

# Shadowland

## The Hidden Costs of Bullying



***Bullying and the underlying misconception that 'treating people mean' is the way to get the best results is costing the UK £18 billion a year and an untold tome of human suffering.***

***Not much surprises me these days; a fifth of young adults thinking Fish Fingers are actually the fingers from fish and the fact that so called celebrities can't spell 'Sofa' on a popular TV show. What does astound me is the seaming universal acceptance that the way we often treat each other, particularly at work, is simply the way things are!***

So have we all suddenly become nastier? Is it one giant conspiracy? No! In our view it's worse; there is a horribly misguided belief for some people in business (all sectors) that treating people mean and pushing them in negative and harsh ways ultimately delivers the best performance results. This could not be further from the truth! Last month, ACAS in conjunction with Employment Research Australia published a Policy White Paper – *"Seeking Better Solutions: tackling bullying and ill-treatment in Britain's workplaces"*. It makes frightening reading when you listen to stories from staff who work on their helpline, i.e. direct references to *suicide, relying on long term medication, long bouts of absence.*

The paper refers to an earlier business case (Giga et al, 2008) that demonstrates in no uncertain terms the tangible cost of resultant low productivity, turnover and absenteeism – estimated in 2007 at £17.65 Billion of negative GDP. Personally I think this is a conservative estimate. Why? In all of my professional work, both within industry and consulting, the difference between a 'fear based' or negative culture vs. one that lends itself to innovation, collaboration and problem solving is completely self-evident. *"The psychological effects of bullying are unpredictable. Managers need to find the courage to deal with conflict and prevent it from arising in the first place. Leaders can enable this by creating a holistic approach to organisational culture which treats employees as human beings."* Vikki Hawes – ACAS Council Member.

We teach management teams all the time, the 'tell' signs of effective working practices, e.g. open and easy information sharing and associated levels of trust and honesty. In negative environments (where bullying is prevalent or tolerated) there is a negative correlation to innovation and problem solving. Instead the focus is often inwards and individualistic.

Only last week, two companies we spoke to openly, referred to a bullying culture from senior managers. I'm not surprised, but what worries me is the seeming lack of ability to deal with those situations and people, in a timely and effective manner, often because of their seniority or the perceived consequences of dealing with them. I wonder what the appetite to change this would be if the true costs, as identified by ACAS were more widely understood.

We can no longer afford the cost or tolerate this anymore. Managers who display the wrong behaviours can no longer go unchallenged. Lives are at stake, profits & performance too. Individuals who bully need to be seen for what they are; often weak and lacking in inner confidence, they are great self-publicists who can misdirect the Board and manage their own career story beautifully. When you diagnose forensically what they achieve and the costs and missed opportunities that surround them, it becomes clear that everyone loses.

There is a better way. Anyone should be able to complain or question these costly behaviours without fear of retribution. Both the culture and the structures need to be in place to facilitate this. The media needs to play its part; we should celebrate less the man who gave us the iPhone and the finger wagging bearded bloke on the Apprentice; it's time to celebrate the truly great leaders who don't cost us anything but instead give us so much.

If you suspect that in your own team or business, you have been tolerating poor behaviours or have turned a blind eye to the hidden costs, it's time to reach out for professional support so you can construct a better future. Call us for a fully confidential conversation now.