

## **Workplace bullying in New Zealand: What are all these scandals telling us and what should be done?**

On Wednesday 21 April at 6.00 pm the Royal Society of New Zealand Wellington Branch hosted a public lecture and discussion of current research on workplace bullying. The lecture was given by Dr. Geoff Plimmer, Senior Lecturer at the School of Management at Victoria University of Wellington.

Dr. Plimmer noted that workplace bullying has attracted much attention in recent years, with media stories directed at sporting, public service, private sector and other types of organisation. He stated that its effects are devastating to employees and organisations. How should an organisation best deal with it? Dr. Plimmer discussed this question by considering the available evidence.



Introducing Dr. Plimmer's lecture, Branch President, David Lillis, stated that the topic is not new and that reporting of workplace bullying in the New Zealand media seems to have escalated about 15 to 20 years ago. He noted that we have all read newspaper articles, magazine editorials on workplace bullying, have listened to television panel discussions and current affairs programmes where bullying was a discussion item and, in recent years, on-line news media have featured many exposures of bullying around New Zealand. He noted that bullying is a controversial topic because anyone criticised, fired or managed out of a job may see the process as unfair and may allege bullying, regardless of whether it has taken place or not.

Dr Plimmer defined workplace bullying as repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that can lead to physical or psychological harm. Repeated behaviour is persistent (occurs more than once) and can involve a range of actions over time. Unreasonable behaviour means actions that a reasonable person in the same circumstances would see as unreasonable. It includes victimising, humiliating, intimidating or threatening a person. He said that bullying may also include harassment, discrimination or violence. His definition was adapted from the New Zealand Work Safe definition, which was in turn adapted from the Australian definition.

Dr Plimmer summarised the effects of bullying on the target as including use of alcohol or drugs, lost sleep, reduced capacity for work, depression, reduced performance and lost self-confidence.

The effects on the organisation can include reduced productivity, absenteeism, reduced performance, errors etc. Other costs include recruiting, turnover, compensation claims. Impacts on

organisational culture include ineffective relationships, collaboration, teamwork, commitment, toxic work environments and reputational damage.

Current initiatives are often focussed on investigating allegations, but more could be done around prevention and remediation of the damage that it causes.

Following Dr. Plimmer's lecture, the audience engaged in a frank discussion with Dr. Plimmer and Dr. Lillis. Dr. Lillis noted that representation from public service ministries and other agencies that were invited was very sparse and thus limited the possibility of engaging in further activity on bullying on the part of the Royal Society of New Zealand Wellington Branch.

Dr. Plimmer studied organisational psychology at Victoria University, and works in the School of Management. His research and teaching aims to be practical, and tends to focus on leadership, performance management, employee resilience and harmful behaviours such as workplace bullying.

The lecture was held 6.00 pm - 7.00 pm at Victoria University, Kelburn Campus. Approximately forty five people attended. An edited recording will be made available on the Branch web-site very soon.