

MEDIA RELEASE

Shift in ‘anti-dobbing’ culture required to reduce workplace bullying and harassment

Employee policies should foster an open and accountable workplace while avoiding creation of a ‘culture of complaint’

Sydney, 28 April 2010 – Australia’s ingrained ‘anti-dobbing’ culture may be hindering efforts to stamp out workplace bullying and harassment, which remains a serious issue for Australian businesses, according to Harmers Workplace Lawyers.

And employers fearful of building a ‘culture of complaint’ should be aware there are ways to encourage employees to report bullying while discouraging proliferation of false claims, the leading employment lawyers said.

Greg Robertson, General Counsel for Harmers Workplace Lawyers, says the first step for employers in creating an anti-bullying workplace culture is to address the cultural issue of employees refusing to ‘dob in’ their work colleagues.

“Australian workplaces tend to have a ‘don’t dob in’ mindset, which hinders attempts to eradicate workplace bullying,” Mr Robertson said.

“A number of bullying cases recently have highlighted situations where employees have, for whatever reason, stood by and done nothing to report or stop the incident. These cases contain lessons for all employers,” he said.

“Staff should be encouraged to come forward and alert senior management to any incidents of bullying, harassment or discrimination they may witness. They need to know that any form of mistreatment will be taken seriously and that their role in alerting management to the issue will remain confidential.

“Having said that, employers understandably do not want to create a ‘culture of complaint’ within their workplace, in which false, petty or vexatious bullying claims are continually brought to the attention of management.

“For this reason, we recommend employers establish a policy whereby employees face some form of reprimand if they bring a complaint found to be false or unfounded,” he said.

Mr Robertson said organisations needed to ensure their HR teams had people skilled in investigating workplace bullying so that complaints are properly addressed. This included the ability to discern what is and what is not bullying.

“Bullying is generally accepted as unwanted behaviour that offends, persecutes or excludes an individual within the workplace. Bullying behaviour typically breaches any number of workplace legislation such as OH&S or discrimination, and may even breach criminal laws,” he said.

Mr Robertson said the key to eradicating workplace bullying was to implement and apply firm office policies and procedures that demonstrate employers and managers will not turn a blind eye to bullying or harassment.

“Achieving cultural reform within the workplace requires a clear management commitment not only to respecting the dignity of all employees, but also to implementing robust systems to achieve this,” he concluded.

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Note to editors:

About Harmers Workplace Lawyers

Harmers Workplace Lawyers was established in 1996 as a boutique employment law firm. Since then it has become one of Australia’s leading employment and industrial law firms, with offices in Sydney and Brisbane. The firm has been awarded Australasian Legal Business’s ‘employment specialist firm of the year’ for the past three years running.

Issued by Sefiani Communications Group on behalf of Harmers Workplace Lawyers

For further information, please contact:

Dylan Malloch / Lauren White

Tel. (02) 8920 0700

Email: dmalloch@sefiani.com.au / lwhite@sefiani.com.au