

Anti Bullying guidance for small businesses

By Fiona Young

There has been a lot of publicity this week highlighting issues surrounding Bullying, both in schools and in the workplace. For small businesses the issue of bullying in the workplace is a double edged sword.

Positives for small businesses are that they tend to have much closer relationships between management level and employees which does lend itself to better communication, understanding and the ability for management to work side by side with staff and be tuned into the challenges their staff face, all of which is good for a bullying free workplace.

Negative factors include over familiarity of staff leading to a lack of respect for authority; allegations of bias between staff; complacency; or a growing sense of entitlement and demand from employees wanting pay rises, bonuses, time off and other benefits. These demands particularly in an economic downturn can put added stress and pressure on small business owners.

Often hands-on management can be construed, when taken out of context, as being draconian or too tough, and small business owners constantly walk the tightrope of managing their employees and the business effectively and productively while ensuring they comply with their legal obligations as a considerate employer. Tribunal claims can be catastrophic for small businesses, in terms of time, cost and reputation. They also damage workplace morale (workplace disputes in small businesses are rarely possible to keep confidential) and can mentally and emotionally devastate a business owner who feels that they have done everything correctly.

In addition, small businesses often have to deal with “institutional” or corporate bullying - facing competition and scare tactics from larger mainstream competitors or having to deal with overzealous governmental or union officials.

Suffice to say, the Anti-Bullying message is one that resonates for many reasons with small businesses and yet all too often they are painted with the same stereotypical brush as larger organisations and expected to meet the same identical standards of care with substantially less resources and economic capability, yet far more at stake if things go wrong.

Top tips for small businesses to avoid bullying from all angles are:

1. Get a good employment lawyer from the outset. Use your employment lawyer as an advisor not a protector. Employment lawyers are often frustrated with the fact that a client comes to them when a matter is at its illogical conclusion and they have not had the opportunity to assist the employer with damage limitation or prevention. Good workplace policies to pre-empt and govern staff procedures and employer responsibilities are essential. These must of course be readily available to staff.
2. Make a values statement regarding professional conduct and respect in the workplace and ask everyone, no matter what their role is in the workplace to contribute to the values statement. Ask your employees how they would like to be spoken to and treated. It is guaranteed they will all ask to be spoken to respectfully

and kindly. Then remind them that they are also required to do the same to their managers and colleagues. That policy should also extend to customer services behaviour as happy customers clients tend to result in happy and less stressed staff.

3. If there is a union representation, or a government agency you need to work closely with don't see them as the enemy but as your ally. Engage with them, understand what they require of you and also explain to them the realities and limitations of workplace . Every business owner wants their business to be profitable and getting the best out of your staff and hearing their concerns, implementing those that are appropriate and explaining clearly and with reasons why matters cannot be implemented when appropriate, is a step towards increasing and improving productivity.
4. Do not think that the responsibility for preventing bullying in the workplace is not yours. As a business owner/manager you set the tone for your working environment and it is only in your power to make appropriate changes and implement procedures that provide a safe environment for your staff. Remember they can leave a business they don't like, as the business owner you cannot and therefore you should run your business as a place where you enjoy working. By setting a positive example, encouraging your staff to follow that example, having clear behavioural and communication policies in place; rewarding positive behaviours and constantly reminding those employees in engaging in negative behaviours that those behaviours do not tie in with your business culture - you will begin to eliminate undertones of interstaff bullying and in so doing minimise the likelihood of claims against you as an employer.
5. Finally, there is no quick fix for the David and Goliath corporate bullying scenario - it is a reality of the business world and an extra challenge small businesses face. However as a small business you have the advantage of being empowered to create the positive work environment admired by staff and clients alike, you have the flexibility and maneuverability to implement changes where needed and dialogue with your staff and clients directly to gain their input. By creating a friendly, enjoyable positive place to work you are more likely to attract high calibre employees who stay for longer and are committed to building your business in-line with your vision of profitability and growth. Therefore rather than trying to compete with the larger corporations or challenge any attempts they make to take business from you, use your size, flexibility and close customer and employee relationships as a tool to offer an alternative to the big corporate machine. As someone who is only just touching 5 foot in height I can definitely say that substance far outweighs size every time.