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<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2017.1328172>

**Omari, M. and Paull, M. (2017) Debate: 'Robust performance management' or workplace bullying? Not just the 'what' but the 'how'.
Public Money & Management, 37 (5). pp. 315-316.**

<http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/37406/>

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Debate: ‘Robust performance management’ or workplace bullying? Not just the ‘what’ but the ‘how’

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There is a very fine and difficult to detect line between what can be called ‘robust performance management’ and workplace bullying (Omari, 2007 Omari, M. (2007, p. 20). Most policies, guidance notes, codes of practice and legislative provisions are clear in that ‘reasonable management’ action does not constitute workplace bullying. But what is ‘reasonable management’ action? And are these few simple words enough to delineate justified management behaviour for corrective action from workplace bullying behaviour that is abusive, unfair, harsh, aggressive, ‘over-the-top’, ‘nit-picky’ and unrelenting?

This distinction is more complicated than it first appears. A study of workplace bullying in the Australian public service (Omari, 2007), found that a small number of victims reported increased productivity after being bullied. This may point to a number of scenarios, including the alleged victims’ performance having been sub-standard in the first place, and/or manager action having had positive effects on productivity, quality of work and output. It may also be that the alleged victims pushed themselves even harder in response to being bullied, and performed better in the hope that the bullying would stop. So, is this robust performance management and therefore ‘reasonable

management' action, or is it workplace bullying? The answer here is not only about the 'what', but also the 'how'.

For some, performance management represents a threatening process, whereby one person is judged by one or more others. Much has been made of the importance of objectivity in the process with the development of policies and procedures, however, as with many assessment processes, subjective judgment often determines the outcome. Performance management in its most generic form is focused on the identification of strengths and gaps in competencies and performance, provision of feedback, and planning for the future. The process brings together two sets of realities and perceptions: that of assessor and the person being assessed. Given the personal nature of performance assessment, it is easy to see how differences in opinion may arise. If not dealt with properly, these differences can easily escalate into (dysfunctional) conflict or worse.

In an era of globalization and economic imperatives, the public sector, like its private counterpart, is driven by the quest for productivity, efficiency, transparency and a need to demonstrate a performance culture. This often requires maximizing the benefits from available resources and assets (including people) and 'doing more with less' (Kelliher and Anderson, 2010); this 'managerialism' has long-standing roots in the private sector. Its ascendancy in the public sector is, however, more recent, with the first waves of change coming through in the late 1980s as a result of new public management (NPM) (Hood, 1995); this continues to the present day.

The public sector in Australia, like much of the rest of the English-speaking world (Caverley, 2005), has experienced torrid periods of reform in the past few decades. NPM reforms aimed to achieve results by promoting a performance culture and making the public service more responsive with increased accountability, efficiency and effectiveness (Hoque and Moll, 2001). The resultant performance culture necessitates regular scrutiny of employee performance through processes that were not traditionally part of the environment. This is a case of unaligned elements of change where the new approach is not in keeping with extant organizational cultures where individuals value tenure, seniority, stability, and the 'need to do time'. Given traditional job security, and the historically stable

nature of the sector, it is therefore not surprising that there has been some reluctance to accept the new ways.

As managing performance is not in keeping with public sector history and culture (Ironsides and Seifert, 2003), many individuals whose performance has been inadequate have been surprised, and reluctant, to accept the need to be accountable and perform to required standards. After all, they: 'have always done it this way, and no one has complained before'. New pressures require that the sector no longer 'carry' poor performers, thereby increasing focus on the quality and quantity of work.

The performance management movement has its own issues for the assessor as well. Many are thrown into the process unsupported and with little, if any, training. A team leader, or 'mate', suddenly becomes responsible for judging the performance of others, often without adequate skills or support. Even those who have been trained experience significant difficulty in providing negative feedback. Performance management programs are unlikely to succeed if organizational cultures and stakeholders are poorly prepared, especially in the public sector (Hawke, 2012).

Change can often race ahead of effective communication, policies, structures (for example Teo *et al.*, 2016), as well as relevant training, leaving managers ill-prepared and under-supported. Neuman and Baron (2003) report that insensitive treatment by managers and colleagues can lead to workplace aggression and violence. Some managers providing performance feedback may therefore be inadvertently but actively leading an employee towards increased feelings of alienation and low satisfaction, and reduced performance.

Positive leadership behaviours in modern public sector organizations play a significant role in outcomes, including employee performance (for example Wijewardena *et al.*, 2014). It is also well established that abusive behaviours have negative consequences for individuals and organizations alike (for example Rodwell *et al.*, 2014).

If poorly handled, the parties in performance management scenarios may resort to inappropriate behaviours to protect their own interests and standing, in turn having detrimental effects, and negating any benefits that may have otherwise been derived from the process in the first place. Here, an

employee may feel unfairly targeted by performance management processes, and a manager may feel unable to ascertain whether the person should be blamed and sanctioned, or whether external factors, including their own management roles, have contributed. These issues point to a need for very careful performance management systems with high levels of support, including training and review for managers and subordinates alike. To reduce the possibility that perceived incompetence can become an excuse for bullying, managers should be trained in interpersonal, negotiation and conflict management skills that can be used to build an individuals' competence and self-esteem. The public sector needs to take a closer look at performance management processes, and use training, education, and cultural change programs to ameliorate inappropriate behaviours.

What is clear is that there is a fine-line between acceptable management of performance and undue pressure on individuals which can compromise values, such as equity and safety at work.

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