

Entrepreneur Suzanne Hall once had several million dollars in the bank, a four-hectare lifestyle property in Kerikeri and drove a Lexus. Now, the millions are gone. Forced to sell her home, she rents a flat and earns so little she sometimes has to think twice about filling up the Honda.

It's not as if she's squandered the dosh on wild shopping sprees – though a 400-year-old, \$8000 antique Chinese medicine chest in the corner of her eclectically furnished Auckland office overlooking K' Rd's strip joints and erotica shops speaks of headier days.

Hall, who founded the globally successful Living Nature skincare company and was going to “do art and gardening” when she sold it in 2007, has ploughed all her money into wellbeing projects that are delivering, if not big financial rewards just yet, greater satisfaction than she's had in years. After developing Be Intent, a computer platform and mobile app to help workers feel more inspired, engaged and motivated on the job, she's now using the same approach to tackle bullying.

Hall travelled the world interviewing a number of renowned mindfulness experts as part of her research ahead of the launch of Be Intent in 2008 and, during its development, was also hired by companies as an independent adviser to improve employee engagement. She quickly realised the biggest demotivators for staff

DONNA CHISHOLM IS NORTH & SOUTH'S EDITOR-AT-LARGE.

BULLIES AT WORK – AND HOW TO STOP THEM

As pressure grows on companies to stamp out workplace bullying, a woman who founded one of New Zealand's most successful companies is launching an innovative potential solution. Donna Chisholm reports.



Suzanne Hall



WAITRESS BRODIE PANLOCK (LEFT) KILLED HERSELF AFTER RELENTLESS BULLYING BY HER CO-WORKERS AT A RESTAURANT.

were poor communicators in leadership and office “silos” that resulted in information being shared through “Chinese whispers”.

Surveys of businesses using the Be Intent app have reported a nearly 40 per cent increase in staff positivity and a nine per cent rise in productivity.

Her team was on a technology accelerator course in Australia in 2012 when a federal parliamentary inquiry into workplace bullying was held following the death of Victorian waitress Brodie Panlock, who killed herself after relentless bullying by her co-workers at a restaurant. It was the moment Hall recognised the importance of employers looking after their staff and how her own technology could make that job easier.

Hall says she’s long been interested in trying to improve mental health and her work has so impressed one of the coun-

try’s largest mental health and addiction service providers, The Wise Group, that in November it bought a 10 per cent share of her Be Intent company.

In January, Hall launched a mobile anti-bullying app, the result of a two-year collaboration with bullying prevention adviser Jan Eggleton. It includes interactive training modules and other online resources for both bullies and the bullied.

Eggleton says the app gives users 24/7 access to quality information, options and tools when the problem is happening. “This could be ground-breaking in terms of getting things sorted before they escalate. It’s quite exciting to be shifting the no-narking habit – the passive-aggressive way New Zealanders have of getting things resolved.”

Anything that kick-starts the conversation around workplace bullying has to be positive, she says. “We’ve been

talking about sexual harassment for 45 years – but the conversation about bullying is where sexual harassment was 20 or 30 years ago.”

The app, Hall and Eggleton say, gives people being bullied a “toolbox” for dealing with their tormentors, enabling them to manage situations and stay strong. It also provides help for bullies to identify their behaviour and change their ways.

Bullying awareness is also part of Hall’s original Be Intent app, which asks users every day to report their state of mind and then offers ways, through mindfulness training, that they can help themselves get to the headspace they want. Data so far suggests 82 per cent of us start the day in a negative state, mostly because of tiredness. Those who report their status as “bullied” are linked to resources and helplines, and asked whether they want to do anything about it. If the victim okays it, one of the options is for their systems administrator to be alerted that someone in the company is being bullied, and to identify the team they’re in. The alert isn’t sent to the boss, who could be the bully, but the company is told an employee is reporting being bullied and

instructed to ensure all workers feel safe and looked after. Hall says the system allows a business to keep track of possible bullying hotspots, and do something about it.

It’s a myth that only the vulnerable get bullied, say experts in the field, with many competent and highly effective staff targeted by insecure managers.

“I have a friend who’s being bullied,” says Eggleton, “and I’ve been coaching her in how to stay a strong, powerful stropo woman in the face of a workplace psychopath. She was starting to get beaten down by this person, but it’s about learning to flick the bully off. The organisation wasn’t going to deal with it because the bully was inherently vital [to the company].”

More than 11,000 people from 300 businesses have now piloted or bought the Be Intent app. In bullying questions introduced to the programme last year, an astonishing 61 per cent of 500 users said they had been bullied, while 42 per cent said they had stood by and watched someone else being bullied but didn’t know what to do about it. Nearly 20 per cent admitted they had bullied someone else but, of those, 86 per cent reported also being the target of bullying.

The figures didn’t distinguish between bullying at home or at work. National surveys suggest our rate of workplace bullying is around 18 per cent, but that’s still at the higher end of international statistics, which range from two to 20 per cent.

Public Service Association and State Sector Commission surveys done in 2013 suggest the figure is even higher in the public sector, with 25 per cent of state servants saying they had been bullied in the past year, and 30 per cent of PSA members reporting they’d been bullied in the previous six months.

Bullying prevention researchers say the main causes of the behaviour relate to a company’s organisation rather than workers’ interpersonal relationships. Bullying is widely recognised as being prevalent in health, education and, unsurprisingly, hospitality – Gordon Ramsay, anyone?

Although the state of Victoria introduced laws against bullying after the Panlock case, New Zealand – in line with most other Commonwealth countries – has only voluntary prevention



Independent bullying investigator Mary Irwin (left) and bullying prevention adviser Jan Eggleton.

guidelines, introduced in 2013.

High-profile cases here have included \$300,000 payouts in 2012 to four victims of bullying by Auckland Council manager John Dragicevich, and the suicide of Waikato Museum science educator Dr Raymond Mayes in 2013. Mayes’ widow, Julie, claimed a “toxic” environment at the Hamilton City Council-run museum drove her husband to breaking point and told the Coroner’s Court in August that new museum director Cherie Meecham was a bully. Though coroner Wallace Bain made no adverse findings against council staff, he conceded the stresses of the job had likely impacted on Mayes, whose

TWENTY-FIVE PER CENT OF STATE SERVANTS SAY THEY HAVE BEEN BULLIED.

workload increased dramatically after other educators were made redundant.

Bullying researchers say relentless and unreasonable work pressure, particularly in places like hospitals, are frequently associated with higher rates of bullying. “What would a coroner know



GETTY

UNREASONABLE WORKLOADS CAN BE DEFINED AS BULLYING UNDER THE NEW WORKSAFE NZ GUIDELINES.

about bullying?” Eggleton added.

Former Hamilton City Council property officer and union delegate Allan Halse, who knew Mayes, is now working with Julie Mayes to investigate ways of taking a posthumous employment case against the council over Mayes’ working conditions. Halse, who was sacked in January 2014 after blowing the whistle on more than 100 allegations of bullying within the council, has since set up CultureSafe NZ to support bullying victims and says he’s already assisted more than 60 people, about a quarter of whom have been on stress or sick leave as a result. Several people have had suicidal thoughts.

Of those 60, half had formally complained, but in vain. “They have been further victimised – the employer runs what I call a sham investigation process, which finds not only that there was no bullying, but whatever happened was the victim’s fault.”

He says that after a 40-year career in human resources, staff advocacy and health and safety advice, he’s never known bullying complaints to be so rife. And he believes the problem will keep

increasing as long as companies pay off workers with serious complaints in exchange for confidentiality agreements. Halse himself had challenged his dismissal and settled with the council after two days of mediation.

The coroner noted Mayes had not complained about his workplace, but Halse says Mayes was not a complainer. “At his funeral, they said one of his attributes was that he never spoke ill of anyone. I thought, ‘That’s actually what killed you.’”

He says an app like Hall’s could be extremely helpful to workers, particularly men like Mayes who were more prone to “internalise”. It’s also likely Mayes didn’t even realise that unreasonable workloads could be defined as bullying under the new WorkSafe NZ guidelines.

Professor Tim Bentley, co-director of the NZ Work Research Institute, who helped to write the guidelines, says the commonest question he’s asked is what bullying actually is, with some trying to excuse it as harmless banter, or simply requiring staff to do their jobs properly, and suggesting workers should just

“toughen up”. “There’s a lot of that in New Zealand...”

The guidelines define workplace bullying as repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed towards a worker or group of workers that creates a risk to their health and safety. It doesn’t have to be overt personal abuse – a worker can be bullied if they’re given impossible deadlines, meaningless tasks, unpleasant jobs, no support – or even dirty looks.

“We wanted it to be a code of practice, which would have had more teeth,” Bentley says. But the guidelines will increase pressure on companies to step up efforts to tackle bullying. “Up till now, they haven’t known what it is and what to do about it – now they do.”

While the guidelines are voluntary, the Employment Relations Authority and Employment Court would probably regard it as a black mark if a company ignored them. “Fear of ending up in court is probably not at the top of their mind, but what should be is the performance of workers and the productivity and retention of staff,” says Bentley.

The next research project will be trying to determine the cost of bullying in New Zealand. “If you really want to make a change, you have to get in the ear of the CFO – just telling them there are people issues and lost productivity doesn’t cut it; we need to work out how to measure it.”

He believes bullying rates are high in the public sector, with its emphasis on positional power. Add to that the pressures of dealing with unhappy or unstable clients, particularly in health and education, and the likelihood of bullying increases. “You might also have a workplace that’s otherwise free of stressors, but it’s poorly organised and there aren’t enough resources, leadership is poor and deadlines are always too short – that’s most likely to create stress and bullying.”

Bentley says “to some extent” we have a dysfunctional public service. “A lot of it comes down to high demands on these people and a relatively low amount of control or resources to deal with those demands. A great influx of money and resources isn’t likely to happen to change things, so we need to think more about how we work smarter with what we have, about leadership, providing flexibility where we need to and having a very clear understanding about what



KEN DOWDIE

Dr Bevan Catley (left), a senior lecturer in Massey University’s school of management who specialises in bullying research, and Professor Tim Bentley, co-director of the NZ Work Research Institute.

is and isn’t acceptable.”

The PSA survey, by Victoria University’s Centre for Labour Employment and Work, found staff in “high-bullying organisations” felt they had little voice. Conversely, the centre’s report said, many organisations with a high rate of bullying reported better motivation but lower performance. “This finding, and the high rate of bullying generally in the public sector, suggests there is a lot of pressure and ineffective busyness without much really getting done.”

Hall is aware that the companies with potentially the biggest bullying problems may not be those enlightened enough to embrace the sort of help her app can provide. “Organisations are fearful of actually knowing the extent of the issue.”

She says a large bank that had been trialling the app over the past 18 months recently put the programme on hold. “Their risk assessment team decided that if they really knew how their staff were feeling, and the extent of the bullying issues, then there’s an obligation to solve it. They’re still

deciding whether knowing how staff feel and which teams are having bullying issues is going to be dangerous for them. They’re not using a good solution yet because they’re worried about negative publicity.”

Organisations that are really making a difference “don’t pretend there isn’t an issue; they boldly acknowledge the elephant in the room”.

Hospitals repeatedly crop up as bullying hotspots, but Massey University PhD student Kate Blackwood, who is writing her thesis on bullying in nursing, says district health boards, which had helped in her research, are being “really proactive”. She says bullying seems to be rife in the health sector because it’s “embedded and engrained” in its hierarchical structure. “It goes back to Florence Nightingale days when nurses were an oppressed group and expected to be obedient.”

Nursing traditionally recruits managers based on clinical expertise rather than leadership capabilities, “so you have charge nurses who are expert clinicians but don’t know how to handle

these situations”.

Blackwood interviewed 34 nurses who said they’d been bullied and found only two who’d had the issue successfully resolved. “We’re using conflict management techniques that we use for other workplace disputes, but bullying is very different, so they’re often ineffective.”

“I think we need a whole new way of intervening, and we need to look right at the start in identifying what it is and what it isn’t. That involves changing the culture of what is accepted and what is not, and helping victims to accurately interpret it and report it. It’s severely under-reported.”

Dr Bevan Catley, a senior lecturer in Massey University’s school of management who specialises in bullying research and is supervising Blackwood’s PhD, agrees. In most cases, he says, bullying isn’t witnessed, making it difficult to determine the truth in a “he said, she said” situation. It’s often subtle and may seem trivial and incidental unless the victim can document a pattern of behaviour. It usually takes victims six to 12 months to realise

they're being bullied. "It becomes very easy for the human resources manager to decide there's no substance."

The fact that the HR managers are often the ones who are doing the investigation adds a layer of political complexity, he says. Is their role to support the organisation, or be an advocate for employees? "When it's a manager against an employee, HR gets torn."

Independent bullying investigator Mary Irwin says HR managers are frequently ill-equipped to properly examine bullying complaints, or compromised by their relationships with one or both parties. She conducts in-depth inquiries into about 18 bullying complaints a year and says false or vexatious allegations are rare. Irwin, who has investigated harassment and discrimination for about 20 years in roles with the Human Rights Commission and Disputes Tribunal, says she's seen only four such cases in the hundreds she's examined.

By the time a formal complaint is laid and an independent investigation launched, it's often too late to rescue the working relationship between the bully and victim, and one or both end up leaving the business anyway.

Irwin and Eggleton say it's common for bullying to fester because both victims and witnesses to the behaviour are so reluctant to tackle it. "The first time it happens, they say, 'Oh! What just happened?' The second time, they say, 'What have I done, what did I do wrong?' The third time, it's, 'I might have to leave,'" says Irwin.

"The dynamic is like water torture," says Eggleton. "In Australia they're more likely to say, 'How dare you talk to me like that - get stuffed!' and carry on the relationship. Nobody would dare say that here."

Hamilton employment lawyer Gillian Spry, who represented Julie Mayes in the Coroner's Court hearing, says bullying complaints are being made more frequently now because the new guidelines have put it "top of mind". While she can't talk about the Mayes case, she says that from an employer's perspective, walking the line between bullying and calling staff to account and trying to improve their performance and conduct can be difficult. "In those situations, I think employees are often kind of snatching onto the bullying allegation because it's



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easy to make and for an employer reasonably difficult to defend. Employers are quite vulnerable to these allegations at the moment. At the same time, there are employers who are bullies and there's just no excuse for it."

Catley says there are few commonalities among bullies and targets. "There's no evidence gender or ethnicity play a role. It's almost an equal-opportunity offender - it can play out in all circumstances and there's no reason any one of us can't be bullied given the right circumstances."

Bentley says the only generalisation is that women tend to more often bully other women and men to bully other men. "It's not about picking on the weak - that's simply not true. It may be some people are less resilient in coping with it, but that's not why someone is going to bully them. They're going to be bullied because they're a threat."

Rust is a good analogy, says Catley. "You're never entirely sure when it starts, it seems quite innocuous, but over time it does great damage and it

doesn't matter how strong the piece of metal is. If you leave it untreated, it will corrode right through. It doesn't matter how strong you are in the beginning, it will corrode that person and turn them into a shell of their former self."

Back at Hall's Be Intent headquarters, her team of seven - a far cry from the days where she had 120 staff in Kerikeri - has also been moulded by its exposure to the bullying training.

Hall says until she teamed up with Eggleton, her company didn't even have a bullying policy, and she's realised she had been "a bit casual". She acknowledges she pushes her staff hard - "I stretch them and it can be really uncomfortable" - and says at 50, she's still learning about leadership.

"I started Living Nature at 22 - I had no idea. But I was always present to the staff and shared a lot of stuff. I know that inadvertently 30 years ago I was doing what is purported now as good practice, but I didn't get there by knowledge. I didn't even know what the term employee engagement meant."

Whatever she did, though, she must have done it right - the company's 20-year staff retention rate was 99 per cent and she says that's what made it profitable. "You imagine, for 20 years, everyone stays. Knowledge is built up and up and up. And we always had plenty of fresh blood because we were growing"

By the time she sold the company, its natural products were sold in 14 countries, it had an annual turnover of \$20 million and she'd been made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit in the Queen's Birthday honours.

These days, she pays herself just \$40,000 a year and is grateful to have relearned how to live on a tight budget. "I really appreciate going through that again, because it was like that at the beginning of Living Nature. A lot of our customers are ordinary people who do an ordinary job and earn 15 or 16 bucks an hour. I can now empathise with them a lot more. Really having to think about how to spend every single cent in your pay packet is quite humbling.

"It's pretty lonely doing this idea, because a lot of people think it's a bit mad, a bit excessive and it's risk-taking and I think they're right, but I just feel driven with it." +