

Seafarer returns to work after going on stress leave

Longtime seaman Ivan Verschuur says no to bullying and abuse at work

Two and a half million Australians experience some aspect of bullying during their working lives, costing the Australian economy about \$15 billion a year, according to a new report undertaken by the Productivity Commission. The report also suggests bullying and harassment is not properly addressed in occupational health and safety laws.

Ivan Verschuur is a seaman who – after 35 years on the waterfront – experienced bullying in the workplace in 2009.

Ivan has worked primarily on the waterfront in Geelong, but for the last three years on the tugs in Whyalla. He reckons he's been around long enough to know what kind of behaviour is right on the job. So when a certain shipmaster screamed at him and "lost it yet again, always over the silliest thing", while Ivan was trying to do his job, he found himself going into a downward spiral.

Having previously suffered from depression, Ivan found that he was unable to drag himself out of the funk he was in. The doctor felt he should take some time off work.

When Ivan's WorkCover claim was lodged, an investigation was undertaken at his workplace, as is the case with claims that are due to stress and harassment. Initially, Ivan's employer was not impressed with an investigation taking place.

"They thought I was putting it on," says Ivan. "But the guy had had warnings before. They were aware of his behaviour. I told them to check my records in Geelong. I was there for 32 years, and had 20 guys working for me – and my record was immaculate."

Ivan's Employers Mutual case manager referred him to a vocational rehabilitation consultant, who sent him to see a psychologist.

"I saw him six times, and it really helped. He helped me to understand why I reacted the way I did – because of previous abuse as a child. I've got four kids, I'm nearly 60, I've been through a divorce and some hard times – but there's always stuff to learn. He helped me with the underlying issues."

The vocational rehabilitation consultant also spoke to the company on Ivan's behalf, and in time they began to understand the seriousness of the abuse that had taken place, and the effect that it had had on Ivan. The shipmaster was sent to anger management classes.

When Ivan was well enough to return to work, the company suggested he be moved to another tug. "I said no," says Ivan. "If anything, he should be shifted."

"A good shipmaster is good with people, as well as the boat. And this man has been bullying people for 26 years."

"But I'm not afraid of confrontation. I've worked on the waterfront since I was 16. I've been a bouncer. I just thought, his behaviour is unacceptable, and if I don't go back, then I'm backing down. And I didn't want that."

"But when I got back, he was nice enough. He knows he can't bully me. I also told my employer that he should deal with his problems. And now, there are fliers around the place about treating your colleagues well, and other stuff about health and safety in the workplace."

It seems Ivan's positive attitude and unwillingness to put up with workplace bullying has led to a process of learning – not just for himself, but for the shipmaster with anger management issues, and Ivan's employer and colleagues too.

WorkCoverSA

100 Waymouth Street, Adelaide South Australia 5000

General enquiries: 13 18 55

Fax: (08) 8233 2290

Email: info@workcover.com

Website: www.workcover.com

Free information support services: TTY (deaf or have hearing/speech impairments): (08) 8233 2574. Languages other than English: call the Interpreting and Translating Centre - (08) 8226 1990 and ask for an interpreter to call WorkCover on 13 18 55. Braille, audio, or e-text: call 13 18 55 and ask for help in an alternative format.

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