

Country Cultures Make Their Mark On Workplace Bullying

Few international human resource professionals would argue that bullying does not exist in the world of work. In any hierarchical organisation there is room for power to be abused. While type of industry, salary and gender can all play a part in the scale of workplace bullying, little systematic research has been done into the impact of a country's culture on the acceptance of such behaviour.

This has now changed thanks to a worldwide study into how much white collar workers will put up with office bullies. Carried out by myself and 19 other international academics, the research reveals that until now we have been neglecting an important factor in the degree of workplace bullying: the country concerned. In a whole new development, results show that if we are lucky enough to work in a certain country the national culture will keep bullying to a low level, whereas someone in the same post in another country could suffer at the hands of volatile bosses. The study also suggests that while bullying may be stronger in particular societies, people in other societies experience more anxiety when bullied simply because the practice is considered more unnatural.

This research dealt with 14 countries grouped into broad world zones. In this way, the acceptance of white collar bullying was studied in six country clusters: Southern Asia (India), Anglo (England, United States, Australia), Confucian Asia (Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong), Latin America (Colombia, Argentina, Mexico), Sub-Saharan Africa (Nigeria), and Eastern Europe (Greece, Poland, Hungary). Nearly 1450 alumni and current students of Masters in Business Administration (MBA) programmes were questioned. All were white collar with similar educational levels. Because these factors remained constant across respondents it was possible to conclude that national differences in the acceptance of workplace bullying are distinct. In this way, other factors that relate to features of the job/occupation or the work environment did not 'contaminate' the results.

When dealing with such a subject

the first challenge is how to measure 'bullying' itself. The problem lies in the fact that what may be seen as bullying by one culture may not be viewed in the same way elsewhere. Instead, the focus was on getting respondents to describe the behaviour of their boss without explicit reference to the word "bullying". Respondents therefore simply reported their boss's actions and did not have to decide whether it constituted bullying or not. These actions were then split into physically threatening bullying or work-related bullying. Unsurprisingly, physical bullying was deemed unacceptable across all countries. The same cannot be said of the much more widespread phenomenon of work-related bullying.

What emerges is that such actions as shouting, loading certain employees with too much work or consistently highlighting their mistakes, may be seen in some countries as boosting productivity. This makes bullying more acceptable in so-called "high performance orientation" cultures which value accomplishments, a sense of urgency and explicit communication. This is true of the Anglo group of



countries (England, US and Australia). Workplaces in such countries are more likely to tolerate bullying if this is seen as a means of achieving better results. Ironically, the bullying behaviour seen in 'Anglo' countries as keeping employees on their toes actually often has the opposite effect. The study implies that bullying might bring greater productivity in the short-term in certain cases but at a longer-term cost. This is because constant criticism, unfair division of labour or excessive monitoring can cause emotional exhaustion or even physical trauma. As a result, workers can feel depleted of energy and lose their initiative, but they can also feel trapped, develop anxiety, depression and even suicidal thoughts. Little wonder that such a scenario can lead to problems of motivation, fall in the standard of work, or good employees leaving.

In contrast to the 'Anglo' countries, the Latin American zone shows itself to be distinctly anti-bullying. It seems that in countries such as Argentina, Mexico and Colombia, more value is placed on humane treatment of the individual at work, through the cultural value of "humane orientation", as opposed to economic performance. As a result, office tyrants are less accepted and so apparently less common.

While English, American or Australian white collar workers are prepared to bite their lips when faced with workplace bullying, their acceptance of such behaviour is still less than that of their counterparts in the Confucian Asia region. The study shows that an even higher acceptance rate of bullying bosses is to be found in Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan. This is linked once more to the cultural feature of "high performance orientation." However, in Confucian Asian countries this strong performance orientation is linked to strong "power distance" making work-place bullying more acceptable. Such high power distance means that the actions of those with 'power' are seen as a natural right. As a result, any behaviour from bosses is deemed acceptable and rarely excessive.

Meanwhile, what is important and interesting is that workers in countries such as the UK may fall victim to bullying at the same rate as Confucian Asians but are likely to suffer more because Anglo-Saxon societies are extremely low in “power distance.” This means that British or American employees find bullying not only very unfair but also unnatural, and can develop strong psychological distress because of this.

Ultimately, the highest levels of acceptability of bullying were observed in countries with a combination of low “humane orientation” and strong “power distance”, such as the survey’s Eastern European countries (Greece, Hungary and Poland). Here, bosses are allowed to behave in any way they think proper while at the same time kindness from supervisors is not something that is valued or expected. Such bosses find it normal to bully while subordinates find it natural to be bullied. What is important, and somewhat sad, is that unlike white collar workers in the Anglo and the Asian countries, those in Eastern European countries not only accept

bullying from supervisors but expect it regardless of whether it helps achieve results. Bosses in Greece, for example, are expected and allowed to harass simply because they are bosses.

It is clear then that a country’s culture of work is the key influence on the degree of workplace bullying. This finding, while of interest to employees wishing to enjoy a good quality of professional life in another country, is above all vital to multi-national firms setting global HR policies. Organisations that become international in scope need to be aware of the acceptance of such behaviour and to so in turn develop their own codes of acceptability. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), which represents over 250,000 members in more than 140 countries, is campaigning for the adoption of global standards for HR policies and practices as well as for a universal code of business ethics. This push for global standards highlights the importance of understanding cultural differences in the acceptance of workplace bullying. In short, both employers and employees

need to recognise that the culture of the country in which a company operates has a substantial effect on how managers can treat the workforce.



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