the intention of drawing out discussion. Some staff feel there can be no 'off the record' discussions when the word 'bullying' has been mentioned. Others recognise that this request may come from a frightened member of staff and that it may be a plea for some kind of reassurance from further attack or victimisation.

staff counselling, occupational health unit, trade union, equality and diversity unit, the internal bullying and harassment network, and any further professional development training that may be useful, eg assertiveness.

Checklist
We then offer a checklist for staff of our tips on what to do if they find themselves either experiencing bullying behaviour, managing bullying behaviour or accused of bullying behaviour.

Five-stage problem-solving process
To conclude, we offer a five-stage problem-solving process as we are often asked for tools or techniques that staff can take back to the workplace. The process is taken from *Find your power – a toolkit for resilience and positive change*[2]. This allows for a live problem to be looked at and for an individual to gain the support of the group. This is particularly effective when individuals feel blocked or stuck with a problem and need some fresh input. Staff often report feeling like this when they are in conflict situations at work. They can find support from the group and a sense of feeling less isolated in tackling the issue. Feedback from delegates reveals that they often find this is one of the most useful parts of the workshop.

By teaching this process, we demonstrate the parallel process and encourage staff to take the technique back to the workplace to use within their teams. We give space to hearing the true nature of the problem and recommend hearing

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We will discuss the need for good communication skills and good listening and add a word of caution about initiating formal process too quickly before informal discussions have taken place. We highlight how, often when formal processes are set in motion, the process will take over and may end up leaving individuals feeling more disempowered by the process. That said, we also highlight the dangers of doing nothing, and how, in cases where no action was taken, organisations have been found to be negligent in their duty of care to staff.

We highlight the useful resources that are available within the organisation to assist staff, for example,

the emotions involved as this is often the most powerful part of the process. If strong emotions of anger or hurt are not recognised and acknowledged, it is unlikely that the individual will feel the problem has been solved or understood. Once emotions have been acknowledged, we then advocate using the skills of the group and/or others to problem-solve and use a five-step problem-solving approach to achieve it.

Delegates have brought a range of problems, including:
■ having a hunch a member of their team is being bullied and not knowing what to do

- being accused of being a bully and not understanding how or why
- wanting to help a colleague who is being bullied
- wanting to know how to help their team move on after a formal investigation has taken place which has left unresolved feelings.

We don't promise that this problem-solving process will solve every problem, but we know that it gives the problem some space to be heard and that the acceptance and empathic listening we offer is certainly part of the process to making some headway.

Closing round
We close with a final statement from each delegate about what they feel they can take away from the workshop such as any useful insight, awareness or points of learning.

Delegates have highlighted the following as being the most useful aspects of the workshop:
- sharing their experience and learning from the experience of their colleagues
- the practical advice and the tools, eg the problem-solving process, the heaven and hell exercise, and the small group exploration of the issue through the case scenarios
- being able to explore live issues in a safe and supportive environment which leaves them feeling better able to address the issue and appropriately challenge unacceptable behaviour
- having a training environment that acknowledges the reality of the issue within the organisation and which also supports staff wanting to find ways to respond when they find themselves in relationships that undermine dignity and respect
- having a forum whereby the distinction between bullying management and robust management can be safely explored and understood.

Our process
It is important that we attend to our own self-care and process when undertaking this work, as working in the field of workplace bullying often entails dealing with traumatised individuals. Writing on the realities of working with the issue of bullying and harassment in the workplace, Rennie Peyton advises us that 'we have to understand and accept that if we intend to work in and with organisations, we have to let go of those things we cannot do anything about.'[1] We may have to accept our own limitations as trainers as we do not have the power to make the decisions that will bring an end to the bullying and harassment. This can engender feelings

of helplessness. We need to recognise the role that we have played, and we work together to fully debrief after a training session. It may be necessary to take any outstanding issues to supervision.

Conclusion
As trainers we are part of the feedback loop to the organisation and we provide management with an annual report on our findings. We share the general points that we learn from running the workshops with those who are most committed to tackling the issue of bullying and harassment in the organisation. Further research would need to be undertaken over time to evaluate the effectiveness of the workshops as an intervention to reduce the reported incidents of bullying and harassment and improving wellbeing.

In its 2009 report, NICE argued the business case for promoting mental wellbeing at work, stating: 'Positive steps to improve the management of mental health in the workplace, including prevention and early identification of problems, could result in cost savings of 30 per cent. In an organisation with 1,000 employees, this is equivalent to cost savings of £250,607 per year.'[3]

The organisation has a range of measures it offers to help prevent and tackle workplace bullying. As a cultural intervention, the workshops are one such measure, and a point of reference where staff can re-evaluate what constitutes reasonable, normal standards of behaviour at work. They can also find support to address bullying behaviours and conflicts before they escalate. As one delegate put it: 'All of this workshop was relevant as it encompassed a lot of what people feel goes on in this organisation. It has helped me be clearer about my role in influencing things in a positive way and tackling bullying and harassment in my team before things go too far.' ■

References
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2 Johnstone C. Find your power – a toolkit for resilience and positive change. Permanent Publications; 2010.
3 NICE. Promoting mental wellbeing at work. Business case – implementing NICE guidelines. November 2009.