

Responding to an Incident of Bullying at Work: An Opportunity to Create a Zero-Tolerance Culture

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This version of the paper does not include US data on the prevalence of workplace bullying in US workplaces. This data is included in the final published APA version.

Abstract

Reported incidents of workplace bullying are on the rise across workplaces around the country and the globe. This article draws on my experience in working with these issues for over twenty-five years, and illustrates some of its themes in a two-part case study. The article describes a series of well-intentioned but ineffective responses to incidents of workplace bullying which could be taken by a manager; defines bullying in terms of an attempt by the bully to remove power from the target and retain that control for themselves; distinguishes between true bullying at work and aggressive non-bullying behaviour; and identifies a suite of twelve effective responses to workplace bullying which could be taken by organisations committed to creating a zero-tolerance culture.

Introduction

As a manager, it is inevitable that at some point you will become involved in managing or responding to an incident of workplace bullying. You have a key role to play. Your personal attitude, and the steps you take both immediately after an incident and in the longer term, *are* the messages your workforce receives about the significance and importance their employer attaches to incidents of bullying at work.

What you say and do in the aftermath of an incident is crucial. Both employees adversely affected by bullying behaviour, and those who use it, will be on the lookout for signals from you. Targets and witnesses will be on the lookout for evidence about whether the bullying will be regarded seriously with decisive steps taken to confront the bully. Bullies will be on the lookout for encouragement that they will get away with it, both this time and in the future (Rayner and McIvor, 2008). Should you be involved in managing or responding to an incident of bullying in your workplace, your first task is to decide how you will respond to that incident.

Well-Intentioned but Ineffective Responses

Consider the following well-intentioned but ineffective responses which you could make. In each case, the action taken is followed by a short critique highlighting the risks associated with it. You could:

- *Give the bully a written or verbal warning.* The risk here is that although the bully gets the message that they have been reprimanded they may not understand what they did, accept the truth of the reprimand or be committed to changing their behaviour. Some bullies may recognise that they got it wrong and want to

do something about their counter-productive behaviour, but without tools to show them how to do things differently and better they won't know how. Others will simply ignore the warning. In either case, there is a strong possibility that without development, the bully will resort to the same bullying behaviour again at some point in the future.

- *Move the bully to another department or team.* This strategy is based on the misguided belief that changing the environment in which the bully works will automatically alter their behaviour. This strategy doesn't work because the impulse to bully originates within the person's life – it is primarily intra-personal – and is not triggered only by circumstances. However, in some incidents the bully's perception that circumstances are going against them may play a part in the impulse to bully (Oade, 2009). Moving the bully to another department usually results in an unaddressed problem being passed onto another team. At some point in the future, the bullying is likely to reoccur.
- *Move the target to another team to 'protect' them.* This doesn't work because the target experiences this approach as a punishment for speaking out against being bullied. They resent being deprived of their job, losing established working relationships, and being required to start again in another team. It also enables the bully to target someone else in the original team.
- *Adopt the view that targets need to stand up for themselves.* The view that only weak people get bullied at work is simply wrongheaded. Anyone can be targeted, including self-confident and senior people, although it is true that people who have a hard time using assertive behaviour may be more vulnerable

to being successfully targeted. The view that workplaces are pressured environments, employees should take the rough with the smooth and everyone should get on with it, represents an abrogation of responsibility by managers of teams in which bullying occurs, and sets up repeated instances of bullying.

If you do too little too late, or do the wrong things, you'll send a clear message to people who bully that they will get away with it. You'll send a clear message to targets that you are not committed to building a workplace culture which supports them using their energy wholly in the service of their work (as opposed to using some of it to protect themselves). You'll send a clear message to everyone that you aren't prepared to take steps to create a workplace environment that is intolerant of bullying behaviour and which places a high value on employees' psychological safety and wellbeing.

Case Study: Mishandling the Moment

Let's illustrate these issues, paying attention to how a manager's desire 'to do the right thing', and her own dislike for conflict, can result in her making a series of well-intentioned but rash, and ultimately ineffective, decisions. Due to my commitment to confidentiality, we will do this in a realistic, but fictional, case study.

In this situation, one member of a team has been bullying two team colleagues in separate campaigns conducted simultaneously. Each incident takes place during a 1-to-1 encounter between the bully and one of the targets. Some of these encounters are during planned work meetings, others take place in the office kitchen or a

hallway when the bully and that target happen to be in close proximity and alone. The two targets confide in one another and then confer with non-targeted members of the team to determine whether they are being overly sensitive to robust behaviour or whether they are being bullied. They consult their employer's HR policies and locate the policy relating to bullying and harassment. Having read it, they decide against confronting the bully whom they fear, but decide to speak informally to their manager to bring the bullying behaviour to her attention.

Their manager is a technical expert, confident when discussing work issues in which she is skilled and when discussing project issues with her team. But she does not seek or like conflict, and particularly does not like aggression. When she hears about the allegations of bullying made by two of her team against a third member of the team, her initial response is one of shock because she had not witnessed anything untoward herself. Her team members point out that the bullying occurs in private when there is no one else around. The manager has a preference for harmony in the team, and wants to sort the situation out quickly so she can re-establish a calm and ordered work environment. She also wants 'to do the right thing' and, after concluding her meeting with the two targets, she calls the bully into her office. She tells him about the feedback she has heard about him, and waits for his response. The bully reacts with surprise and then with anger. He says he has been slandered, that his reputation has been unjustly maligned. He demands to know why the manager is taking malicious tittle-tattle about him seriously. In a heated and emotional exchange, he demands redress for the injury he has suffered by being wrongly accused of bullying.

The manager now has an escalating and complex situation to deal with. She decides to act quickly to resolve the tension between her and the bully, and between the two targets and the bully. Worried that the team's performance on its time-sensitive work will be adversely impacted if she doesn't act, she moves the two targets into a different team, tells the bully that she isn't taking the matter any further and hopes that everything will settle down. The two targets experience her well-intentioned but flawed decision-making as both a punishment and a whitewash of the issues they brought to her attention. The non-targeted team members feel anxious that nothing has been done to prevent the bully from targeting them in the future. The bully feels vindicated. He bides his time waiting for the next opportunity to commence a new campaign, confident that he will get away with it again. Over the subsequent month, the performance of the team declines as it operates with two fewer members than usual, and the non-targeted team members expend time and energy questioning the conduct and effectiveness of their manager and worrying about who will be targeted next.

A Framework for Understanding the Dynamics in Workplace Bullying

So, if you are not to fall into pitfalls like the fictional manager, what effective steps can you take?

The starting point is to recognise that bullying is about power. It is not a private spat that has got out of hand. It is not about one person having a different workstyle to another, or team members preferring to do things in different and mutually exclusive ways. It is not a legitimate way of confronting under-performance or of

driving an under-performing team member towards higher standards. Why?

Because bullying is about a deliberate attempt by the bully to remove power from their target and retain that control for themselves. A true workplace bully uses behaviour which involves:

- Personal attacks against the target in 1-to-1 meetings or in a group meeting or in a public or team setting.
- A deliberate attempt to undermine the target's ability to carry out their work, to injure their reputation, and/or to weaken their self-esteem, self-confidence and self-belief.
- A desire on the part of the bully to put their target onto the back foot, keep them there and remain in charge of the interaction between them (adapted from Oade, 2015 p. 30).

In a team environment, this approach invariably results in non-targeted team members becoming adversely affected, along with the target(s) (Oade, 2017).

Targets frequently experience plummeting self-esteem, dramatically lowered self-confidence and raised anxiety levels as they struggle to protect themselves from on-going attacks. Frequently, their standard of performance lowers as their energy goes inwards to cope with the pressure they are subject to. Team relationships become strained as power dynamics and allegiances shift. The team's energy is diverted away from its work towards handling the distress of the target. Every non-targeted team member needs to decide how to react: do they turn a blind eye, collude with the bully, confront the bully or offer private support to the target?

Part of the challenge you face as a manager responding to an incident of workplace bullying lies in the fact that no two bullies use the same behaviour. Every bully uses their own bullying tactics. Some bullying behaviour is subtle and indirect, such as a bully quietly slandering a target behind their back in an attempt to undermine their reputation in the eyes of their colleagues. Other bullying behaviour is outright and obvious, such as an angry verbal attack during a 1-to-1 or group meeting in which the bully balls their fists, glares and uses a hostile tone. The key point is that, however it is expressed, bullying hurts people psychologically and emotionally.

However, let's be clear. Not every incident involving *aggression* at work necessarily constitutes *workplace bullying* (Oade, 2015 & 2017). Bullying is always about power, but aggression is not necessarily so. Consider the team member who gets it wrong either occasionally or regularly by being aggressive towards colleagues. This person lets their anger spill out in their verbal exchanges with their colleagues or even allows it to dominate their behaviour from time to time. They vent their feelings while in the presence of colleagues and the aggression they display may be experienced as unacceptable by some of the colleagues affected by it. In some cases, it may even damage a working relationship so much that it becomes fractured. But an incident like this is different from true workplace bullying because it is not primarily about one person's desire to *remove power from another*. Rather, it is about one person's inability to handle their own emotion constructively, their urgent need to develop a suite of effective emotional self-management skills, and their need to stop bringing their unresolved anger into the workplace.

Revisiting the Case Study: Addressing the Issues

Let's revisit the earlier case study to illustrate how the manager could handle the issues differently and better. We will pick up the action at the point at which the manager has received feedback from two of her team members that they are being bullied by a third member of the team. This time, we will look at the situation through the eyes of both the manager and the bully.

The manager recognises that what she does next is critical. She recognises that the situation does not play to her strengths of technical order and calm work-focused conversations. She feels anxious about the potential for on-going stress and tension in the team, and about her need to confront the bullying. She is wary of confronting the bully with hearsay which could lead to a messy and unsatisfactory conversation. Nevertheless, she does want to take a clear stand against bullying in her team, and ensure that the team's work is not compromised in the process.

She decides to gather her own observations of interactions between the bully and each of the two targets. She finds out when the next 1-to-1 meetings are scheduled between each target and the bully. She makes sure that she is on hand to note the demeanour of each target as they go into the meeting (walking slowly, head down, unenthusiastic) and the way they appear after it (shoulders dropping, upset and cowed). She decides to intervene on the basis of these observations, and spends time planning what she intends to say. She calls the bully into her office and, using a clear and firm tone, describes her observations about the changed demeanour of the targets before and after their meetings with him. She tells him that she has some

concerns about the way he conducts himself in these meetings, and that she is not prepared to let the situation carry on unaddressed. She tells him that she has concluded that he uses an overly forceful approach with certain people around the office, but only in 1-to-1 meetings, and that she wants it to stop. She informs him that she can see two possible ways forward. The first is that she sets up a development opportunity for him, in the form of coaching, so that he can discuss with a coach how to work effectively with a range of colleagues without resorting to overly forceful methods. She tells him that, should he decide to go down this route, she will arrange a series of three-way meetings between the two of them and the coach as part of the process, to gather feedback on the extent to which he participates and takes value from the exercise. The second option is that he simply ceases using an overly forceful approach with certain colleagues, and doesn't recommence it again. She then waits for him to respond.

The manager braces herself, expecting the bully to object either by asking her to justify her observations about him or questioning the credentials of the coach. In fact, the bully does neither of these things. He hears the authoritative factual manner in which his manager describes certain dynamics around the office. He hears the conviction in her voice. He knows that she does not like conflict and yet she has just placed a clear challenge to him on the table. He feels distinctly uncomfortable that she has called him to account, and done so without making it easy for him to create fog around the issue or to become emotional. She has placed *her perceptions* on the table and waited for his response. He decides that the best way to save face is to leave the room. He stands up, says 'I don't need coaching' and leaves her office

telling her he has work to do. Although he has not engaged directly with the substance of the feedback, nor said he will demonstrate sustained behaviour change, the manager takes it that he has heard what she has said. Over the next two weeks, she observes the bully's interactions with the two targets carefully. She touches base with both of them about his conduct on several occasions. The feedback she receives is that he remains an uncomfortable person to deal with, but his use of aggressive and coercive behaviour has ceased. The manager tells both targets that should he recommence his use of bullying behaviour at any point in the future, she wants to know straight away.

Creating a Zero-Tolerance Culture

The manager in the case study decided to handle that situation via a direct confrontation with the bully, a requirement that he stop coercing colleagues, and the offer of development in the form of coaching. On that occasions, these interventions were effective in confronting that bully. But what other actions are available to you, as a manager? And what can you do to encourage your wider organisation to make a clear commitment to creating a zero-tolerance culture?

There are many effective steps you could take to hold employees who use bullying behaviour accountable for their actions, while also offering support to those who have been targeted, in order to create a culture in which bullying behaviour is not acceptable. Some of the following ideas are mine. Others come from Rayner and McIvor (2008):

- Require people who use bullying behaviour to participate in a coaching programme designed to enable them to develop greater self-awareness, develop a suite of emotional intelligence skills, and replace their counter-productive behaviour with a suite of effective people-handling skills.
- Provide targets with coaching designed to enable them to detoxify from their experience of being bullied, regain their self-belief and enthusiasm for the workplace, and learn how to protect themselves at the time of any future attack.
- Have a well-publicised library of written and audio resources for people who are worried about whether they have been subject to bullying behaviour, who want to read or consult material which will assist them to put their experiences into perspective, and who want to learn how to use self-protective and self-preserving behaviour at the time of any subsequent attacks.
- Train a cadre of volunteers as Dignity at Work Advisors: volunteers with knowledge of the relevant employment law who have a role in advising and counselling colleagues who think they may have experienced or been witness to workplace bullying.
- Employ managers who have already developed effective people-handling skills rather than those who are technically able but do not have well-developed influencing, leading and managing skills.
- Continually develop the level of influencing, managing and leading skills displayed by managers.
- Raise awareness among employees about what does and what does not constitute workplace bullying including holding seminars and workshops.

- Train occupational health advisors and safety health and environment/human resources/employee relations/learning& development professionals about how to identify and handle bullying behaviour in the workplace.
- Train employees whose role involves investigating complaints of workplace bullying so that they know what to look for and how to investigate incidents of workplace bullying justly.
- Design and publicise simple and straightforward complaints procedures for employees to access should they witness or experience incidents of bullying behaviour.
- Write and distribute simply-worded and effective anti-bullying policies.
- Collect and analyse data around reported incidents of workplace bullying to identify trends and address them.

Conclusion: The Benefits of Responding Effectively to Workplace

Bullying

Responding effectively to workplace bullying enables you to ensure your employees' wellbeing while they are at work, and benefit from their highest levels of commitment and performance. By taking decisive, effective and timely action you, as a manager, can play a leading role in reducing the toxic effects of bullying behaviour in your workplace.

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