

More than just a few bad apples

The need for a risk management approach to the problem of workplace bullying in the UK's television industry

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Bullying: A high-profile issue

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Peter Chappell
Friday May 07 2021, 2.00pm, The Times



Noel Clarke, right, with co-stars Billie Piper and David Tennant from the second season of the revived BBC show
ADRIAN ROGERS/ALAMY

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But.... workplace bullying and harassment are widespread in UK television

- *93% of TV professionals have experienced or witnessed bullying or harassment in the workplace*

State of Play 2021: Management Practices in UK unscripted television - van Raalte et al

- *57% subjected to bullying, harassment or discrimination in the previous 12 months*

Looking Glass 2021: Mental Health in the Film and TV Industry after Covid - Brightpurpose / Film and Television Charity

Changing attitudes - persistent problems

- In 2013 Federation of Entertainment Unions membership survey:
 - creative industries ‘a “hotspot” for bullying, compared with other workplaces’
 - but Cathy John reports:
 - ‘almost an acceptance of the prevailing culture of bullying; an attitude of “if you can’t stand the heat then get out of the kitchen”’
- (John, 2013)
- In 2023 recognition of the issues within TV - but a tendency to foreground the individual perpetrator, or ‘bad apple’ with favoured solutions including EAPs and ‘whistle-blowers charters’
 - general reluctance to frame the problem as systemic - notwithstanding evidence of the part played by working environments

The risk of workplace bullying is greatest where:

- workloads are high and mentally demanding
 - teams are working under pressure to tight schedules
 - roles are not clearly defined, or are subject to conflicting demands
 - there are competing hierarchies / structures of control
 - lines of communication are unclear.
 - issues & conflict are not addressed
 - there is a lack of feedback
 - employee perceptions of fairness are low
 - job insecurity leads to a reluctance to report concerns
- All of these risk factors are common, if not embedded, across the practices and cultures of the TV industry.

• Karasek, 1979; Warr 1987; Leyman 1993/1996; Einarsen et al 1994; Vartia 1996; Zapf et al 1996; Niedl 1996; Einarsen 2000; Hoel & Cooper 2000; Salin 2003; Bakker et al 2005; Hauge et al 2007; Ballien & De Witte 2009; Notelaers et al 2010; Van den Brand et al 2007; Arnold 2017; Einarsen et al 2018; Salin & Hoel 2020; Agotnes et al 2021 etc.

Impact of leadership and management

- Risk of bullying moderated by good leadership - and exacerbated by bad
(Agotnes et al 2021)

- Key characteristics of good leadership:
 - regular constructive feedback
 - professional development opportunities
 - positive role models
 - a sense of collective mission
 - addressing issues and conflicts before they escalate

= aspects of 'transformative leadership' (Bass 1985)

- Destructive leadership practices include:
 - actively destructive eg 'tyrannical leadership'
 - passive and avoidant eg 'laissez-faire' leadership
- Both exacerbate risk of bullying
(Skogstad et al 2017)

State of Play 2021: *Management Practices in UK unscripted television* (for Bectu)

The survey:

- 74 questions: 61 multiple choice & 13 open-ended.
- Average completion time 40 minutes
- 1184 responses
- 53% editorial, 18% production, 17% senior management, 12% craft
- 57% over 10 years experience
- 88% freelancers
- 70% had management responsibilities as part of their current role

NB: Bullying not the original focus but emerged as a key theme

Findings of the survey

- Shocking ‘extreme’ examples - but more shockingly widespread & tolerated
 - “freelance staff are frightened of criticising the person who employs them as they know they won’t get booked again. This enables a culture of bullying and ...exploitation to thrive” (SoP-1010)
- Reports of a ‘culture of fear’, ‘blame culture’, ‘brutal’ and ‘toxic’ workplaces
 - “a culture of fear is bizarrely seen as productive in some areas” (SoP-0876)
- But also of incompetence, micromanagement, miscommunication etc.
 - “I’ve found that a lot of managers will balance their own anxieties around their role out by bullying junior members - not that they’d recognise it as that” (SoP-0409).

Environmental / systemic risk factors were classified after Salin and Hoel (2020) ie: job design & work organisation; organisational cultures and climate; leadership & conflict management

Job design and work organization

- Workload
 - “By far the biggest problem is an expectation that staff/crew will work as many hours as necessary to fit the work into the available time” (SoP-0777).
- ‘Flexibility’
 - “the Series Producer would not make an editorial decision - changed the shoot at 10pm the night before and expected me to action this. You just cannot live like that!” (SoP-0991).
 - Cognitive demands
 - No sense of control
- Micromanagement
 - “If the leader is not able to work as part of a team, for example they prefer to do everything themselves, other team members become confused as to their role, no longer feel part of that team [and] take a step back, and so the team falls apart.” (SoP-1061)
- Role conflict and role ambiguity
 - “the result [of whistle-blowing] would be never being employed by that company again - or any subsequent companies the staff concerned worked for” (SoP-1020).
 - Job insecurity

Organisational cultures and climate

- *Poor time-management*

“Everyone is on their knees from production managers, directors, through to runners. 12-hour days turn into 14-hour days, emails and texts fly around at 8am, 11pm, and all through the weekend, doils [days off in lieu] can’t be taken..., and everyone just carries on, worried about creating fuss or a bad reputation” (SoP-0080).

“Some senior people in television are, ironically, appalling communicators” (SoP-0392)

- *Poor organisation & communication*

- *Perceptions of fairness & blame culture*

“On a major daytime home show, the producers received several complaints about a presenter, mainly regarding sexual harassment and bullying. Editors were asked to compile on-camera evidence and submit it to the executive producer. When the presenter wasn’t sacked, it was revealed that the footage was used to keep their fee down during contract negotiations.” (SoP-1043)

Leadership and conflict management

- Good management the exception
 - “Some companies treat people so badly it’s infuriating and there isn’t much you can do about it” (SoP-0705).
 - “people begin and end jobs having no idea whether they are qualified, able to do the role, have done a good/bad job, areas for improvement...” (SoP-1082).
 - Lack of professional development opportunities
 - “I’ve seen senior staff latch on to single mistakes of individuals. And leave little room for growth or support that damages the career chances of junior staff. People are written off very quickly” (SoP-1005).
 - “you can be a brilliant programme maker.... but that doesn't mean you know how to manage people” (SoP-0003).
 - Failure to address issues or conflicts
 - “I think a lot of people in this industry struggle with how to deal with poorly performing personnel.... there is a tendency to ignore it rather than try to improve the situation.... reinforcing negative practices in the industry” (SoP-0937).
- Lack of regular constructive feedback
 - Lack of positive role models

More than just a few bad apples: A risk management approach to bullying in TV

Bullying clearly a systemic issue in the industry in need of a systemic approach:

3 interconnected areas of action required.....

- Change the culture
 - Work in progress: awareness raising eg Bectu's Unseen on Screen, BFI guidelines, BAFTA interventions etc.
- Provide tools (for managers and employees) to avoid and address
 - Some engagement - primarily with whistle-blowing schemes
 - New 'HR tools' offered by ScreenSkills
 - Management training a key element - still unavailable to freelance staff
- Recognise and manage underlying structural and systemic risk factors
 - Limited engagement with underlying risk factors eg. workloads and precarity
 - But TV has well developed strategies to manage risk in other areas so has capacity....

Thank you

- Full article and bibliography available at:
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17510694.2023.2182101>