



Bullies operate in many workplaces and their behaviour can have a devastating impact on individuals.

**Aryanne Oade** offers a strategy for countering this destructive behaviour.

**S**adly, incidents of bullying behaviour are on the increase across UK workplaces. As a SHE professional in your organisation you are likely to be involved in responding to incidents of workplace bullying, and your understanding of the dynamics could play a role in determining how those adversely affected by bullying behaviour recover from the experience.

Many workplace bullies continue to bully because those they target don't know how to use behaviour which protects them at the time of an attack. In other words, the target doesn't know how to send back a message to their would-be assailants that they will not be a straightforward person to bully.

This in no way removes responsibility from the bully for their behaviour; that

responsibility sits squarely on their shoulders no matter what. However, it does open up the possibility that learning skills that alter the bullying dynamic in their favour at the time of an attack will enable targets to retain control when they most need to and stop bullies in their tracks.

So, what behavioural skills are needed in the moment of an attack? How does a target alter the bullying dynamic in their favour? What does a target need to do to retain their personal power and create consequences for the bully to deal with? To answer these questions, first it's important to consider what behaviour constitutes true workplace bullying.

There is a difference between an incident of true workplace bullying and one of aggression, even egregious aggression, at

work. In the latter, a colleague mishandles their emotion and vents it in the presence of colleagues, letting their anger spill over into their dealings with their co-workers. Subsequently, they may or may not reflect on the impact of handling things this way, and may or may not acknowledge that they have stepped over the line. Even though their intention was not to injure a co-worker, it is possible that some co-workers may decide that the level of aggression they experience, consistently or occasionally, is deal-breaking and their relationship with the aggressive colleague may reach a point of break-down.

But those circumstances are quite different from instances of true workplace bullying. For an incident of overt, active aggression – or more indirect, passive aggression – to constitute true workplace bullying it needs to conform to all three of the following criteria:

- A one-off, frequent or repeated personal attack, which the target finds emotionally hurtful or professionally harmful.
- A deliberate attempt by the bully to undermine the target's ability to carry out

their work, to injure their reputation, or to undermine their self-esteem and self-confidence.

- A deliberate attempt by the bully to remove personal power from the target and keep this control for themselves.<sup>1</sup>

Consider the following examples:

- The manager who fears the skill-set and popularity of a member of their team, and unfairly criticises their work to their face at every opportunity in an attempt to reduce their self-confidence and cause them to doubt themselves.
- The peer who enters the target's office unannounced, closes the door, and stands in front of their desk with balled fists, silently glaring, before uttering the contemptuous words: 'You have insufficient skill for this role'.
- The envious colleague who slanders the target at meetings involving both of them, telling the other participants that the target is performing below par, is not up to the job, and is actively making mistakes when none of these things is true. The target is so stunned by the attack that they cannot find anything to say, and the meeting moves on.

### The bullying dynamic

In each of the above situations, a dynamic evolves where the bully places the target on the back foot. This is either because the target misunderstands the intentions of their assailant and takes unjust criticism seriously or it's because they don't know how to respond effectively to a personal attack. In each case, the bully uses behaviour that they hope will create a bullying dynamic, one in which the target:

- Is unable to defend themselves.
- Experiences disbelief, anxiety and/or self-doubt.
- Struggles as their energy goes inwards to cope with their confusion and fear.

The bullying dynamic therefore involves:

- The bully employing intimidating behaviour.
- The target reacting with outward compliance at the time of the attack.
- The patterns of behaviour that become the norm between them during the period of the campaign.

The bullying dynamic is, however, a two-way street. The fact that it is a two-way street

implies that the target has more influence at the time of an attack than they might realise. Therefore, it is the skill with which the target handles the behaviour that they are subject to *in the moment of an attack* which will create consequences for the bully to think about and, to some extent, alter the evolving bullying dynamic in their favour. Let's explore the nature of that influence.

**"There is a difference between an incident of true workplace bullying and one of aggression, even egregious aggression, at work"**

### Altering the bullying dynamic

Consider the following effective responses, which the target could make to each of the three examples outlined above:

- The next time the manager makes a criticism, the target needs to see the moment for what it is: an incident of bullying not an honest piece of developmental feedback. The target needs to seize the moment and, using a firm and even tone, say: "we both know that the criticism you just made isn't true". This neat response places the bully in a double-bind; it tells the bully that both the target and the bully know that the latest criticism is not a genuine attempt to help the target improve their performance. It says that the target can see through the attempt to undermine their self-esteem and self-confidence, and it reveals the manager's bullying tactic for what it is. The way is now open for the target to take back control of the meeting, challenge the unjust criticism and assert the truth about their level of performance.
- As soon as the bullying peer enters the target's office, they need to stand up, fold their arms smartly across their chest, move out from behind their desk and open their door wide. Then, standing in full view of the corridor, they need to adopt a clear and cool tone to convey to their colleague that they are busy, and that should their colleague want to speak with them about a business matter perhaps they could call and make an appointment for a mutually convenient time. The target then needs to stand there, fully composed, and wait for the bully to leave. If they refuse, the target can then walk quietly

out of the room, leaving the bully standing there.

- As soon as the target hears the bully slandering them, they need to speak up. They could say: "I am surprised to hear that – you haven't said it to me. In fact, I am hitting all of my targets and can show you the figures if you like?" This response makes it quite clear that the information being presented to the meeting as factual by the bullying colleague is actually misinformation. It gives the other people present at the meeting a clear choice about who to believe, and places the spotlight where it should be – on the bully's reputation and character.

These responses are effective because they assert the truth and enable the target to *take back their power in the moment of an attack*. They are simple but powerful rejoinders to bullying behaviour which demonstrate to the bully that they will not have it all their own way, that the target has got the measure of them and, crucially, that the target is *quite capable of exercising a self-preserving choice in the moment of an attack*.

Responses like these create doubt in the bully's mind, and while they are unlikely to reveal their discomfort verbally, their behaviour will alter the next time they meet that target. It is now the bully who will be on the back foot, giving the erstwhile target the option of maintaining the new status quo by vigilantly preserving their boundaries and continuing to make wise choices.

It is the act of making a choice during an attack which alters the bullying dynamic. Targets who employ these responses, and the many variations of them, send back a clear message to the bully that while their hostility is intended to require compliance, that is not how it's going to play out between them – not then, and not in the future either. ■

### Reference:

1. *Free Yourself from Workplace Bullying* by Aryanne Oade, page 30 (Mint Hall Publishing 2015).

**Aryanne Oade is a chartered psychologist, executive coach and bestselling author – see page 4 for more details. Her latest book *Free Yourself from Workplace Bullying: Become Bully-Proof and Regain Control of Your Life* is reviewed on page 49.**