

Too much pressure at work leads to more bullying, research reveals

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Employees experience more bullying on days with higher work pressure and passive avoidant leadership, finds new research from BI Norwegian Business School (<https://www.bi.edu/>) and the University of Bergen.

Pressure is an increasing problem in working life as it can impact employee health and well-being. Leaders and managers have a responsibility to ensure good health and well-being of employees, particularly in times of high work pressure.

Professor Olav Kjellekvold Olsen, and colleagues, studied how work pressure is related to daily experiences of bullying-related acts, as well as the relationship with transformational or laissez-faire leadership. Transformational leadership involves paying more attention to employees' needs for achievement and providing social support. Laissez-faire leadership involves a more passive and destructive approach leaving followers on their own in situations in need of leadership.

Participants completed a daily survey measuring work pressure, leadership behaviour, and exposure to acts of bullying over 36 days. The results showed that on days in which individuals reported higher work pressure, they also experienced more bullying behaviours, signifying that bullying and other negative behaviours are consequences of problems in the work environment.

Also, the relationship between daily pressure at work and exposure to bullying was stronger on days when the participants reported higher levels of laissez-faire leadership. These would include days where the leader avoided intervening or helping employees manage stressful work situations. This suggests workplace bullying and harassment particularly flourish in environments with unfavourable working conditions and inadequate leadership.

Prof. Olsen says,

“The relationship between work pressure and bullying-related acts can be explained by an imbalance between the increase in effort needed at work and a lack of the necessary resources to cope, resulting in feelings of stress, frustration and changes in behaviour. These negative emotions leave employees vulnerable to conflict and exposed to bullying-related acts. The fact that this relationship is present daily shows how quickly stressors in the workplace can trigger negative social interactions and cause, facilitate, or escalate bullying.”

Managers should be aware of risk factors, such as work pressure, in order to intervene early in situations that may escalate into bullying. It also highlights that for a leader in situations with high work pressure, it is more important not to be perceived as distant and avoidant compared to being perceived as inspirational and charismatic.

Also, these early interventions should not only include conflict management; organisations should incorporate preventative steps to reduce the overall levels of all employees' work pressure which may be the root cause of bullying-related negative acts.

These findings were published in the European Management Journal.

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For more information, a copy of the research paper, or to speak with Professor Olsen, please contact Kyle Grizzell from BlueSky Education on +44 (0)1582 790709 or kyle@bluesky-pr.com