

Managers bullied by staff: study

By Bianca Wordley
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BULLYING in the workplace is not just a coalface experience with many managers now reporting harassment from staff, a researcher has found.

Sara Branch, a researcher with the Griffith University Workplace Bullying and Violence Research Team, has begun a doctorate study into the incidence of "upward bullying" in the workplace.

"Upward bullying" is a term being considered to describe when employees bully their managers," she said.

Ms Branch said she decided to do the study after discovering most of the literature on bullying was focused on managers bullying staff or colleagues bullying other colleagues.

She said bullying was normally considered to be perpetuated by someone who was in a position of power over another person.

But Ms Branch said employees can hold power as they were often the ones who hold the knowledge, expertise and information required to carry out tasks in the workplace.

"If a person is dependent on another person then that gives them some power and in terms of the managers and employees there is a relationship of interdependence," she said.

"If one person has the knowledge it makes them quite powerful and if they have a grievance they can decide to withhold that knowledge."

Ms Branch said as companies downsized and rationalised resources, managers were increasingly being expected by senior managers to carry out more duties and were often at the frontline of implementing changes.

"It is creating a lot of stress amongst staff and managers and is producing conflict between them," she said.

"Staff don't trust their managers anymore."

She said workplace bullying was a complicated process and at times both parties could feel bullied.

The initial findings of the research have been based on two one-hour interviews with 16 managers (three female and 13 male) from within a government owned organisation and eight female managers from the public and private sector.

Most of the managers interviewed said they had either experienced or seen "upwards bullying", she said.

Ms Branch said bullying came in many forms such as workplace gossip, graffiti on toilet doors, rumours and threats.

"A number of the managers were threatened physically or verbally threatened and a number have felt quite intimidated," she said.

"One manager referred to it as 'manager bashing' and another said it was 'payback' for a prior decision they'd made."

She said managers who had been bullied found it hard to deal with the issue as it made them look as though they could not do their job properly.

"They can discipline the employee but it often backfires on them in the form of a grievance or accusation."

The interviews are the first stage of a wider study being conducted into the issue, with hundreds of questionnaires now being sent out to managers.

Ms Branch said organisations interested in being part of the study should contact the Department of Management at Griffith University in Queensland.

She hopes to complete her thesis by early 2006.