

Slow investigations are turning conflicts "toxic"

04 March 2021 4:00pm

Employers are taking far too long to complete bullying investigations, and their lack of a systematic approach is eroding employees' confidence and exacerbating workplace culture issues, a specialist says.

Bullying is "as rampant as ever" in workplaces, and the mishandling of an increasing number of complaints points "to something being wrong within the grievance process", says [Segal Conflict Solutions](#) managing partner **Saranne Segal**.

After analysing Fair Work Commission decisions involving bullying and reporting her findings in a [white paper](#), Segal says too many employers take an "ad hoc" approach to bullying complaints, even where policies and procedures are in place.

The main problem is speed, or the lack of it, she tells HR Daily.

"Sometimes they'll sit on things for months... they're hoping that it disappears. Maybe it's a bit of fear as well, because they're not really sure how to deal with it."

But the system is also an issue: "a lot of times, the policies and procedures aren't integrated, so they have... different procedures for different things all over the place."

Having one integrated policy allows employers to address bullying complaints with "no guesswork involved", and to examine bullying through a "legal lens to best mitigate their liability", she says.

Resolve complaints in 30 days

Segal sets out a best-practice flowchart for dealing with bullying in the white paper, and this includes different workflows for [informal and formal complaints](#), along with a risk matrix to help determine whether an internal or external investigation is required.

In the vast majority of cases, employers should be aiming to resolve complaints in 30 days, she says.



Source: Segal Conflict Solutions

And, when employers are following a process, transparency is key.

In too many cases, "employees just don't know what is going on", Segal says.

"People have to be informed, and communication lines have to be open. It sounds like a cliché, but it's really 'communication 101' or 'HR 101'... something has to change."

Faster resolution stops conflict turning "toxic"

When employers fail to deal with complaints quickly, issues "fester" and environments can become toxic, says Segal.

"Once this has occurred, the organisation exposes itself to legal liability, and it takes extreme effort on behalf of management to eradicate the toxicity."

Segal says it is easy to spot toxic teams by how employees interact.

"They speak badly to each other, [spread] rumours, [and there's] exclusivity," she says.

These environments start with small things that are left unaddressed, and eventually, "if you actually delve deeper, you'll see, 'you know what? This started off by this manager in the group excluding 'x' and 'y' from the Friday lunches, and she has favourites in her group'", she says.

"Generally speaking, if you go in there, there is generally one perpetrator [about whom] you can ultimately say, 'hey, that is why this is happening'."

On the other hand, when organisations treat conflict as a time-sensitive issue, they experience less toxic workplace behaviour.

"Time is a major factor," Segal says. "The quicker the conflict is nipped in the bud, the easier it is to resolve."

Steeper consequences for mishandled bullying

As well as the culture benefits, organisations have a strong financial imperative for dealing with bullying issues more effectively, Segal says.

Compensation payments after bullying-related disputes are "getting quite large", and there's growing public and media scrutiny of how poor behaviour is handled, she notes.

"Inappropriate behaviour is being tolerated less, and the courts are definitely following that."

Could more people on your team benefit from receiving HR Daily Premium access and membership? [Contact Pauly](#) for our discounted rates to add colleagues to your HR Daily Premium account.

Related premium content

- [Webcast: Uncovering workplace culture trouble spots](#)
- [Webcast: HR's role in conflict resolution](#)
- [Remote work increasing bullying, micromanagement complaints](#)
- [Zero-tolerance built by culture, not policies](#)
- [Anxiety-inducing performance plan wasn't bullying](#)

Related content

- ['Bullied' employees skipping informal resolution](#)
- [Investigations 'throw a grenade' into workplace conflicts](#)
- [Executives need "tough love" to eliminate bullying](#)
- [Two strategies 'turn down the temperature' on emerging conflicts](#)