

# Workplace Bullying

## When Whistleblowing Leads to Bullying at Work

By Stig Berge Matthiesen (Associate Professor), Univeristy of Bergen, Norway

Whistleblowing can be defined as the act that takes place when an employee is witnessing wrongdoing in the work place (e.g. unethical conduct, corruption, violence or bullying against others, criminal acts etc.) from a fellow employee or a superior (or a group of employees or superiors), and he or she then tries to stop the wrongdoing by informing a leader or someone who is in the position to stop the wrongdoing. This telling about the wrongdoing may be done internally or externally. In the whistleblowing literature it is common to differentiate between whistleblowing and informing. A whistleblower does not take action with the intent to promote their own career ambitions. Blowing the whistle concerns important ethical or societal issues, and the whistleblower may feel that he or she does not have the conscience to just keep quiet. Lives may be lost, serious pollution may get out of control, human rights may be seriously violated, or the company may get liquidated, if someone does not take action. On the other hand, if you want to get even with your colleague, or express something negative about him or her to your boss, then you act as an informer, not as a whistleblower. Many, including those in the judicial system, find it difficult to differentiate between acts of whistleblowing and acts of informing. Mixed cases may of course also exist.

Some whistleblowers are rewarded, and gain career promotion. An example of this happened when 3 middle managers were appointed as "name of the year" in USA in December 2002 by Time Magazine. They had reported severe corruption (in the World Com and Enron companies) or criminal neglect (in the FBI system after the 11<sup>th</sup> of September) to their superiors, in order to stop the wrongdoing. First they were ignored, but they never gave up. However, some whistleblowers experience the opposite of being rewarded. Ingratitude is the way of the world, they realised instead. Some whistleblowers are exposed to severe bullying after they blew the whistle. They can be met with severe intra group or career sanctions that may lead to major health problems, even to symptoms of PTSD. A typical way of punishing or sanctioning a whistleblower is to meet him or her with tough ostracism, to completely isolate the person from others or from work tasks. Many of whistleblowers are simply sacked from their job, or their work contracts are not renewed. They may even experience that rumours about this "disloyal" worker are spread around, to other companies as well, making it extremely difficult for the person who blew the whistle to obtain another job.

One of the whistleblowers I met as part of my job as a researcher and counsellor in the field of occupational health psychology, Mr. X, worked as a prison officer in a sub-unit of a major prison. In this job he was confronted with many episodes of unethical or criminal acts conducted not by the prisoners, but by his fellow prison officers. A relatively influential group of his colleagues constituted the problem. The organizational culture of the unit, with e.g. severe corruption, was in his opinion out of control. At least this was what he realized after several years with gradual decline of the general professional conduct in the ward. He found this negative development impossible to tolerate. When Mr. X took action and informed the management of the prison, he was treated as a Judas or traitor, not only by his fellow colleagues, but also by the union representatives.

He was then socially isolated, being transferred to another job as an industrial guard in the prison system without being asked about his own opinion. In his "new job" he would not have any regular contact with any colleagues or inmates, as a "persona non grata". When he was met with the impact of all the sanctions imposed upon him, he suffered a nervous breakdown. The break down turned into a long lasting sick leave. After some years, with several episodes of successive long term sick leave, he was granted disability benefit. After some of his old mental strength had returned, he took his case to the court, but lost.

As part of the judicial process, Mr. X was tested extensively by various psychological tests (MMPI-2, SCL-90, GHQ-30, among those) by 2 expert witnesses (I was one). We, as expert witnesses, also conducted several interviews with him. The psychological tests all revealed the same picture. Mr. X suffered from severe mental health problems (depression, anxiety, concentration difficulties, and bizarre imaginations, among others). About 18 months after the trial ended his case was taken to the appeal court. The story repeats itself – he loosed again. Did his mental health further deteriorate after such an experience? About 2 months after the last court trial, Mr. X ,went through the same kind of psychological screening. All tests revealed that he had recovered his mental strength, quite contrary to my expectations in advance. Mr. X's own explanation was that even if he lost the court trials, and even after being out of working life against his own will, he had been able through this process to achieve a kind of psychological redress. The judicial process, and all the people he had been in contact with therein, gave him access to extensive moral and social support, he claimed. Suddenly Mr. X was heard and understood by his surroundings. He was no longer confused. Thus, Mr. X now recognized the interconnection between the various things that had occurred in relation to him blowing the whistle. Sense of coherence, shattered assumptions being recovered, cognitive dissonance being replaced by cognitive consonance, are but some of the psychological processes that may explain why Mr. X recovered.

In sum, exposure to bullying and harassment may be the consequences of blowing the whistle on your colleagues or your organization. This may be the case, in particular, in organizations that lack experience with how to handle whistleblowing. A defensive reaction when someone blows the whistle is to "kill the messenger", instead of preventing or interfering with the alleged acts of wrongdoing. Poor leadership skills should also be considered as an important intermediate factor when whistleblowing ends with bullying. Usually, the leader will have a (high) work task orientation, combined with a minor (low) level of people orientation. Hence, many whistleblowers may realize that they may be exposed to strong work place sanctions following whistleblowing, such as severe ostracism or even risk of losing their job or any positive or meaningful parts of their current job. Such an unfair and destructive process must be prevented. Still, as seen in the presented case, some of the bullied whistleblowers are able to maintain their mental health irrespective of this, and they may recover. The case of Mr. X may illustrate this. Psychological redress may constitute an important explanation of such mental recovery. As occupational health psychologists, we may have a role to play in that respect.



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## At a glance

### OHP Research: Workplace Bullying

- Whistleblowing and bullying
- Victimization from bullying
- Bullying among business professionals
- News from the bullying conference circuit

Pages 3-6

### Mental health problems in the workplace: the OHP view

Andrew Arthur reports the results of his 2002 survey of Vienna conference delegates

Page 7

### News from the Academy

- Website discussion boards
- Membership developments
- 2004 Oporto conference update

Pages 8-10

### OHP World

Important OHP events for your diary

Pages 11-12

### Submitting articles to the *Occupational Health Psychologist*

- Proposed sections
- The Editorial team

Page 13

## Editorial

Welcome to the first issue of the *Occupational Health Psychologist*, a new publication of the European Academy of Occupational Health Psychology. It seems that the spring months have provided the Academy and its contributors with renewed energy! With a splendid lead from Jonathan Houdmont, the Academy's Executive Officer, and Scott McIntyre (Instituto Superior da Maia), the preparations for our next annual conference are well underway. Oporto 2004 promises to be another successful event and one we very much hope you will be able to attend (see page 10 for conference registration and submission information).

As you may notice from the new title, the newly formed Editorial team has also been busy rejuvenating the Newsletter. Over the last three months, the team has been consulting with Academy members to establish how the Newsletter could be enhanced to reflect the areas of expertise within our expanding membership base. This has been a challenging and exciting exercise and we hope that our new format accurately reflects your needs and interests as members. The new *Occupational Health Psychologist*, incorporating the Academy Newsletter (up to Vol. 4, Winter 2003) has been assigned an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN), which can be found in the top-right hand corner of this page.

As we move the publication forward, we hope to provide a showcase for the very best work within the areas of OHP research, education, and practice. We are developing a new format that is designed to allow OHP researchers and practitioners to publicise