

MEDIA RELEASE

Taser incident shines spotlight on workplace bullying

Harmers Workplace Lawyers warns even isolated incidents can take a heavy toll, threatening viability of businesses and employee wellbeing

Sydney, 9 August 2010 – Harmers Workplace Lawyers says recent reports of alleged workplace bullying in a Western Australian police station are bringing the important topic of bullying to the forefront once again, and Australian businesses could suffer increasingly severe consequences if they fail to do more to reduce the occurrence of such incidents.

As reported in news outlets recently, a sergeant and a senior constable have been stood down on full pay and two constables have been confined to office duties after claims that they discharged Tasers directly against the bodies of fellow officers at Rockingham Police Station as part of an initiation ritual or for punishment. This follows the judgement brought down earlier this year in the 2006 suicide of cafe worker Brodie Panlock following a year of insult and ridicule from her co-workers.

Shana Schreier-Joffe, Partner, Harmers Workplace Lawyers, says these are high-profile examples of workplace bullying, but that the behaviour can take many forms and Australia is lagging behind other countries in its people management practices.

“Workplace culture is vital to workplace health, morale, productivity and efficiency, and it is disappointing that current survey data indicates Australian organisational cultures tend to be aggressive/defensive rather than constructive, resulting in high degrees of stress and conflict.

“While most jobs involve a degree of stress, high stress levels combined with dissatisfaction and frustration in the workplace tend to be associated with increased bullying, which has a hugely detrimental effect on employers, workers and the profitability of a business,” she said.

Ms Schreier-Joffe explains that the difficulty in addressing workplace bullying lies in the translation of a policy into practice, and businesses must ensure they do more than post a policy on an office wall. “People at all levels must keep a watchful eye out for actions that offend, persecute or exclude someone,” Ms Schreier-Joffe said.

Actions associated with workplace bullying include social isolation or silent treatment, rumours or gossip, excessive criticism or monitoring of work, and verbal or physical aggression. Evidence suggests that workplace bullying by managers or supervisors makes up a clear majority of bullying cases, meaning senior-level management cannot simply rely on team leaders to stamp out these activities on an individual basis, but rather must implement a robust system to ensure compliance.

“Bullying tends to occur when there is a perceived power imbalance, where the victim is unable to retaliate or withstand the bullying because of informal or formal

structures placing the victim in a helpless and defenceless position,” Ms Schreier-Joffe said.

The International Standard Organisation’s ISO 31000 and the Australian Standard of Employment Rights are two mechanisms available to employers seeking to develop a holistic strategy to achieving a zero-tolerance approach to workplace bullying.

“If employers don’t take workplace bullying seriously and do not have the right procedures in place, they are opening themselves up to decreased productivity, significant financial losses, staffing issues, irreparable damage to their reputation, and also, in some cases, prosecution for failing to ensure that they have provided a safe work environment,” Ms Schreier-Joffe said.

Practical steps for employers

Ms Schreier-Joffe says there are a number of proactive steps an employer can take to address bullying within their organisation. Employers should:

- Illustrate a clear management commitment to respecting employees’ dignity
- Ensure feedback channels are open, available and known to employees
- Develop an effective and comprehensive policy and procedure to deal with abusive situations
- Communicate the policy to all employees, with regular training and induction training for new staff
- Conduct separate training for supervisors and managers and ensure that senior managers are available to handle situations
- Remain vigilant and aware of behaviours in the workplace, with an eye for adverse actions such as social isolation, gossip spreading, excessive criticism and verbal or physical aggression
- Take all complaints seriously and ensure appropriate investigation
- Provide appropriate support and counselling for staff members that have experienced bullying
- Keep accurate records of steps taken to assist if legal action commences

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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, Melbourne and Brisbane. The firm has been awarded Australasian Legal Business’s ‘employment specialist firm of the year’ for the past five years running.

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