
The Bully in the Boardroom

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If you see bullying as essentially a playground problem – one that doesn't affect adults in the course of their working lives – you couldn't be more wrong. Bullying in the workplace is pervasive and toxic. It has a deleterious impact on individuals, their work environments, the reputation of their company or organisation, and the larger economy. Much like playground bullying, the workplace variety can make victims feel offended, intimidated and diminished; the experience can be distressing, even devastating for its victims. The emotional and psychological consequences of being bullied at work include the collapse of careers and livelihoods – even lives. Workplace bullying poses a genuine risk to the health and careers of its victims and the wellbeing of their communities.

Workplace bullying manifests itself in myriad ways. It might take the form of unfair treatment, public undermining, harassment, obstruction, spreading malicious rumours, or denying a person training and opportunities for promotion. Bullying happens by email, letter, phone, in person or through social media. The victim might be persistently criticised or have responsibilities or status removed without just cause. Job security might be threatened without basis or substance; the victim's professional status threatened or undermined. Bullying also might involve being ignored, victimised or excluded from processes.

The workplace bully might be aggressive, belittling and ridiculing; impose impossible deadlines, withhold vital information, demand unrealistic standards of performance, or even steal credit for work. Very often, the bully will misuse institutional power or position to victimise a target. Identifying bullying can be particularly challenging with bullies who use the nature of interpersonal interactions to dodge responsibility – claiming a 'clash of personalities', that the bullying was 'just a joke' or intended to be 'character building', a leadership style or even provoked by the victim him or herself. While the circumstances of workplace bullying differ, as do both bullies and victims, many targets of bullying share some traits. These include (but are not limited to) appearance and conduct. People are targeted by bullies for reasons as varied as age, sex, race, religion or belief, disability, sexual orientation, pregnancy, maternity and gender identity. Bullying can occur between a boss and subordinate (or far less frequently, in the other direction) or between co-workers. It is marked by ongoing harassment and derision, most often verbal but sometimes physical.

One of the principal health effects associated with workplace bullying is stress. In Japan, 47% of suicides are attributed to work stress. Suicidal ideation and post-traumatic stress are also common. Bullying affects those around the victim as well: co-workers who observe bullying may also experience stress, fear and emotional exhaustion. In turbulent economic times, when job security is weak, many employees may feel they have scant choice but to endure ill-treatment, often with little support from colleagues or management, particularly if the victim holds less seniority than the bully. Being the victim of bullying and harassment has cost to both the financial wellbeing and career progression of the victim: a 2017 study reported in *Gender & Society* found that 80% of American women resigned their positions within two years of being harassed, a rate 6.5 times greater than average job turnover, with accompanying salary stagnation and the loss of traction for organisational promotion.

Workplace bullying also has an enormous cost to organisations and businesses. The direct costs to organisations include increased staff absenteeism, increased litigation, higher work accident rates, lowered staff retention, and associated increased recruitment and training costs. Indirect costs include loss in productivity, rehabilitation expenses and increased workers' compensation premiums, as well as serious reputational costs to the organisation when the exposure of bullying results in negative publicity. The media is awash in descriptions of the vast sums spent on non-disclosure agreements to settle bullying, often protecting the alleged bully in the process. Bullying pervades all professions at all levels and exists across every sector.

The damage caused by bullying and harassment is not limited to organisations, but also affects the wider economy, the costs to which are considerable and experienced globally. A report by the Productivity Commission in Australia

identified that the total economic cost to the economy might be as high as \$36 billion every year. According to the British Medical Association, bullying and harassment in the United Kingdom's National Health Service are found to waste at least £2.3bn a year, a conservative estimate calculated by using employee absence, increased staff churn, diminished productivity as well as the direct costs of litigation, industrial-relations costs and compensation. This represents a cost to the UK taxpayer. According to a 2017 study by the Workplace Bullying Institute in the United States, an estimated 60.3 million Americans (of a workforce made up of approximately 162 million people) had been affected by workplace bullying, a level the Institute terms 'epidemic'. The largest study of its kind, conducted in 2010, found similar levels: 37% of American workers reported having experienced workplace bullying.

Given the pervasiveness and high costs associated with workplace bullying, researchers have attempted to understand who bullies, and why. Most agree that workplace bullying is about power, and this is often how the bullying dynamic is established. In the majority of cases, bullying in the workplace is perpetrated by management, although it occurs with clients, subordinates, peers and co-workers as well. Unsurprisingly, a correlation exists between the seniority of an employee and the likelihood of being bullied: the higher one's organisational position, the lower the incidence of bullying. One commentator claims that managers are identified as bullies in 60-80% of cases, and that they often enjoy the support of their executive and managerial peers. Indeed, whistleblowers who expose bullying (and other unethical practices) often become the target of further bullying. Whilst common in a hierarchical structure, bullying can occur in structurally flat organisations as well as between peers irrespective of organisational status.

According to one observer of workplace bullying, people in positions of power who perpetrate bullying often have impossibly high standards and expectations of others. They may lack basic social, anger-management and communication skills. In many cases, they are insecure and resort to threats, punishments and put-downs to maintain power. They may also engage in bullying to conceal their own incompetence and insecurity. Research carried out in Australia by Katarina Fritzon and Nathan Brooks suggests that as many as 20% of corporate executives exhibited the hallmarks of psychopathy, including lack of remorse or egocentricity. Similarly, astonishing research out of the University of Surrey in the UK, examined the relationship between personality disorders and workplace bullying. Here they compared the personalities of high-level executives with those of criminal psychiatric patients at Broadmoor Hospital, a high-security psychiatric prison hospital, including those who were dangerously psychopathic. The researchers found that three of 11 personality disorders (PDs) were more commonly found in managers than in disturbed criminals. The first was histrionic PD, marked by superficial charm, insincerity, egocentricity and manipulateness; the second was a higher incidence of narcissism, which presented as grandiosity, self-focused lack of empathy for others, exploitativeness and independence; and the third was obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, which was characterised by perfectionism, excessive devotion to work, rigidity, stubbornness and dictatorial tendencies.

In the literature on workplace bullying, both scholarly and popular, victims are often characterised as vulnerable, passive, submissive and non-confrontational. They may be older, racially different, disabled, physically remarkable or somewhat isolated within an organisation. But bullies are often themselves vulnerable – bullying behaviour can obscure personal insecurities – and it is a myth that all targets of bullying are vulnerable. In fact, workplace bullies often target those who are highly competent; employees who make them feel insecure or who pose a threat. The target's skill, competence, integrity, fairness and likeability might all serve to throw a glaring spotlight on the bully's incompetence and inadequacies. Bullies may seek to elevate their own status within organisations by diminishing others. Research by Fast and Chen on the relationship of power, incompetence and aggression in the workplace confirms that bullying is often a result of a threatened ego, and associated with elevated aggression when paired with a perceived lack of self-competence.

Workplace bullying is also gendered. Women are more likely to be bullied than men, and most frequently by men. In research conducted by Spector and Fox, being male was a factor that strongly predicted involvement in the bullying of

others. A Workplace Bullying Institute survey conducted among American organisations found that 70% of bullies were men and 65% of their targets were women. However, the same survey also revealed that women bullies target other women 67% of the time. Women are significantly more likely to be bullied in the workplace. New research conducted by the International Bar Association on the nature and prevalence of bullying in the legal sector found that about 50% of female respondents and 30% of male respondents experienced bullying at work.

The #MeToo movement has laid bare the pervasiveness of sexual harassment, which overlaps with bullying in some cases. Bullying may include sexual harassment, and vice versa, but they are not the same. In general, they are treated as discrete instances of workplace abuse. In the most basic terms, sexual harassment is defined as unwanted behaviour that is sexual in nature, and this behaviour is defined by the effect it has on the harassed person. Both bullying and sexual harassment are expressions of power. Bullying is largely intended to harm the victim – for any number of reasons or for no reason at all - and this intention is the component that differentiates these abuses.

Another factor at play in creating the conditions that may lead to increased workplace bullying is widespread environmental stress. A study of the Norwegian workforce established the anticipated effects of both individual and situational stress as predictors of being a perpetrator of workplace bullying. It identified factors that were experienced in the work environment that may trigger perpetrators to engage in bullying of others and confirmed that bullying thrives in stressful work environments.

Given the significant negative consequences of bullying to individuals, to organisations, and to national economies, surprisingly few countries have made it illegal. New provisions to protect workers from bullying have been incorporated into existing legislation in Canada, Australia, and nine European countries including Serbia, Sweden, France and Denmark. In general, existing national workplace health and safety legislation affirms that employers have a duty of care to provide a safe work environment for employees, which is understood to mean that workers are kept both physically and mentally safe, and that the workplace is free from bullying and harassment. As such, employers are responsible for preventing bullying and harassment, and can be held liable for any abuse suffered by their employees.

While large organisations and work environments have policies relating to bullying, many do not. If these policies do exist, they are of limited effect when experiences are dismissed or trivialised and bullies are protected. Organisations often lack the requisite training to identify and deal with workplace bullies. Moreover, once bullying is exposed, management may itself become complicit in bullying if the victim is left without redress and if management fails to shut down the bully.

How then is bullying, which is often perpetrated by highly manipulative individuals, to be countered within organisations? The most effective responses require clarity, candidness and a strong reliance on as much substantiated fact as possible. It is important to identify the behaviour: sometimes bullying is covert and insidious. It's imperative to establish strongly- and clearly-defined codes of workplace civility, and to hold people to account should those codes be transgressed. However talented, charismatic or valuable the bullying employee, overstepping these established red lines cannot be permitted. Providing organisation-wide training allows those involved to create a positive work environment by enabling them to identify intimidation and bullying, and to respond assertively. To this end, organisations need to address bullying authoritatively as it occurs. Too often, bullies manipulate processes and explain away their behaviour. Finally, according to Forbes, effective management of bullies requires a strong 'script' with which to confront the bully. What the research on personality in the workplace makes clear is that if people cannot change, consequences can nonetheless be enforced and candid choices can be offered.

Workplace bullying is a toxic issue with devastating effects. You probably can't change a bully, but you can change the way you react to bullies and their behaviour. No one should have to tolerate this abuse: there is no place for playground intimidation in the adult world.