

TOO MUCH FEAR AND LOATHING

Workplace manipulators can ruin morale, as Mary Casey found. So she took action. **Report: Emily Chantiri**

• Mary Casey, chief executive of Casey Centre, a health and education company, is no stranger to manipulation in the workplace after seeing it at her own company.

Casey, who has a doctorate in psychology, says that even though she viewed herself as a confident person running a company that employs 300 people, she's still had cases of manipulative behaviour that have affected her.

"I lacked personal boundaries and had to learn to change in order to no longer be a victim," she says.

According to Casey, manipulation is prevalent in workplaces, particularly through hierarchies where control and power tactics can prevail.

She suspects manipulative or toxic behaviour in the workplace is on the rise. "I think it's because we are more aware of it, although I also suspect that we are bringing up people to have more narcissistic personalities," she says.

"There is a stream of thought that the way we bring up children today is to praise them for doing things that they should be doing anyway – we give them a high five for picking up toys, for example. You still need to praise them to build up self-esteem but not for things that they should be doing."

She says manipulators aim to either covertly or overtly control and overpower the behaviours of others, even if it robs another person of their freedom of choice, reason and rationality.

The behaviour is insidious and when it's exhibited by some people – such as those in senior positions – can have far-reaching consequences.

The worst places for manipulative behaviour tend to be in government departments, she says, pointing out that they can often have fewer systems and less accountability in place than private companies.



Insidious problem: Manipulators aim to either covertly or overtly control and overpower others

The corrective services division in particular she highlights as a division where the wrong people are often put in powerful positions. "In that kind of situation they can play people off each other and discredit others," she says.

She says manipulators often may use tactics such as threats to keep their targets anxious and charm to gain their confidence. They may often seem to refute just about anything, as well as discredit people.

Casey says signs that employers should look for are ongoing conflict between staff, high staff turnover or staff feeling anxious, stressed, disempowered or even physically sick when in contact with a particular person.

The important thing for companies to do when they suspect manipulative behaviour is to make sure they have a good support and grievance system in place.

In Casey's own company, a case of manipulative behaviour got so bad "you could cut the air with a knife", she recalls.

"It had got to the point where I couldn't deal with it any more. I have a background in psychology and knew the issues had to be resolved."

To do that, Casey hired an outsider to come into the office and implemented new strategies to deal with complaints and negativity.

"We introduced a new policy around behaviour in the office," she says. "No more sarcasm or negativity or discrediting a work colleague and if anyone had an issue about someone, they would address them directly."

It is now, she says, a very different place to work. "The funny thing is that since then we've had a few people join who showed manipulative behaviours but they haven't stayed." **HRW**

TIPS ON DEALING WITH MANIPULATORS

- **Create the right culture:** Set values and create policies and procedures for difficult behaviour such as "conflict management", "access, abuse, sexual harassment and bullying", "employee grievances" and "disciplinary actions". Enforced consistently, they create a culture.
- **Middle-management policies:** If you are a large company, consider developing procedures for dealing with frustrating and sensitive situations and poor attitudes that are consistent at all levels.
- **Monitor trial periods closely:** It's hard to spot a manipulator in an interview, so trust your gut. Monitor them closely in the first few weeks and get feedback from other staff.
- **Communication training:** Make conflict resolution, dealing with manipulation, and constructive feedback training mandatory in staff development programs.