



## Psychosocial Hazards and “Gaslighting”

The term “gaslighting” is a term which describes a cocktail of inappropriate and often manipulative workplace practices. Historically, these practices have been described as “subtle workplace bullying.”

Workplace bullying is classified as a psychosocial hazard. The risks generated by this hazard must be assessed and managed by every PCBU in accordance with the requirements of the WHS Act and WHS Regulation. New requirements concerning psychosocial hazards and risks came into effect in NSW on October 1, 2022.

The term gaslighting is based on a 1944 film “Gaslight” starring Ingrid Bergman. Bergman’s character marries, and mysterious things start to happen to her in her marriage. Her husband convinces her that she is imagining things, when in fact he is scheming with criminal intent.

Gaslighting is described as *subtle but unhealthy manipulative behaviour*. An employee who is the subject of gaslighting will likely, certainly initially, struggle to understand what is occurring – similar to Bergman’s character in the film.

Typically, an employee cannot “put their finger on the problem.” They may believe they are imagining things. They may even feel “non-credible.” All the employee knows is they feel constantly undermined or excluded and they start to develop trust issues within the workplace. Their confidence and productivity levels suffer. They start to feel unwell. They may even be signed off work by their GP with “work-related stress.”

Gaslighting is a classic abuse of power. It’s a manipulative power-game, which individuals or groups of individuals play within a workplace with the intent to control an individual or control a situation. A perpetrator could be a colleague, a supervisor, a line manager, or even the directors of the business. It’s a covert and subtle behaviour that falls into the category of psychosocial hazards.

### What are the signs of Gaslighting?

The signs of gaslighting include;

- **A lack of openness and transparency.** This may occur with the immediate line of management in a one-on-one relationship or it may be at corporate level involving an entire executive board and/or a business owner.
- **A reluctance to minute meetings or draw-up file-notes.** This could be a lack of management skills but it could be intentional and therefore far more serious.
- **Refusal to follow policies unless it suits the business.** For example, reluctance to acknowledge a verbal employee complaint or investigate a formal grievance but at the same time applying a forceful approach to performance management and disciplinary policies. It may be that a manager is “picking

and choosing” what policies and procedures they want to apply depending on their own whims and at the expense of the employee’s rights or interests.

- **Drip-feeding information or failing to provide full facts** or repeatedly re-scheduling meetings or withholding important information. Thus “setting a person up to fail.”
- **Moving goal-posts or changing elements of an employee job description** without first engaging in discussion or making reference to a policy regarding change-management.
- **Springing surprises** ie: calling last-minute meetings but failing to share data or advise in advance what the purpose of the meeting is and what the likely outcomes may be. Cornering a worker for information on a matter when the person was not prepared and forcing them to comment without allowing them to gather their information first is another example of springing surprises.
- **Gathering critical information** on employees and then presenting it to them to show them what they are doing is “wrong”. This is an underhanded management style where the manager is compiling lists of criticisms on particular people (without their knowledge) to build a case against them, thus skirting normal performance management procedures and job training opportunities.
- **Knee-jerk Suspensions** over minor issues where a discussion or an informal meeting will have resolved any misunderstanding.
- **Instant Dismissals** without following due process.
- **The inappropriate use of the term “redundancy”** simply because a management team want to release an employee and/or make changes within the business for their own benefit.
- **Failure to carry out fair and thorough grievance or disciplinary investigations** and deciding in advance of an investigation that an employee’s complaint will not be upheld (ie: pre-determined outcomes). Warning signs include a refusal to appoint an independent, impartial, workplace investigator in grievance and disciplinary cases.
- **Undermining behaviour intended to destroy an employee’s confidence.** For example, open criticism or alleging that others have complained where, in fact, there is no evidence of any complaint. (This is different to talking about the person behind their back or secretly gathering critical information to be eventually used against them.)

Gaslighting can be extremely deep-rooted within a business, whether that business is private or public sector. It is important to remember that any one of the above circumstances, in isolation, does not necessarily make a case for gaslighting. However, where there is a repetition of these scenarios the PCBU will need to address and manage the situation as per the risk management requirements of the WHS Act and WHS Regulation.

## Note

For more information on Psychosocial Hazards and Work Health and Safety feel free to contact one of our WHS Service Consultants about Courtenell’s **MANAGEMENT OF RISKS – PSYCHOSOCIAL HAZARDS** course.

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