

# Testing conditions

**Karen Grave** Karen Grave introduces a key 2020 PPMA Campaign, 'Out of the Shadows' and explains why and how workplace culture needs to change

As I write the opener to the conference edition of this PPMA supplement, the weather is that frustratingly British combination of beautiful sunshine followed by the more usual rain and storms.

The British weather is a pretty useful metaphor for working in human resources (HR) and organisational development (OD). There are some wonderful sunny days where we are involved and energised by interesting and innovative work. But there are those periods that can chill our souls and cause us to question the values and impact of our profession.

We are heading into our annual conference focused on implementing our new structure, developing our membership offering and developing content for our eight strategic themes. For the PPMA, this work represents our sunny days. Our strategic themes reflect areas of practice that are important not only to HR and OD practitioners, but our organisations more broadly.

We will be spending time during the second year of my term as President on a number of specific campaigns supporting our themes. This supplement edition is dedicated to our first campaign, 'Out of the Shadows', which will take a hard look at all the issues involved in bullying and harassment.

#Metoo has most definitely been a catalyst for a broad set of conversations about what is acceptable workplace behaviour.

Setting aside the publicity – which isn't always helpful – the debate about behaviour is a critical one.

The question is why has PPMA chosen to focus on this issue now? There are a number of reasons:

The issue isn't going away and the Women and Equalities committee started examining an aspect of it last year – namely, settlement agreement confidentiality clauses.

And a consultation has just been concluded on this. They found that there is enough evidence that the ACAS code of practice as it relates to Settlement Agreements (under section 111A of the Employment Rights Act 1996) is not being adhered to by employers; that it is beyond time to shine a spotlight on the role of HR and OD in how we handle bullying and harassment; and that while all sectors use non-disclosure agreements – and there are valid reasons to retain those as an important legal tool – it is easy to understand the particular sensitivities around their use in public services, given it is taxpayers' money ultimately used to settle employment claims.

During the past year, I've seen at close hand the impact bullying and harassment has had on friends, PPMA members and employees. And I have spoken to HR colleagues struggling with what they are being asked to do by senior officers.

Some of what I have seen and heard has made me weep, and it has filled me with anger and disappointment. It has led me to think

deeply about two things – the role and impact of our profession, and leadership and accountability.

It's blindingly obvious HR and OD has an enormous role in this area. We're accountable for writing policy and process, ensuring compliance with employment legislation, making sure relevant processes are followed, running training and development for managers, ensuring support is provided for people involved, etc.

Through Out of the Shadows I hope we can start to change some of the narrative and deliver meaningful and sustainable change

This is all very mechanical sounding and there is no doubt policy and processes that are transparent by design and delivery are critically important. However, the most important aspect of what is often hard and emotional work is the human component. I frequently quote Tom Riordan, Chief Executive of Leeds City Council who, in introducing our PPMA Northern Forum in October 2016, told us that he viewed HR as the 'praetorian guard of leadership and values'. This resonated deeply with me at the time and it has stuck with me ever since.

We talk easily and sometimes glibly about the importance of

treating people with respect, dignity compassion and honesty at work. As we will know from our own experiences, this is often easier to say than do. The pressures we operate under don't always mean we have the luxury of holding these values paramount. And, for some people, those values really do not take priority. Compromises are sometimes necessary, and the pace of work and the scope of workload is ever increasing for the majority of us.

Setting all this aside, the role of HR and OD is not always benign, although the law expects us to act neutrally. I've seen poor HR practice impact individuals; I've seen HR professionals lean towards protecting the organisation at the expense of an individual – even where an individual is in the right; I've spoken to colleagues who have felt pressurised by directors to change the outcome of a report or change their advice; I've spoken to managers who have felt overwhelmed and ill-equipped to participate in a bullying/harassment case and; I've spoken to employees who have felt utterly broken by their experiences.

I have also seen senior leaders in organisations failing to lead on these issues and sometimes even wanting to keep them quiet for fear of reputational damage, difficulties with political leadership and so on. HR and OD professionals cannot, on their own, eradicate bullying and harassment. But, in partnership

with leaders and managers, we can collectively work to build workplace cultures that starve the conditions in which bullying and harassment is allowed to happen.

The legacy of these events is far too often long lasting and negative. Through Out of the Shadows I hope we can start to change some of that narrative and deliver meaningful and sustainable change.

During the next 12 months we will be spotlighting an aspect of this issue each month. We'll do this through blogs, interviews, TV programmes, lobbying work, and more. We'll hear from every perspective – employers, lawyers, legislators, HR & OD professionals, employees, trade union representatives, as well as family members and friends.

Some of these stories will be written anonymously. The irony of our bringing some of these issues Out of the Shadows, is that people remain bound by the confidentiality clauses included in settlement agreements. This does not take away the power of these stories.

I was heartened by the response we received to our last supplement on inclusion. Reading personal stories is a powerful way to reflect and learn. So, I very much hope you will find this supplement moving and thought provoking.

**Karen Grave is PPMA President**





# The view from the legal corner

Managing bullying on any level in an organisation can be a tough task. **Mark Greenburgh** gives a few tips on how to tackle the issue

Bullying at work occurs more often than we care to admit; and as HR professionals we are often at the sharp end of having to manage the complaint, the complainant, the accused, the process and the impacts on the organisation. We have to juggle the legal risks, emotional impacts and the financial liabilities. We are often torn between doing the right thing and fulfilling the organisation's objectives.

Managing bullying at any level in the organisation is hard enough; but what happens when it is at the centre and involves senior managers, members or the chief executive? I have noted in my practice an increase in the incidences of passive aggressive bullying, more microaggressions, more bullying in the name of austerity (which seems to mean we are a tough organisation and that means we can behave badly) and more 'strongman' bullying – this is however, by no means limited to male perpetrators.

Is this just the increase in public awareness? Is the political climate in which being 'strong' and quite often offensive,

seems to be in vogue? I'm sure it has an impact.

So what to do? I am fond of quoting that 'the standard of conduct we walk past is the standard we are prepared to accept'. But I wish it was always easy to hold fast to our values. It is not. And even when we do stand up and offer advice, it is not always heard or heeded.

I would certainly advise documenting both the allegations, and the options for resolving matters carefully and make sure that you have set out clear and unambiguous recommendations. Consider involving the monitoring officer or head of legal. Firstly, there is some safety in numbers; and secondly, they have statutory reporting powers (and protections) which can help.

Of course, change is harder to achieve in a crisis, by which I mean, when a bullying

accusation is made and everyone is feeling defensive, it is harder to bring about change. But a process of 'restorative justice' getting the parties to sit down with a mediator, to understand the other's perspective and why behaviours are perceived as bullying, can be successful in defusing matters before they go too far. So too can effective mentoring from outside – and both of these may be more cost effective than the more formal processes our policies envisage.

If formal processes are needed, where senior colleagues or members are involved, a degree of detachment and independence is crucial and I strongly recommend involving investigators and advisors from outside your organisation. They will be needed to both conduct the investigation and make recommendations, and be an independent advisor to the decision

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taker or panel who determine the complaint.

One final thought; how many times have we seen the accuser of bullying end up being suspended? They might well be off sick for a period and experiencing bullying and admitting to it can be hugely stressful, but it is far better for the organisation for one or both of the parties involved to be assigned to different working arrangements or duties, rather than end up with a suspension.

Not only does the recent Court of Appeal decision in *Agoreyo v London Borough of Lambeth* show that the neutrality of suspension is no longer a legal certainty – and unjustified removal from the workplace is likely to result in a legal claim – but the person making the allegation is very likely to be a whistleblower to whom additional duties to avoid any 'detriment' applies.

**Mark Greenburgh is a solicitor specialising in public sector employment law, equalities and ethical governance**



# Walking the right line

In cases of bullying and harassment there should be a clear line of duty for HR and OD professionals, says **Karen Grave**

I suspect many of you, like me, are avid fans of *Line of Duty*. What has that got to do with our 'Out of the Shadows' campaign? Well, I often think that when HR colleagues – or non-HR colleagues – are called in to investigate allegations of bullying and harassment, the processes we follow require a broad range of technical and soft skills. And they aren't too dissimilar to those of the heroes and heroines of AC-12.

There are a range of roles involved in bullying and harassment processes – commissioning officer, investigation officer, HR advisor, witness and, of course, the person(s) making the allegations.

A commissioning officer must be able to oversee a process and make an assessment that the process has been fair and what an outcome should be – usually based on an investigator's work. There is a clear need for an investigator to be able to gather evidence, be thorough and relentless, focus on detail and corroborating evidence, assessing evidence fairly, and have a laser focus on drawing the line and weighing allegations. A witness must feel able to and comply with the need to provide evidence. Critically, the person raising a complaint must feel they are able to do so safely – and the organisation must commit to ensuring all parties will be treated fairly.

There are, of course, other 'soft' skills needed, particularly for those leading the process. Empathy, a capacity to gain the trust of people in difficult circumstances, integrity and discretion are paramount. The unspoken reality is that whenever a formal bullying or harassment process starts, people are inevitably under extra pressure and they can feel isolated and afraid. This is a horrendous set of circumstances for anyone to be in.

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So, for me, it is absolutely critical HR professionals exemplify and become role models for integrity and courage. This is important at any time, but it is particularly important when sensitive matters are being handled. It is often the case that employees assess the credibility of their leadership and the values they espouse when circumstances are toughest. HR and OD professionals must do their utmost to ensure the organisation reflects these values.

Unfortunately, I have heard HR professionals tell me they have felt pressurised to come to a particular conclusion; that complainants have sometimes used spurious reasons for making a complaint; that our processes don't focus enough on supporting the people who are being complained about, and so on.

I can recognise all of these scenarios and, from experience, recognise it is often a lonely place in HR. Pretty much everyone has an opinion on what a good policy and process looks like, without of course the background in employment legislation. Pretty much everyone also has an opinion on the role of HR, but very few people see the really tough and emotional work that HR and OD professionals are involved in.

And we have to acknowledge that sometimes HR people don't practice what is preached and we don't hold to our professional values. Helpfully, the new Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development profession map reminds us of what matters. Our profession is principle-led, evidence based, and outcome driven. And, thankfully, in the detailed profession map we can see a focus on ethics and speaking truth to power.

The commentary around bullying and harassment we increasingly see laid out in the media, and sector-wide conversations are a

reminder to all of us that we need to urgently take a look at our roles too.

Holding the obligations to behave ethically, speak truth to power and do what we can individually (and collectively) to uphold employer and employee confidence in an organisation's values can often mean that we have to speak up and challenge. And sometimes that makes us targets. I have often heard colleagues say it's hard to speak up and they are worried about putting their heads above the parapet.

Yes, it can be difficult, and it can be profoundly lonely. But, and forgive the analogy to *Line of Duty*, we as HR and OD professionals, have a fundamental duty to live these principles. If we do not, damage will continue to be done to people, organisations and our profession. The damage is wide ranging. It's of course an emotional cost for people wounded by the process, but it can also be a financial cost to organisations in settlement agreements, or reputational damage, and it is a certainly corrosive cost in terms of a lack of trust between employer and employee.

The PPMA holds open a door to any HR professional, leader or manager who wants to talk about any of these issues. You can contact us confidentially on [president@ppma.org.uk](mailto:president@ppma.org.uk) or [outoftheshadows@ppma.org.uk](mailto:outoftheshadows@ppma.org.uk).



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# Time to speak up

Many people who are bullied believe it happens because of their attempts to speak truth to power. **John Higgins**, who will deliver the opening key note address at this year's PPMA Conference, offers an interesting perspective to this critical topic, which is covered in his soon to be published research

Today, like every other day, you will choose when to speak up and when to stay silent. You will select whose opinion to listen to and whose to disregard. Your choices have and will turn into habits which determine whether you get promoted or sidelined – whether you steer clear of trouble or land right in it. Whether you feel proud of yourself or ashamed for what you have or have not said. Whether you flourish and feel motivated or end up dissatisfied and resentful.

Seemingly mundane acts of speaking and listening become habitual and profoundly influence how you see yourself and how others see you. They have defining consequences for you and those around you.

Your perceptions of relative power, status and authority drive what you and your colleagues say and who you listen to. Although these perceptions are often unconscious, you need to be skilful at acknowledging, observing and

influencing them in order to make better choices.

Wherever you sit in the organisational hierarchy, you will find out what you can do to make speaking up feel safe and useful. Through our research, based on hundreds of interviews and survey responses, ethnographic studies and action research inquiries, we have developed a practical TRUTH framework.

It sets out five questions which are vital to answer if you want to speak up and listen up more effectively:

1. How much do you *Trust* the value of your opinion and the opinions of others?
2. What are the *Risks* involved when you or others speak up?
3. Do you *Understand* the politics of who says what to who and why?
4. Are you aware of the *Titles* and labels we attach to one another – and how they shape what gets said and heard?
5. Do you know *How* to choose the right words at the right time in the

right place and how, skilfully, to help others to speak up through what you say and do?

As individuals, teams, organisations and societies, we need to stop the blame game, look in the mirror and face up to not only how we silence ourselves, but also how we silence others

#### Time to look in the mirror

Our research uncovered a critical blind spot in our capacity to improve conversations at work. Answering these questions might reveal it to you:

- Do you ever find yourself thinking: 'They should speak up more'?
- Do you ever find yourself thinking: 'They are scary – they should be more approachable'?

If you do, then you are far from

alone. Our blind spot is that we tend to think it is other people that need to change. While this may be the case, as we wait impatiently for them to do something differently, we can forget to look in the mirror and take responsibility for changing our own conversations. All too often senior executives told us that the problem lies with the rest of the organisation failing to have the courage to speak up.

'They just wait to be told what to do! They need to step up!'

'They don't really care – they've already made up their minds.'

The point is this – speaking up is relational. It happens in-between some-one being willing to say something and someone being willing and able to listen.

We know from all of the different strands of our research that we tend to think it's the other person's fault. The reason we don't speak up is because that person doesn't listen. The reason we don't listen up is because that person takes too long



to get to the point or we assume that person just doesn't understand.

We know that we tend to value our own opinion around a third more than the opinion of others (in some groups we looked at, this went as high as three times).

We know that we tend to believe

## Finding purpose

**Karen Grave** talks candidly about her own experiences of workplace bullying and how this has helped shape her as an HR professional

There is a danger in having too many articles from one person in our supplement and I am mindful that article writing became a bit of a speciality for me in 2017! However, given the nature of the topic and that we want to encourage people to talk, I am sharing some of my skirmishes with the wrong end of a bullying case.

My experience of being bullied happened in the private sector but, as we know, bullying and harassment happens everywhere if enabled. It happened a long time ago when I can just about remember being young. My abiding memory of meeting a new boss, who had been appointed before I joined, was that there were going to be problems. Call it gut instinct but, privately, I was on my guard. I tried never to show that publicly. Sometimes a brave front is a good thing, but it can mask problems.

My boss was very powerful, highly thought of and an inspirational leader – certainly my view at the time. And I was awed: it was wonderful, I thought, to work for someone who seemed to really believe in people. And I doubted my gut instinct.

Over time, the situation worsened, and my role became much harder to undertake. I had a period of ill health during that period that, ironically, had been well handled and I had felt

very supported. In truth, I can't recall all of the details in the run-up to my decision to make a complaint, but I do remember key incidents.

I recall trying to get a transfer to a different part of the organisation and being told by my boss he would make sure I was blackballed. I cannot say for sure now that this was the exact wording he used, but it was most certainly his intention – and it was what happened. I also remember, so clearly – as if it was yesterday – talking to an assigned mentor who told me brutally honestly my boss had already called him, and that he had also been threatened. The organisation was being restructured and he was told that if he gave me any support he would likely suffer. He had a family and while, at the time, I could rationalise his view I was utterly destroyed by the logic of it, as well as angry and helpless.

Then followed a nightmarish period of months. I made a complaint which at first was not sustained, and I then appealed. During that time I was asked by an HR manager whether I wanted to talk about an offer – and I remember asking her, with tears streaming down my face, why I should leave when I hadn't done anything wrong. I had, of course, stood up to a powerful person.

I felt deeply scared during that process. I have



found that many people making a complaint often do feel scared, overwhelmed and utterly alone. I certainly felt alone and I know for sure that I withdrew – I did not tell my colleagues what was happening. I tried to carry on and do the decent thing, comply with process and continue working.

In retrospect, I think I would have been observed and judged as being remote and non-communicative. In my heart of hearts I know I would never have left a colleague alone if I knew something was happening – but I also know that people often feel afraid to help. I also came to understand that other people in the process felt very uncomfortable too.

During my appeal, I went to see a friend in Bristol for the day. I had been particularly

scared prior to that visit as I had started to receive pornographic material on my work email account. That, of course, was a gross misconduct offence. I had reported it to HR – I always had the sense there was a panic when I raised the issue. And that HR weren't too surprised. But, to this day, I have no evidence as to whether that sense was valid or not.

When I got home from Bristol I logged into my private email and found the start of the same series of pornographic emails: the same addresses and same disgusting content. I burst into tears. It would be a period of 18 months before those emails stopped – the police asked me to keep my private email account so the perpetrators could be traced. Only four people at my employer knew my personal email address.



we are approachable and therefore assume others wouldn't hide things from us. We know that if each one of us alters how we speak and listen, even marginally, whole cultures can change.

As individuals, organisations, teams and societies, we need to

stop the blame game, look in the mirror and face up to not only how we silence ourselves, but also how we silence others.

#### The sound (and cost) of silence

Silence is the missing voice in a conversation. It is the sound of the

'something that should have been said but hasn't been'. It happens all the time.

Have you ever encountered a situation you know to be wrong but not said anything? Have you ever had an idea about how something could be improved but kept it to yourself?

Ever come to the realisation that someone at work or at home hasn't told you something because they were too scared to, didn't want to embarrass you, thought there was no point, or believed it wasn't their place to tell you?

The silence of missing voices costs careers, relationships and lives. It means new ideas never see the light of day and obvious problems don't get sorted out. It can and regularly does bring global organisations to their knees.

Silence leads to the drama of a CEO being fired, the scandalous fraud splashed across the front pages and the public outcry when what seems to be too good to be true turns out to be just that. But these dramatic moments don't come out of nowhere; they build up, often imperceptibly, over time as we silence ourselves and others, one conversation at a time.

We absorb the rules for our social group: what we should say and what we shouldn't; whose opinion counts and whose doesn't. Undiscussables, the 'elephants in the room', develop and are kept alive through our ordinary habits of going along with how things are done round here. Work is not just about getting the job done, it's also about fitting in – being recognised as someone who belongs to the gang. This means that challenging the status quo, however wrong it is, is risky.

Put yourself in the shoes of Toni, a successful sales director we interviewed. Frighteningly propositioned by one of her company's most influential customers, she

eventually plucked up the courage to talk to her stressed head of sales. His impatient first response was: 'Maybe you were sending out the wrong signals?' Confused, she felt at fault, didn't argue when she was taken off the account and stayed silent about her experience. She has since heard that a female colleague was harassed by the same client. Patterns of silence and silencing meant this was allowed to go on.

#### How do you get your voice heard?

How do you know if something is going on in your workplace right now that will be the next front page scandal? And how do you embolden others to offer their ideas so you can respond to a world of ever-shifting expectations.

The answer is you can't and won't, unless you know how to speak up and help others to in our messy, political world filled with ordinary people, brimming with hope, vulnerability, insight and ambition.

The solution comes from the same place as the problem – we must unsilence ourselves and help others to do the same, one conversation at a time. We must begin to make choices today that mean it is less risky for everyone to speak up.

**John Higgins is a researcher, author, coach and evaluator. His research paper *Speak Truth to Power*, co-written with Prof Megan Reitz, is published by FT Pearson later this year**



Incredibly, my appeal was upheld. What mattered so much to me was that the investigating lead told me she completely believed me, as did the HR officer involved. One of the outcomes of the appeal was that I had to meet with my boss and another manager to talk about the way forward. I knew I would still suffer the consequences even though it was my intention to carry on working. A colleague of mine in the United States had started to ask me whether I was looking for work, which is always an indicator that if you aren't you should be.

I recall at that meeting additional evidence was presented that had been totally fabricated – apparently I had been skipping meetings I'd never been invited to. I remember my hand shaking as I picked up a glass of water to drink, the other manager noticing and realising there was a problem. My boss said something that upheld the behaviour I had complained about – and I remember the HR officer enabling and supporting my boss.

I went home, knowing I couldn't appeal anymore, but I did write another email to the investigating team. The next day I was called into a meeting and sacked. I was told my colleagues in the management team did not trust me and they did not want me in the organisation. That turned out not to be true, but I had no ability to challenge or test that for a while. My laptop was removed and my telephone account had been suspended.

I remember calling a member of the investigating team who was utterly shocked by what had happened. I honestly think, at that point, they thought all of this was a silly squabble. But the person I spoke to that morning was genuinely taken aback by what I told them.

Up to that point, work had mattered

enormously to me – career was so important and surviving as a woman was a big deal in those types of organisations. So having it taken away was devastating.

A couple of months going back and forth saw me obtain a settlement agreement – it was barely anything and I was caused much harm in the process. After I left, an alliance partner contacted me to explain my boss had written to all the external partners I dealt with to say that with immediate effect I was no longer employed by the organisation. In those days that was always code and, while my lawyer was livid and disgusted, we couldn't do anything. The settlement agreement negotiations were brutal – there was an attempt to keep me out of consulting for a year, which was unheard of in those days. It was all about power and humiliation. The reality was I didn't ever work in that type of consulting again.

The legacy effects are still there. In the early days of getting other jobs, I suspect I was not the most trusting of people and that's not great for colleagues. Even now, I much prefer dogs to humans and follow the Reagan doctrine when dealing with people – trust, but verify. And verify a lot. I remain too trusting, possibly, definitely honest to a fault, but oddly enough a profound believer in justice and fairness and in the importance of process for everyone.

For a long time, I was emotionally shattered and my health was deeply impacted. I have an odd hypothyroid problem and one view says it

was likely to have evolved as a result of what happened. I don't necessarily subscribe to this, by the way, although I completely believe emotional and spiritual trauma has a physical impact.

My experiences have certainly shaped how I feel about the HR profession and leadership in particular. I admire enormously those people who are human, who have their frailties, but can acknowledge them with humility. I also admire those who, while dealing with enormous pressure, still strive to maintain their value set.

On the other hand, I utterly despise bullies, not to mention lazy and poor leadership. I am deeply sceptical of anyone who will tell you they believe in HR process and then try to frustrate it all they can. There is just no excuse for any of that.

As much as I despise bullies, I also feel a deep compassion for their cowardice. Bullies are only powerful when we give away our power. We never should give our power away and always remember we do have it. This has been a deep and hard-fought lesson for me. By instinct, I am both an institutionalist and a hippy. I value the importance of institutions because, at their best, they represent the outputs of people working together to build organisations that can deliver amazing services and products.

However, the hippy in me passionately knows treating people with dignity, respect, compassion and care is the best way to ensure we build workplace cultures that do not allow any form of bullying and harassment to take root. The

hippy stuff – thanks be to God – is much better understood and accepted now, and that's a wonderful situation to be in.

This does not mean I have become soft, or believe every instance of someone claiming they have been bullied or harassed. In fact, my own experiences have led me to really challenge people – not everyone means to bully or harass. Sometimes people's behaviour is thoughtless, inconsiderate and lazy.

But the real bullies must be tackled. And as research increasingly shows, they very often do not appear as the devil incarnate. Research around psychopathic leadership at work – gaslighters, etc – show that bullies are very often charismatic, charming, persuasive and nuanced. And very clever at undermining people.

I have seen and spoken to my boss since, but never about this. Ironically enough, I am now deeply grateful to him for the worst experience of my life. Understanding the worst of what people can do has taught me how best to conduct myself and manage situations. I may often fall short of my personal aspirations, but knowing how bad things can be, has helped me become a more balanced professional. And I am a much better person.

I have had an opportunity to stand by someone who has been through a similar experience, although I think their experience was worse. I don't know if I would have had the courage to do that in the past, as there could have been consequences for me, without my own dark nights of the soul.

Isn't it funny what we become grateful for. If we accept life with an open heart, it can be broken, but it can be remade stronger, and with more purpose. I hope this is what has happened to mine.

Treating people with dignity, respect, compassion and care is the best way to ensure we build workplace cultures that do not allow any form of bullying and harassment to take root

# Out of the Shadows

*'We cannot learn from something we are not allowed to know about. The challenge of needing to talk, but not wanting to talk is fundamentally what "Out of the Shadows" is about. This is a painful article to read, because the truth is, more people experience this than we may think. By highlighting what we can, we hope to inform the debate and change practice'*

Sometimes you have to stand up and say that what is happening is not right – from any perspective. However hard it is, as public servants we have a responsibility to hold public sector leaders to account for their behaviour and how they make us feel.

Throughout my career I have only ever wanted to be treated with dignity, honesty and respect – as should everyone – regardless of position or status. All managers, irrespective of title (with no exception) should do this, in a supportive environment free from discrimination, bullying, harassment and victimisation.

I found myself in a situation where my boss and employer failed to do this, and thereby caused me anxiety and stress, which has had a significant and ongoing impact on my health, wellbeing and confidence.

I wouldn't call myself a rebel, but I was certainly motivated to make the organisation I worked in better, and hoped the stated organisational values meant there was an open and transparent environment where it was safe to disagree and challenge the status quo (I had previously been seen to be a leader of people who, through them, delivered on the most challenging of agendas).

Margaret Heffernan sets out beautifully that leaders need to 'dare to have collaborators who are not echo chambers...through seeking people different from ourselves', and that 'to see and create conflict

enables best thinking'.

My organisation was not willing, or mature enough to do this, and focused on control and discipline of thought – choosing to justify this due to the circumstances it was in.

Dan Cable sets out that 'psychological safety is created by leaders who have the humility and courage to actively seek ideas and insights from employees that they serve. This is how leaders create a culture of learning and encourage followers to be the very best they can'. This was not the culture or behaviour of the organisation I worked in.

I shared my concerns openly and appropriately with the political leadership, but my perception was that while I was listened to, I wasn't 'heard' sufficiently to rock the current status quo, despite there being lessons to learn on how I and other senior colleagues had been treated.

My employer and certain colleagues subjected me to a subtle form of bullying that, for me, took the form of being isolated and undermined – despite being in a senior role – and this severely affected my confidence. It became clear that keeping me away from the organisation and distancing me from those with whom I had previously worked was the primary objective – being 'out of sight, out of mind'.

Despite raising my concerns in an appropriate and balanced way it was deemed I was the 'problem' and

there was an organisational attempt to sideline and silence me. I wasn't prepared to submit to this and stood up for the values I believed were at the core of the organisation I worked for. My advice to others is this takes courage. You constantly question if it is you who is wrong, and this can rock your core values and your self belief.

The feeling of rejection was immense and, if I'm honest, was one of the most difficult elements to cope with. How could individuals in power not recognise, or address what was playing out? I had given my all for the organisation I worked for and was highly respected.

**'I wouldn't call myself a rebel, but I was certainly motivated to make the organisation I worked in better'**

I was left to find support for myself as the organisation sought to close ranks and, despite messages of support and understanding from both elected members and colleagues, no one was prepared to stand up and challenge what was happening or ask why. I ask the question: 'What is the role of HR in upholding organisational values?'

I sought guidance and had to find coping mechanisms to assist me over a challenging period. It's important that anyone else in similar

circumstances does this, and you also look to your networks (outside of your organisation) for support. While I was constantly told 'this is not about you', it felt like it was. My core values I had trusted over my career were being severely tested and this challenges your judgement and balance. My advice is: trust it.

We all have music that defines different periods in our life and *You say* by Lauren Daigle haunted me for months.

The organisation went into a 'defence' rather than 'learning' mode and while a conversation would have helped me understand specific actions and the rationale for such – and also help me move forward – this was not only resisted, but also ultimately refused. It helped me to keep a diary of how I felt and what activity/inactivity had prompted this.

In some way, doing this enabled me to try and rationalise what had happened and how I believed I had been treated. I found that being honest, open and transparent did not help resolve matters – rather the reverse, as the alleged perpetrators closed ranks – when my key driver was for the organisation to apologise for how they made me feel and to learn. In reality, the actions taken were to close down liability and accountability.

The role of HR seemed to be more about protecting the status quo and the identified officers – and following through on process rather than ensuring the values of

the organisation were upheld – and encouraging senior officers and members to have the courage to call out 'poor behaviour' from those who should have been 'exemplars'.

HR needs to reflect on whether it is there to do the bidding of the leadership, or to uphold the values and desired culture the organisation has set out. For me there is no question, but in my recent experience this has not been the case.

The positions I have held over the past 15 years have been in the most challenging and stressful environments and, until recently, I believed I was resilient and could withstand whatever was thrown at me. I had never shied away from responsibility and changes to the organisations I have worked in, and indeed to my own role, but I have also never been treated with the total lack of respect, honesty and collusion as I experienced by my employer. And this action has had a fundamental impact on my sense of self worth and self belief.

Organisations often use 'current challenges' to excuse the manner in which they treat employees and the move away from their stated values and behaviours. I believe it is at these times the stated values should drive behaviour. For me, as a leader of people, how you make individuals feel is one of the most important aspects of your role, and should be rooted in the culture and values of the organisation. Without this how can individuals bring their

## Would I be a whistle-blower

**Maria Paviour** shares her experiences after raising the alarm about the conduct of a colleague in the NHS



I became a whistle-blower because the primary care trust (PCT), under whose auspices I worked, asked me to report on a doctor for whom I was business manager. They told me they had received numerous complaints, however, I would not give them any information without first properly investigating the matter.

The PCT asked me to work on the case with my senior partner 'as a team'. Yet later the same PCT said they could not use our evidence because we had acted together! Bizarre.

We raised concerns because we wanted change, not because we wanted to upset people. In fact, we wanted to safeguard patients.

I found it hard to listen to stories patients told me without being brought to tears – and I acted because they should be cared for, treated with compassion.

The backlash I experienced for doing so was horrific.

Senior officials would instruct me to carry out actions, and my staff would be instructed to complain about the same actions. The senior GP, also a whistle-blower, was equally undermined. If I set up a clinical service for patients, as agreed in a meeting, 'certain people' would refuse to become involved, refuse to attend the clinics and then blame me for the fact they were not taking place – even complaining I had claimed money for services I was not running! Small point: I was not a clinician and therefore could only set up and manage the service, not actually attend and see patients.

As a business manager I could see the problems that this behaviour was causing. The practice was seriously losing money and standard patient services were failing.

I begged my bosses to let me and my team of nurses, administrators and receptionists, build the service properly – we had conducted a meeting and everyone wanted to pitch in – but



whole self to work? I was made to feel worthless with no contribution to give.

Don't expect to get closure, but you have to move on. All you can do is be honest and open in raising matters that may be contrary to the values of the organisation you work in. Whether there is 'justice'

or 'organisational learning' may not be within your control. We all have a duty as public servants to call out bullying behaviour, and it is important we do this.

So where am I now? For the first time in my working life I am not defined by an organisation or title, but by my own 'brand' based

on my personal values of honesty, courage and integrity. It's not a place I thought I'd be in – or wanted to – and, to be honest, it feels scary. It has, however, given me the opportunity to reflect on who I am and want to be; the culture of the organisation I want to work in to deliver at my best and, and reiterates how a leader is the

most defining element in setting the culture and tone in any organisation. For me, this is the single most important determinant.

I will never forget how this experience has made me feel – and it is important I don't, as it will define how I approach future leadership roles I hold – and how I make people feel.

It's important individuals continue to stand up and have the courage to call out behaviours that have no place in public service, despite the personal impact it can have on you. As 21<sup>st</sup> century public servants this is our role.

*This article has been supplied anonymously*

# again? The jury is still out

they said I was acting as if I was a partner and bullying them.

Then came the witch hunt, when staff members were interviewed in secret in order to draw out complaints about me.

We raised concerns because we wanted change, not because we wanted to upset people. We wanted to safeguard patients

The complaints included: 'She wore a hat and boots to work one day, and claimed she was a pagan and a witch'; 'She wrote down what we agreed to do in our meeting and then asked me to sign it, my husband says that this is bullying'; 'She shouted at poor xxxx' and 'She went around slamming doors'.

These were all warped, influenced lies. One of the partners wrote, under oath, that I had failed to attend my appraisal. He also wrote a

letter to me, thanking me for attending the same appraisal. How could he lie under oath?

But the management and administration team at the practice would not play ball in this bullying game. And so they all lost their jobs too. One of whom had worked there for 35 years and is one of the most professional and competent people I have ever had the good fortune to work with.

Soon after, offensive poems were written about me and left around the consulting rooms. I received text messages through the evening, all through the night and early the next morning, on my day off. I was shouted at in meetings – like a hairdryer blasting at you. I was trapped in my room sitting at my desk with a man standing over me, shaking papers in my face and yelling (and I don't mean an angry voice, I really mean yelling). Rumours were spread about me and I had to endure the indignity of sexual harassment – including exposure – as well as cyber sexual harassment and cyber bullying.

If affected me physically. I felt a cold

metallic feeling running through my chest. The pain felt as though my breathing was sharp, like I was outside on a bitterly cold day. My ribs felt like sandpaper on the inside. My throat was closed. I found it difficult to speak.

I felt very honoured to be in the privileged position of serving my community. I loved my job, and my results speak for themselves: the practice improved from the bottom quartile to the top quartile in patient service from reception and administration, and we achieved a 'gold standard' information governance inspection.

Quality inspectors asked permission to use my personal development plans – my glossary for identifying, understanding and dealing with negative patient behaviours – as models. My policies were called 'utterly embedded in practice' and I was told we could sell them, and my services, to underperforming practices, and I gave talks on leadership and management at my practice to other managers.

However, after holding fast for two years, a sham disciplinary forced me to quit my job.

Kim Holt, the whistle-blower in the tragic Baby P case, shared this with me from her experience: no one can ever imagine the bullying of whistle-blowers, unless they've experienced it themselves.

And I agree – after the bullying comes anxiety, deep dark moods, and a complete sense of disengagement. Not just in work, but life.

Yes, I loved my job. But my life was ripped apart because I put my patients before myself and before my job – for what?

So what did I do? I reinvented my business. I decided I would structure for emotional engagement, for flow and happiness. I got into my bliss, and I started to do what really matters to me.

I will be sharing more about what this is at the PPMA Annual Conference – I hope to see you there.

**Maria Paviour is an occupational psychologist and author**



We all love to joke with friends, but increasingly in the news and across social media, there are reports of bullying, written off as 'banter'.

Knowing what's appropriate for different situations or audiences is essential for creating a happy, inclusive work environment.

#### Understand bullying

A joke which is acceptable in the pub might cause serious offence at work. We know the sense of humour of our friends, but out of context, jokes become hurtful, and cause problems at work.

While as a culture we have become more accepting of different people and beliefs, people still face sexism, homophobia, racism, ageism and many other types of prejudice, some of which are far harder to categorise.

For this reason, your business needs to be aware of bullying and prejudice in the workplace. Companies have a responsibility to act on any complaints they receive or inappropriate behaviour which managers witness, dealing with bullying or harassment swiftly and correctly.

This isn't just something for business leaders to fix, it's the responsibility of every single person.

#### Harassment is different

While bullying is obvious to the victim, harassment can be tougher to define.

Extra work, being undermined, not being listened to, or your words being twisted, are all examples of prolonged harassment, through manipulation.

This is often referred to as

## Do you know who's unhappy in your business?



You may need to rethink your working environment – but how do you make it happen? **Paul Friday** gives a few tips

#### What you can do now

Bullying and harassment have to stop. Born out of immaturity and insecurity, both ruin the contributions of great employees – a disaster for your business and horrible for anyone to experience.

Harassment has been reported recently at the highest levels of the NHS/BMA where bullying makes 'people afraid so they don't share confidences and concerns', leading to problems with patient safety, and at Google bullying has led to huge strikes.

Harassment is becoming part of the public consciousness, even being the focus of a recent Netflix show called *Aggretsuko* (by the creator of Hello Kitty) which focuses on mistreatment of women in the workplace.

This behaviour is on the rise, as reported by the BBC who also report that abusive managers are often moved around the business instead of being suspended or dismissed.

To ensure people are happy at your business, here are the main areas of focus:

- Make sure you understand what harassment is, make sure employees can spot when they are being harassed or bullied and know how to address the problem.
- Make sure strict guidelines are in place, and that these are followed.
- Communication is key. Make sure employees at every level have a platform to speak up, and document any concerns.

**Paul Friday is Head of Strategic Relationships at MHR**

'gaslighting', a dating term referring to abusive relationships – but don't feel that a smart shirt and employee handbook make this relationship any less abusive.

There are obvious types of harassment we all know: commenting on someone's body suggestively is sexual harassment for example, but gaslighting is hidden harassment which gradually causes anxiety for employees, and needs to stop.

It's difficult to document and employees may not realise the harassment is intentional, but business leaders need to spot this before it costs them an employee, costing that person their mental health.

Harassment is covered in the

Equality Act 2010, describing it (specifically harassment) as 'unwanted conduct related to a relevant protected characteristic' with 'the purpose or effect of violating an individual's dignity', whereas ACAS describe bullying as 'malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power', so it's important to understand there is a difference between the two forms of abuse.

As harassment is often the result of conduct relating to a 'relevant protected characteristic', many organisations pay special attention to employing a diverse mix of people to increase fairness and rightly so.

This has however, recently backfired for Microsoft. In a bid to attract more

people from ethnic minorities and more female employees, the tech giant has been offering financial incentives to senior staff filling roles which meet this criteria.

Rather than being positively embraced, this policy has led to countless complaints from white and Asian men, who felt they were being overlooked based on their race, which is technically the case.

Obviously, prejudice was the antithesis of Microsoft's incentives, but regardless there is trouble ahead. This example shows just how sensitive issues around employee treatment are and why you need to really educate yourselves as business leaders.

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## Are you listening?

Communication is key. Make sure employees at every level have a platform to speak up and document any concerns.

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