



BT case study – Tackling workplace bullying



Diversity Works
for London



Organisational background

BT is one of the world's leading providers of communications solutions and services. It traces its history back to 1846 and today employs approximately 107,000 people in over 170 countries. In the UK, staff undertake a variety of technical, sales and marketing, customer care, and support functions. With 9.2 per cent of the BT workforce coming from ethnic minority backgrounds the company is one of the largest private sector employers of this section of the working population.

How BT started on the diversity journey

As a major employer, BT has actively championed diversity for a long time and it now has a comprehensive range of diversity, equality and inclusion policies and practices in place. Its focus is on getting the basics right (policy and human resource processes), as well as undertaking progressive initiatives such as:

- Actively progressing mental health issues in the workplace, in partnership with the charity MIND
- Encouraging greater numbers of people with disabilities to join and progress through the organisation, in partnership with the Remploy and Manpower organisations
- Linking its diversity and corporate social responsibility efforts and reporting these annually

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BT CEO, Ben Verwayeen

Why BT undertook this initiative

Research by the university UMIST estimates that 18.9 million UK working days are lost each year as a direct result of workplace bullying. The Andrea Adams Trust, the UK's only charity dedicated to tackling workplace bullying, defines bullying as a series of behaviours that may include 'harassment, intimidation, aggression, bad attitude, coercive management, personality clash and poor management style'. For the individuals

concerned the effects can be both physical and emotional and can range from the mild and short-lived to ones with very serious consequences, including suicide.

For employers the 'business case' for managing bullying is a strong one as there is both a moral obligation towards employees and consideration of the impact that bullying and harassment can have on a company's profits. An organisation that fails to address bullying and harassment may see increased sickness absence, high staff turnover, possible legal actions, reputational risk, low staff morale and reduced productivity.

In today's fast moving commercial environment, all employers face a number of factors that can produce additional stresses for the workforce. These could include:

- Rapid changes in technology and fierce competition, meaning that companies must continually update their processes and organisational structures to remain competitive
- Significant commercial pressures on managers, sales and operational staff to win and retain multi-million pound contracts

BT believes that, in order to create and sustain an environment where people feel comfortable and able to do their best, a positive stance on bullying both inside its own organisation and through its external activities is the best approach to take.

Implementation steps

BT's approach is outlined below:

Stage 1: Understand the current situation

In 2004, as part of its annual employee survey, BT asked its employees whether they had experienced or witnessed bullying or harassing behaviour. A team was put together to review the 'yes' responses as well as those that stated 'prefer not to say' and 'unsure'. The team analysed the available data and worked closely with the Dignity at Work programme to understand the results of the questionnaire. It met with staff representative groups including the trade union to understand their members' experiences and engage their support in tackling the problem. As BT took the view that one incident of bullying behaviour was unacceptable, the team decided that the responses it received showed that the number of staff who believed that they had experienced bullying of some description was unacceptably high.

Stage 2: Strategy and policy creation

BT strives to develop workplace policies and practices that reflect the needs and requirements of its workforce. It works in partnership with relevant organisations, such as the Andrea Adams Trust, to enable it to both find solutions to problems and increase the credibility of its approach. This work culminated in 2005 when BT's Chairman Sir Christopher Bland launched the 'Lets Cut it Out' campaign within BT. This became the overarching programme for dealing with bullying within the organisation.

The launch spelt out what was unacceptable behaviour and delivered the message that 'everyone has the capacity to be a bully'. Part of the early activity involved updating the bullying and related policies to include a more effective process for reporting, dealing with and resolving bullying.

Strategically, the aim was to create an environment where bullying did not occur and where staff felt comfortable in coming forward if they felt they were being bullied. It was understood that in dealing with this issue the organisation might experience an apparent increase in reported incidents if more staff felt comfortable reporting incidents.

Stage 3: Support mechanisms

A key part of the approach was to make this a business issue rather than a Human Resources one. This was achieved by establishing a number of 'Beacon Bearers' with the objective of communicating the message across the business. BT put in place a number of measures to support staff experiencing bullying or harassment including a confidential helpline run by the company and creating support mechanisms that employees could access. BT also created a range of tools for the Human Resources community to help them understand the issues behind bullying and harassing behaviour.

Stage 4: Training and communication

BT communicated its policies to all staff including the unions and line managers via a range of internal communications including the intranet and staff magazines. It also delivered training on the policies and acceptable behaviours via a series of intranet-based training, which included a video of scenarios set in a variety of BT environments including call centres and engineering sites. An on-line, 45-minute diversity and equality training programme featuring messages about how BT values diversity, and examples and policy on discrimination, bullying and harassment was piloted to 8,000 staff and then rolled out to over 48,000 BT Retail staff via the BT Academy. BT also invited John McCarthy to give a speech to staff, relating his experiences of being bullied in extreme circumstances as a kidnapped hostage in the Lebanon.

Stage 5: Monitoring progress

The company introduced a number of Human Resource metrics to monitor progress including questions in the annual staff survey and a review of the number and type of grievances and disciplinary hearings. The business areas received their own staff survey findings that indicated their 'bullying score'.

Stage 6: Changing behaviours

BT's understanding of how, why and where bullying was occurring within the organisation increased enormously. In some cases, behaviours were changed simply by highlighting the issue and making small changes to working practices. An example of this occurred when a manager whose team had a high bullying score changed his working patterns and communication style, becoming more visible to his team and improving the 'open door' policy. These simple changes dramatically reduced the bullying score and increased the employee engagement scores.

Stage 7: Influencing outside the BT organisation

BT understands that bullying is also prevalent in wider society, with children often being the victims of this behaviour either in and around school or at home. BT has a long established external educational programme that provides support and sponsorship to a number of national and local activities. It has extended its influence outside the company, including the sponsorship of anti-bullying initiatives in schools and the active support of

charities including ChildLine, the free helpline for children in danger, which it help set up¹. The children's charity now receives 20,000 calls per year about bullying, the most common problem that children call the charity about.

In May 2007, BT launched the pilot of a new anti-bullying campaign in schools in Scotland. This forms part of the BT 'Better World' campaign, which works with young people to help them improve their communication skills and have their voices heard.

Outcome

As a large and complex organisation, BT has acted to address bullying and harassment. It acknowledges that there is no 'quick fix' to the problem. It does believe, however, that it is making some good progress; for example, absenteeism at BT is 3.1 per cent compared to a national average of 8.5 per cent, and 99 per cent of women return to work after maternity leave compared to 40 per cent nationally. The next phase of the programme is to increase the information on bullying available to line managers and to produce case studies of good and bad behaviours.

Commentary

Many organisations wish to deal with their more challenging employment issues internally and BT is unusual in the way that it is addressing this issue openly and in cooperation with trade unions and external organisations. As the CEO, Ben Verwayen says,

"In BT, we value difference because difference brings innovation, creativity and knowledge of new and emerging customers and markets. It is our future. So bullying and harassment undermines all the good work we are doing to make BT a place to work where people can be different and we can all reap the cultural and commercial rewards that this brings".

Employers can respond in two ways, either by responding to incidents of bullying as they occur, or by creating an environment where such behaviour is not tolerated. Organisations that are effective in nurturing a positive culture will reduce the human resource related risks and costs to the organisation, and develop a workplace where all staff can contribute to their fullest.

¹ BT provides office space, strategic and operational support, campaign and fundraising support (more than £6M to date) and the original 0800 1111 telephone number.