Best Practice in Workplace Violence and Bullying Interventions

Introduction

Work-related psychosocial risks concern aspects of the design and management of work and its social and organisational contexts that have the potential for causing psychological or physical harm. They have been identified as one of the major contemporary challenges for occupational health and safety and are linked to such workplace problems as workplace violence, harassment and bullying. Third party violence refers to violence from clients, customers, patients or pupils. Bullying or harassment occurs when someone in the workplace is exposed to persistent negative, humiliating, intimidating or hostile behaviours. According to the Fourth European Working Conditions survey (2007), 6% of the workforce was exposed to threats of physical violence, 4% to violence by other people and 5% to bullying and/or harassment at work over the past 12 months. The risk of experiencing both threats of violence and violence as well as bullying was greatest in the health care sector and in public administration and defense. The risk was higher than on average also in transport and communication, in the hotel and restaurant sector and in education. Work-related violence represents an important concern in health and safety but it is also an ethical issue and relevant to customer/patient service. An agreement on harassment and violence at work was concluded by the European social partners in 2007.

Aim

This guidance sheet summarises the key principles of best practice concerning interventions for the prevention and management of third party violence (customer violence) and bullying (mobbing) at work as defined through the European framework for psychosocial risk management (PRIMA-EF). It aims at providing a reference point for organizations, social partners and experts who wish to implement such interventions across the EU and internationally.

Approaches to Prevent and Manage Bullying and Violence at Work

A distinction regarding psychosocial risk management approaches is often made between organisational, task/job level and individual orientations. On the other hand, distinction is made between the stage of prevention, i.e. between primary, secondary and tertiary level interventions.

Primary interventions are proactive by nature aiming at reducing the risks of bullying and violence at work. These include for example anti-bullying policies and action plans, registration of violent incidents and designing out of risk and redesign of the psychosocial or physical work environment. *Secondary interventions* (*timely reactive strategies*) aim at increasing individual resources or breaking the escalating process. Violence and bullying interventions include for example training, staff surveys and conflict/case resolution.

Tertiary interventions aim at reducing and healing the damages of bullying and violence. These include for example corporate agreements and programmes of after-care, counselling and therapy.

Key aspects of Interventions for the Prevention and Management of Workplace Violence and Bullying

As part of PRIMA-EF a pan-European review and expert interviews were conducted to identify the key aspects of successful interventions and issues that should be taken into account in combating bullying and violence at work.

Both bullying and third party violence are multidimensional phenomena. In prevention and management of work-related violence and bullying a comprehensive approach including individual, job, organizational and society level activities is needed. Preventive approaches should be prioritized.

> *The basis in the management of work-related violence is zero tolerance to all kinds of physical and psychological violence both from inside and from outside the workplace.*

- Planning of interventions should be based on research based knowledge about the causes and escalating nature of bullying and violence situations and on scientific theory.
- Proper situation analysis or risk assessment should be carried out and form the basis of interventions.
- Interventions should be tailored to respond to the problems and needs (e.g. training needs) of the respective organisation and individuals.
- Commitment and support of management to the aims and implementation of interventions is crucial.
- Those involved in interventions should have ownership of the process. Occupational health and safety staff as well as trade unions are good partners in cooperation.
- An evaluation strategy should be developed, clearly linked to the outlined intervention aims, goals, and identified problems.
- A variety of methods should be used to evaluate the intervention (e.g. survey, interviews or group discussions); methods utilized will be dependent on the size and the available resources of the company.
- The quality and effectiveness of the *implementation process* of the intervention should also be systematically assessed.

Best Practice Guidance for Bullying at Work

Awareness and recognition as well as knowledge and know how on bullying at work differ a lot among EU countries and among organisations nationally.

- Awareness and recognition of bullying need to be promoted. If the awareness and recognition of the problem is not adequate, resistance to interventions may appear. Only interventions that employees are ready for can be successful.
- Bullying at work needs to be seen as a work environment problem. Prevention and reduction should concentrate on reducing the risks of bullying in the work environment, paying attention to psychosocial work environment, the atmosphere in the workplace, organisational culture and leadership practices. Initiatives focusing on personality are unlikely to succeed.
- Anti-bullying policies and codes of conduct including clear and operable procedures to prevent and deal with bullying should be built in organisations to support the management of bullying.
- Managers need to be given training on responsible and legally sound management of bullying cases.
- Managers' and workers' competencies and skills of organisations to combat workplace bullying need to be developed.
- External consultants involved in bullying interventions should adopt a neutral and impartial role.

Best Practice Guidance for Third Party Violence at Work

- All workplaces with high risk for violence by third parties should have codes of conduct, guidelines and crisis plans for prevention and management of violence.
- All workers should be given training to help them handle and deal with violent incidents.
- Systematic registration and analysis of violent incidents form an important basis for the prevention of violent incidents. Also psychological violence should be reported.
- Risk assessment should include e.g. work environment design, security devices, staffing plans, work practices, guidelines and training.
- Different methods are needed in different sectors/occupations (e.g. police force, care of demented people).
- Customers and clients also need to be trained not to behave in a threatening and violent way.

Bullying and violence at work arouse shame and guilt. Handling of bullying and third party violence requires a non-blaming atmosphere in the workplace.

Lessons Learned: Key Issues for Success

Organisations and experts that wish to implement interventions to prevent and manage violence and bullying at work should bear in mind the following issues for the implementation of successful and effective intervention strategies.

Organisational readiness to change

Organisational readiness and resistance to change will impact on the success and effectiveness of the intervention. As such it is important to develop and retain organisational commitment and support of the intervention initiative from the beginning. Bullying and violence are sensitive issues for organizations and individuals involved which may increase resistance to interventions.

Realistic intervention strategy

The intervention strategy should outline achievable solutions that can be incorporated into daily business practices, thus facilitating easier, and more successful, implementation over the longer term.

Comprehensive intervention strategy

To successfully prevent and manage violence and bullying at work, intervention strategies should comprehensively incorporate elements from all three intervention levels: primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention.

Supporting continuous improvement

Efforts to effectively address psychosocial risks, and workplace violence and bullying should not be viewed as 'one off activities' but rather, should be incorporated into daily business practices. In so doing, a continuous improvement cycle promoting a better psychosocial working environment will be supported.

More Information

www.prima-ef.org

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EUROPEAN AGENCY FOR SAFETY & HEALTH AT WORK – FACT-SHEET ON BULLYING AT WORK: http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/factsheets/23/view

EUROPEAN AGENCY FOR SAFETY & HEALTH AT WORK – FACT-SHEET ON VIOLENCE AT WORK: http://osha.europa.eu/en/publications/factsheets/24/view

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http://ec.europa.eu/employment_social/news/2007/apr/harassment_violence_at_work_en.pdf

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