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Nip workplace bullying in the bud

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New Zealand's largest health and safety professional association is calling for workplace bullying to move up the agenda of employers to create a culture of kindness.

The New Zealand Institute of Safety Management (NZISM) is highlighting rising bullying rates in New Zealand in comparison to other developed countries, with New Zealand having the second-worst rate in the developed world, with one in five workers affected (Auckland, Waikato, Massey, London Universities research 2016)¹

Greg Dearsly, National Manager NZISM, says all employers need to be more aware of the bullying issue as it affects mental health and impacts productivity, along with culture:

"Workplace bullying is growing into a significant risk and is joining the many other issues health and safety professionals advise on every day," he says.

"Bullying is a social issue that needs addressing - it shouldn't be taken lightly as injury or illness caused by a person's behaviour in the workplace is characterised as a hazard under the Health and Safety at Work Act. Turning a blind eye to people who are creating unhealthy work environments is not an option.

"Unfortunately, in many situations the people involved are also managers, they often don't understand their behaviour is bullying and employees feel trapped, simply because they need the work and therefore stay silent.

"Currently there isn't enough being done in New Zealand to properly address incidents of workplace bullying and harassment. There needs to be a more structured approach to help people in unsupportive work environments," he says.

Workplace bullying can come in the form of verbal threats, sexual harassment, cyber bullying, discrimination, and many more forms of potential abuse.

With many definitions and views of bullying, it can be hard to define and identify when it is occurring but nevertheless employers need to become more aware of its potential and take action, because victims may not speak out.

This silent reaction often results in higher stress levels, and according to the Harvard Business Review, 60% to 80% of workplace accidents are attributed to stress³.

Greg Dearsly adds: "workplace bullying in any form can compromise safety and ultimately affects workplace culture, productivity and the bottom line."

According to economic study at the University of Warwick in 2015⁴, workplace happiness leads to a 12% spike in productivity. Organisations with supportive environments not only boost employee morale, but are also more profitable according to this study.

"A job is such an important part of life and no-one goes to work to be treated badly. But the evidence shows it's becoming a larger problem. Our members are seeing more of it all the time, with managing the effects of mental health becoming a bigger part of their everyday work."

"Our key objective is to raise the competency of health and safety practitioners in New Zealand and support them to acquire the knowledge and skills to help organisations lower health and safety risks, and increasingly this includes bullying," he says.

A recent NZISM initiative has been to collaborate with St. John to provide the opportunity for its members to undertake mental health first aid training in order to increase awareness and knowledge about how to combat mental health in the workplace, an aspect of which results from bullying, and will hopefully lead to prevention.

NZISM is the largest and most established New Zealand health and safety professional association. Founded almost 40 years ago it has 13 branches, more than 1600 members made up of professionals and practitioners working across a broad range of industries and sectors, and over 60 corporate supporters.

As a professional body it offers ongoing professional development opportunities and an internationally recognised accreditation programme to those building a career in health and safety, as well as representing the interests of its members at industry and Government levels.

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