



Revoking a Licence to Kill

A submission to the Australian Senate Inquiry into Suicide

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A victim of workplace bullying that led to a suicide attempt has attuned Karen Carr to the tokenism and indifference which is usually attached to suicide prevention. Carr argues that the tacit acceptance of workplace bullying contributes to an increased suicide rate. Responsible officers of organisations that allow workplace bullying to exist should be held accountable for the consequences as in any other form of corporate manslaughter. Workplace bullying must be treated as a criminal offence with offenders liable to heavy fines and stiff jail sentences.

Government policy and the public conversation involving suicide are fatally flawed. They fan the impression that suicide is the province of predisposed individuals who lack the mental and emotional durability to deal with the conventional challenges of the western lifestyle. They actively accommodate the prevailing view that the suicide decision is an irrational one that is not available to any person in their "right mind". Many view suicide as a selfish decision taken by an individual who opts for the "easy way out".

The policy discussion glosses over many of the causal influences that drive an individual to suicide even though these are usually predictable, obvious and understood. To the extent that these external influences are recognised, far too many are painted with the colours of ignorance rather than the explicit reality of malicious and conscious culpability.

My submission is not intended to find someone to blame for suicide. Nor does it suggest that all suicides and suicide attempts have a common genesis or that their proponents would have benefited from a common cure. I am motivated to examine just one causal element of suicide, that is, the pernicious and insidious prevalence of workplace bullying. I want to explore the complex ubiquity of bullying and expose it and its consequences to the healing light of public inquiry.

The Author:

Karen Carr attempted suicide five years ago after being subjected to intense workplace bullying. She currently works part time as a volunteer counsellor for Lifeline Australia.

I have personally attempted suicide in the face of relentless workplace bullying and now work as a part-time crisis and suicide prevention counsellor. I speak with informed, calm and confident insight on behalf of those many Australians who share my profile, characteristics and vulnerability. In that regard, my ordinariness provides the strength and authenticity that underpin this, my first ever government submission.

In my experience, suicide is an entirely rational decision that instinctively presents itself as a consoling last resort when all other efforts, advice and support mechanisms have failed. Suicide reinvests its proponent with the dignity, control and self-sufficiency that have been plundered by circumstances which the casualty is ill-positioned to influence or control. The act of suicide may often appear impulsive and unexpected but in reality it is usually the concluding episode of a deliberative process of elimination.

My Own Experience

I am 57 years of age and five years ago I attempted to take my life with a fatal overdose of barbiturates. There were no bells or sirens to announce my epochal decision. I had simply run out of reserve, options and ideas and could not bear the idea of returning to work the next day.

This was the end point of many months degradation at my place of work where I was employed as a senior staff member. A number of my colleagues formed a clique and actively prosecuted my exclusion from the team and from access to the resources, cooperation and mutuality upon which my position relied.

Ordinarily this would not have been an insurmountable problem; it would simply have been a routine if complex challenge for my management skills. The intractability came from senior management above me who appeared to be bemused by these antics, and were apparently unprepared to challenge the group dynamic they relied on to support their own self esteem and prestige. In a nutshell, the most senior management of the company wasn't prepared to rock the boat.

They were careful not to provide any explicit endorsement of the bullying. It was their passive reaction to this dilemma that provided a powerful green light to the perpetrators and gave them the authority to continue with their malicious conduct. In my opinion, turning a blind eye gave them a licence to kill.

Bullying of the type I experienced simply starts off with a twinge. A curt remark becomes a spiteful attack with sporadic sorties interspersed with uneventful conduct. I used to wince when the attacks arrived and sought to interrogate my own behaviour as a way of justifying or explaining my colleagues' conduct. I would begin to doubt my judgement during the quiet periods, wondering if I had imagined it all.

Each episode became more stringent and daring and increasing numbers of the team became aware of the process, and by degrees many become more overtly involved. I initially felt hurt, then increasingly betrayed as more colleagues, some of whom I had worked with harmoniously for years, joined the game. This eventually

gave way to humiliation, fear and depression. I began to dread going to work; the quality of my judgement became impaired, and my confidence and self esteem plummeted. On many occasions my frustration turned to deep-seated internalised anger.

As one of seven siblings, I felt my traditional role as the family “anchor” convert to one of dependent as I lost the belief in my ability to do or say anything that was particularly worthwhile. To my bitter regret, I learned just how interconnected were the different parts of my own life and my life as a family member and friend. Workplace bullying, and the sense of worthlessness that it imposed on me, was like the initial domino toppling at the beginning of a chain reaction.

Caring family members and health professionals thwarted my suicide attempt with loving care and abiding professionalism. While I have learned new coping skills to deal with the depression and anxiety caused by the bullying, I have no sense of jubilation or catharsis at having survived. My suicide attempt crystallised the reality and effect of my bullying experience, but the urgent reality of my predicament was simply replaced with the languorous drudgery of a deeper problem.

Despite having a background of some 36 years of continuous and successful employment, by taking leave from work on workers’ compensation, I was branded a malingerer and having suffered my mental breakdown I was immersed in the stigma of mental illness. I may have just as well been placed in stocks or had a symbol of lunacy sewn onto my clothes. While my body may not have died by overdose, I had been successful in committing occupational suicide. Instead of willing myself to thrive, I must convince myself to survive.

Until early this year I was forced to fight through lawyers and the courts to have Workcover even recognise the validity of my illness and its relationship to work. Even so, a whole new court case must now begin in order for me to recover some compensation with which I might hope to rebuild my life. I have endured a workplace crucifixion that I did not deserve and which I actively and conscientiously sought to avert. There is nothing more I could have done, and my workplace could not have done less.

An Illogical Situation

If an individual wants to become a bus driver, they must be trained and satisfy particular competency standards associated with their vehicle. The same person must then undergo national probity checks, pass a medical assessment test and agree to ongoing random urine analysis, drug screening and breath tests. A train driver must jump these hurdles and also pass incident behavioural tests.

A builder will confront huge fines or incarceration if he allows his staff to work in an unsafe environment, most especially if that negligence leads to serious injury or death. A police or defence services applicant will be excluded from consideration for recruitment if their cognitive and behavioural testing reveals a statistical likelihood of misconduct. All seriously competitive employers now put their executives and staff through pre-recruitment and ongoing psychometric testing to gauge and monitor the

individual profile and team composition within the context of evolving corporate needs.

These processes are commonplace because they are the gateway to stewardship of people's lives and the community's assets. There are very few places to hide with any degree of reliability and confidence; and nor should there be.

I say this to make the point that these batteries of tests have ample capacity to reveal a natural propensity of an individual to engage in bullying and unethical conduct. Why then are such candidates not weeded out of a process that enables them to gain promotion, to gather increasing authority and to heavily influence the culture and direction of the company of which they are part? Why is their destructive propensity considered to be a lesser imperative than it is in an environment where the builder, bus driver or policeman has a seemingly more direct engagement with the community?

The answer lies in the reality that this dysfunctional cognitive profile is a precise match to the "whatever it takes" mentality that is regarded as the optimum character profile for entities that are dedicated to short term optimisation of profits or like results. It may be argued that a pathological bully makes the perfect supervisor of a call centre where staff are pummelled into meeting performance objectives which themselves may rely on bullying of the "grind" level consumer market.

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A profile which reveals a tendency to exert unbridled power at the expense of compassion or fairness may provide the ideal fit for a public transport revenue inspector. Perhaps an inclination to satisfy administrative process over common sense and decency could reveal the perfect candidate to manage a privately operated aged person's facility.

A predilection to achieve short term profits over long term community impact could well describe the optimum personality to manufacture and distribute the next generic generation of asbestos.

So far, the public policy approach to reducing and eliminating bullying has been a gross failure because it conscientiously refuses to acknowledge the institutionalised value which is attached to the typical bullying persona. Read any daily newspaper and it becomes evident that some of the nation's biggest bullies are also its most powerful and respected leaders. It is only when these leaders ultimately fall that the real destruction they have wrought becomes clear, **or at least clear to the public.**

An ironic example can be found in the rare but emphatic common ground that is now shared by Telstra shareholders, staff and customers alike.

Far too many people have a vested interest in the maintenance and success of bullying. It is interesting to note that slavery was ultimately abandoned in America as an economic initiative and had little to do with the liberalist emancipation push. The

advent of the industrial revolution simply meant that slave labour had become far more expensive than its worth. So it is for bullying: the humanistic argument will never prevail because too many people rely on bullying for their economic success and financial satisfaction. Bullying will only be minimised when its harsh economic effect is understood by the public and appropriate legal sanctions are demanded by an informed electorate.

The Economic Impact

Before I was brutally forced from my workplace, I was a highly respected, productive and competent professional. I paid my own way, saved for my retirement and was a prolific contributor to my local and the wider economy. In the five years since, I have become a pariah and I now live on social welfare payments funded by the taxpayer. One way or another the taxpayer pays for my intense demands on health services, and my lawyers will only enjoy remuneration by endlessly attacking rather than improving the system. Instead of remaining a nett contributor to the Australian economy I have become an enduring and significant burden.

In effect, the hapless Australian taxpayer has conscripted me as the vessel through which it endlessly subsidises the managerial incompetence and ethical depravity of my former employer. The taxpayer loses, my community loses and I lose: but the company, which allowed and then turned a blind eye to the damage, continues to prosper on the strength of its objectionable mindset.

There are hundreds of companies and private and public sector organisations which fit the profile of my former employer. There are thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of individuals whose experience typically follows mine. That is not to say that all will succumb to the abject despair which dragged me from an ordinary but rewarding life. In fact the majority of bullying victims will endure their lot silently, quietly fleeing their workplace persecutor or tolerating their wretched lot in abject misery if they are unable to relocate to a new position, but make no mistake that the costs to productivity, health and public budgets continue to amass silently and dangerously.

While short-term policy makers and regulators continue to bow at the altar of economic growth, few take the time to consider the quality of that growth nor the intrinsic quality of the gross domestic product. If, as the data indicates, our GDP is becoming increasingly reflective of fixing problems rather than creating things; if we are spending our wealth on ameliorating dysfunction instead of eliminating it, then ultimately the joke is on us.

It is well known that the huge and successful efforts to reduce the road toll were not simply prompted by considerations of human welfare. Efforts have been redoubled each time the total economic burden of road trauma has been calculated. The cost of each road death is now estimated at around \$6million when health, productivity and familial distraction are factored in. It makes economic sense to reduce the road toll and if that has the effect of avoiding human misery and loss, then who really cares about chicken and egg arguments? Organisations with exemplary safety

records also enjoy the most competitive insurance rates and the most empathetic regulatory oversight. It makes economic sense to run a safe organisation and the stiff penalty kickers provide a deeply effective incentive to stay on track.

As a good example, it has taken more than thirty years of trade practices legislation for government to institute jail sentences for collusion and price fixing. It took decades for government to even admit to the proliferation of insider trading before applying serious penalties and jail terms for offenders. Government acted because the public had become aware of the cost to the community and expected its representatives to act.

The deep seated problem of bullying will not be remedied by the emerging industry of bullying experts dealing with the problem in an entirely ex post facto environment. Tough decisions need to be made and they are decisions that will test the most convenient and lucrative relationships between political parties and some of their greatest corporate donors.

People who commit, condone or allow bullying to be perpetrated should be liable to criminal indictment and heavy penalties including incarceration.

For these reasons, the central contention of my submission is that the act of individual or institutional bullying should be established as a discrete and authentic criminal offence. Bullying costs lives and costs big money, and creates a burdensome legacy that endures for generations.

Any society that tolerates bullying as a central tenet of their economic success is effectively admitting it is not smart enough to do anything better.

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In Australia we have a great urge to punish offenders whom we see or perceive as being culturally debased or socially inferior to ourselves. Murderers, violent offenders and sexual offenders receive reliable opprobrium and condemnation from the community. Perhaps we feel safe in doling out such harsh punishment to these offenders because we believe we could never be one of them.

However, as a community we tend to issue extraordinary discounts to the more respectable criminals in our midst. White collar crime is regarded as far less offensive than say a murder, because the victims are far less obvious and certainly less gruesome in their presentment. An executive who leads a financial institution to collapse is rarely associated in public with the hordes who die or suffer truncated productivity and life because their life savings have been embezzled.

And so it is with bullying. We tut-tut sadly when a school child takes her life as a result of bullying, but we make no connection between her lifeless body and that of a murder victim found strangled and stabbed in a laneway. We make no connection between the utterly hopeless form of a suicide victim making the final escape from

harassment and the crushed and mangled body of a construction worker trapped and inert beneath twenty tonnes of concrete.

As a community we fail to grapple with the reality of bullying, possibly because we wonder if every dangerous bully is simply each of us on a bad day. In fact, I don't believe this to be the case. I think institutionalised bullying is reaching such endemic proportions that the inherent injustice of it all can no longer be silenced or ignored. It is a travesty that is screaming for attention; it is one that can only be answered by a political determination that explicitly accepts that every life is valuable and that each one is as valuable as the next.

Whilst this submission bears my name as author, I speak for the young children whom it is our duty to protect and nurture to adulthood; for the teenage girls and young men, still at school or just entering the workplace, whose future potential may never be realised; for the adult men and women, like myself, whose lives have been shattered by circumstances beyond their control, but mostly, I speak for the many whose voices have now been permanently silenced by their own hand, for they embraced the act of suicide as a form of enduring pain relief from the unbearable anguish of being bullied.

May someone please hear their voices through this submission, and stand up to be counted?

Karen Carr
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