

Belgium

La Louvière: Combating Stress and Mobbing at Work – a Practical Approach

Background

The City of La Louvière in Belgium was formed in 1976 through the merging of 10 districts. However, practical realities have restricted a genuine centralisation of local services. With 1150 employees, the Local Authority is one of the major employers in the area.

When the 10 districts merged, the 10 Chief Executives filled the new senior management posts. However, they all retired in the 1980's at a time of budgetary difficulty, and they were not replaced. Subsequently, supervisory responsibilities were given to inexperienced staff.

Local Authority OSH situation	% of employees exposed
Posture and movement exposures	44
Physical exposures	0
Chemical exposures	17
Biological exposures	28
Psychosocial working conditions:	
• Social pressure	25
• Physical violence	19
• General harassment	30

This absence of supervisors aggravated a working atmosphere already conducive to relational conflicts.

A campaign against alcoholism was launched in 1996. The conclusions of this campaign led the Local Authority to look at well-being in general.

One of the several measures undertaken was an initiative to devise an instrument for dealing with mobbing.

Focus on mobbing

In January 2000, the Council passed a decision to cooperate with the ULG (University of Liege), with a view to creating a general instrument for dealing with mobbing. The ULG would lead a working group from February to October 2000, and contribute expertise, advice and coordination. Invitations to participate were made to motivated municipal employees from all levels and sectors.

When he joined in 1997, the Chief Executive began receiving odd transfer requests. Many originated in relational difficulties between the employee and his supervisor/colleagues. A number of such cases could be dealt with through mediation alone.

Discussing his findings with medical staff, several incidences of mobbing were identified by the Chief Executive. He decided that a procedure for the diagnosis and verification of complaints was needed.

The activities of the working group led to the establishment of a "regulation concerning the prevention and handling of relational conflicts in the workplace, including mobbing and sexual harassment", adopted in June 2001.

The adopted text was written by a small group of experts including a specialist in social law.

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Bringing in new standards on relational conflicts and mobbing

The working group led by the ULG met about every two to three weeks. It concluded that it was important for the implementation of such a measure dealing with relational conflicts to be preceded by a good information campaign targeted at the staff. Individual communication could help in this respect. The important point was to demonstrate to the staff that the Local Authority was introducing new standards on relational conflicts and mobbing.

The information campaign had to deal with several issues, for example the well-being of staff and human relations. It also had to lead to a social recognition of mobbing. Because “failing to protect a person in danger” is a criminal offence in Belgium, the campaign also stressed that by addressing the issue of mobbing it was fulfilling its legal obligations. The staff also needed general information about welfare at work. For example, slogans and other tools are currently under development and will be disseminated widely.

A two-phased approach

The regulation adopted as a result of the ULG working group activities contains notably a definition of mobbing and a procedure that centres around two phases: a mediation phase and an arbitration phase:

Mediation phase

- Anyone who feels he is a victim of mobbing can approach the Listening Unit (Cellule d'écoute). The Listening Unit comprises an Occupational Physician and a Psychologist. Its role is to listen to the employee who claims to be a victim of mobbing, and give support and guidance. It is independent of the local authority and is connected to it by contract alone.
- Should this fail, the alleged victim can request the intervention of the Relational Conflicts Manager, who can suggest any action to the various involved parties. However, he has no power to enforce his decision and his role is mainly advisory.

Arbitration phase

- If the intervention of the Relational Conflicts Manager fails, the victim can refer the matter to the Chief Executive. The latter then appoints an investigator whose job is to explore and report on the allegations. Specifically the investigator carries out an inquiry, does some research and asks all questions necessary to all those with a major or minor involvement in the affair. Having listened to the involved parties, as well as any witnesses, he submits a report on the situation to the Council.
- If it is established that a case of mobbing has occurred then the disciplinary process can begin.

Implementing a wider strategy

This particular project was only part of the Local Authority's wider strategy to improve the welfare of its employees. Other measures were also devised, including an Occupational Welfare Task Force and a Supervisory Staff Training Action.

Occupational welfare task force

The Occupational Welfare Task Force was set up in 2000. It has three main objectives:

- To propose actions to improve the well-being of employees at work, with an emphasis on psychological health;
- To identify the human resources management needs of the organisation;
- To develop and carry out preventative actions with regard to all forms of addiction: drugs, medication, alcohol, tobacco etc.

To accompany the shift in focus from 'alcoholism' to a more generic approach dealing the general well-being of employees, three working groups were set up within the task force:

- Stress
- Mobbing
- Addiction

Supervisory staff training action

Following a call for tender, the CFIP (Centre for Training and Counselling) was hired as external consultant to implement a project leading to a staff training action. The objectives of this project were:

- To improve staff motivation;
- To foster a culture of professionalism within the Local Authority;
- To strengthen internal communication;
- To implement an effective human resources management policy;
- To stimulate a sense of ‘public service’ and by so doing, improve the public's image of the Local Authority.

In this context, five two-day training modules were organised on the following themes:

- Leadership
- Staff evaluation
- Staff motivation
- Conflict resolution
- Inter-personnel communication
- Management

Follow-up of this training action is carried out by the Committee Chairs (politicians) and the Heads of Department (officers) of the local Authority. A ‘follow-up committee’ has the responsibility of looking at ways of improving internal organisation, accompanying the training process, and implementing a new procedure for the evaluation of staff.

These training modules make a definite contribution to preventative action against mobbing.

Creating an effective human resources management system

In October 2000, the newly elected Council declared: “An authentic human resources management policy will encourage behaviour that reflects the value of municipal employees in a con-

stant and consistent search for quality”.

The ultimate eradication of stress and mobbing is entirely dependent on the establishment of an effective human resources management system.

With this in mind, the Human Resources Management Steering Committee was created. Its role is to structure initiatives relating to human resources management and to advise the Local Authority on the correct actions to implement.

This includes the following projects:

- Setting up a Working Group on Human Resources to assist the work of the Department of Human Resources;
- Implementing a system of management coaching at the level of the individual, the team and the organisation;
- Organisation of “management refresher courses” for supervisory staff;
- Doing a study on the maximising of human resources: defining long-term principles for the recruitment, selection and promotion of staff that favour skills and ability (according to a predefined profile and according to the needs of the organisation).

Drawing conclusions

The City of La Louvière has carried out a qualitative rather than a quantitative evaluation of its actions.

The various staff involved in the implementation of the procedure must submit a report to the Council every six

months. Based on these reports, three factors that tend to lead to mobbing within the Local Authority can be identified:

- Behaviour of the individual: poor communication skills, lack of training in supervision, apathy among senior staff;
- Institution: distribution of work, human resources management;
- Environment: rivalry between grades, lack of consideration for the individual.

The Local Authority claims that having such an instrument in place acts as a deterrent, and a perceptible albeit unquantified reduction in the cases of mobbing has occurred since its adoption.

Factors affecting the success of the project are:

- Quality of the counselling;
- Readiness to allocate time resources to assisting the victim;
- Assistance from senior staff and politicians within the Local Authority;
- Capacity of the Local Authority to carry out a critical self-analysis;
- Creation of places, where alleged victims can talk about their problems and be heard;
- Support from external sources;
- Integrating the issues into staff human resources management training;
- Consideration of the perpetrators as well as the victims of mobbing;
- Confidentiality;
- Clear dissemination of information.