

# **HAPPY AT WORK**



**A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO  
OVERCOMING WORKPLACE  
PSYCHOLOGICAL HARASSMENT**

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# Chapter One:

## The path to transformation

*Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.*

Henry Ford

We have learned in recent years that epidemic crises can lead to social transformation. Workplace psychological abuse infects our workplaces at great cost to individuals, organisations and society. It is one of the most serious and neglected problems in employment relations across developed economies. A Global Survey by the International Labour Organisation revealed that Australia and New Zealand have the highest reported rates of workplace violence and harassment in the world, with many respondents having suffered multiple times. The rates are higher for women, people of diverse ethnicities, faiths, physical and neurological characteristics, etc.

The quality of our working conditions matters. Over a lifetime, the average person spends over ten years at work. Most of us work to earn a living, yet for many, the 9-to-5 is much more than the 9-to-5. Work is the centre of all kinds of human interaction, for example, competition - it has long been a place of struggle and transformation - but also camaraderie, belonging, friendship, joy, and standing for what we believe in, our self-worth. For many, work is deeply connected to who we are.

Work integrates our sensibilities around social and environmental issues and our overall identity and lifestyle. Today, we are told, 'Bring your authentic selves to work.' But what does that mean? And are we really supposed to? The rise of social entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility (CSR) reflects this shift toward purpose, personal fulfilment, and the opportunity to impact the world positively. In recent years, the concept of business human rights (BHR) has emerged as a new form of corporate social responsibility. It is bringing transformative change to the interface of business with human rights. In addition, the meaning of work is influenced by emerging influences such as:

- advancing technology;
- the changing global economy;
- the Uber economy;
- intra-generational participation - sometimes four generations in a workplace simultaneously;
- diversity, intersectionality, and
- a new emphasis on workplace well-being and safety.

People who find meaning and purpose in their work experience higher job satisfaction, engagement, and well-being. The modern job seeker often has the luxury of considering

factors beyond salary and benefits when choosing an employer. A healthy, safe work environment attracts and retains talented employees. This means organisations prioritising mental health are more likely to enjoy greater business success, not only in relations with employees, but also with shareholders, customers, suppliers, and other stakeholders. Relational capital across-the-board is the beneficiary of happier workplaces.

COVID and the working from home phenomenon have reinforced the importance of ensuring that the work environment is safe and does not endanger workers' physical or psychosocial well-being. Today's workers seek employer commitment to workplaces free from psychological harassment. Mental health is a human right. Employers have a moral responsibility and a legal duty to ensure that the workplace does not threaten workers' physical or mental health. In addition to international conventions, many jurisdictions have legislation in place, as well as common law protections and social expectations.

Some workplaces model shared purpose and engagement with high levels of job satisfaction. Workers with diverse voices feel heard and respected; they are genuinely committed to values such as integrity, courage, and trust. Ideally, this will increasingly be the case in the future. Nevertheless, many employers still do not prioritise safety at work. Even while they pay lip service to values like teamwork, collaboration, openness, and transparency, it is not unusual for employers to actually incentivise and reward psychologically abusive behaviour. In many workplaces, the situation is not getting better. Often, we can't even talk about it.

Right now, workers who attend safe workplaces are the lucky ones. Despite widespread awareness of the importance of well-being, today's workplace is not always safe. Many of us still suffer demeaning and abusive treatment at work. This book is about changing that. It is about overcoming psychological harassment to transition to work environments that are safer, more productive, happier for more people.

The conversation here is not about physical violence or sexual harassment in the workplace. Those are related but distinct topics. And thankfully, sexual harassment and physical violence are now taken seriously, generally speaking. We have reached a point where, for the most part, those offences are not tolerated.

Yet we still let psychological harassment happen. And when we do, we deprive ourselves and each other of our right to a safe workplace. A safe shared environment in which to work is not only everyone's right, but everyone's responsibility. Solidarity of workers is a fine tradition historically. Research shows, however, that worker solidarity in recent years has declined. This decline is due to various factors, but we can turn it around. Solidarity at work is something we can embrace if we can find the courage and commitment to resist the individualistic impulse to isolate and protect ourselves, and instead make a conscious choice to support each other and to use our voices at work.

This book is not the story of any one person, but rather represents an amalgam of personal experiences and extensive research, that encompasses scholarly research as well as hundreds of accounts recorded in submissions to the 2012 Australian Parliamentary Inquiry

into Workplace Bullying. Among the 319 submissions, many documented personal experiences of targets of harassment. Others were from experts in the field.

Informed by this wide range of sources, this book outlines the basics of workplace psychological harassment, offers insights and advice to manage and prevent harassment, and provides a framework for changing the conditions that allow harassment to persist and thrive, from internal processes and personal choices to broad societal transformation.

The book is organised in three parts, which represent something like a hero's journey in overcoming challenge. Taken together, it is hoped that the three parts of the book offer the reader some useful understanding, insight, and inspiration. Part One (Chapters Two and Three) introduces the phenomenon of workplace psychological harassment and the challenges it presents. This is the departure, encountering the challenge, the first ordeal in the hero's journey. Part Two (Chapters Four, Five and Six) represents the initiation. This is the second ordeal, and in this context the book describes the darkest substance, the many ways that we are tested in psychological harassment, and the obstacles in the path to overcoming its challenges. Part Three (Chapters Seven and Eight) is about ways of meeting and overcoming; this is the return, finding the courage, wisdom and strength to master ourselves in service to others.

*Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve....You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.*

**Martin Luther King, Jr.**

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