Bullying in Traditional, Remote and Hybrid Workplaces

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Framing Thoughts

- Too many organizations remain silent on bullying that is not based on or adjacent to protected class
- Too many organizations find intersectional bullying to be "not harassment, just bullying."
- The consequences of bullying, especially "quiet" bulling are extremely serious at an individual and organizational level
- Incivility and a "that's just….." culture almost assure bullying will happen. When this occurs, a traumatic response gets embedded in the organization's DNA
- Bullying and its aftermath are clear evidence that organizations that focus strictly on unlawful behavior do so at their own peril.

Defining Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying is targeted, persistent mistreatment of a person or persons for no reason or any reason besides one related to legally protected classes. It includes at least one of the following categories of mistreatment:

- Physical intimidation or threats
- Psychological abuse, such as humiliating, gaslighting, threatening with arbitrary job loss or subjecting to overly harsh and unwarranted criticism
- Sabotage of work, such as providing intentionally erroneous instructions, failing to provide tools necessary to accomplish work, altering or destroying work product
- Social media use to denigrate, embarrass, or attack a person

Bullying Typology

Workplace bullying takes three primary forms. These types of bullying are not mutually exclusive and can be occurring concurrently:

- Explicit Aggression (Loud Bullying) involves acts that have the effect of creating a threat response in targets. This includes yelling, public criticism, constant and unwarranted fault finding, publicly humiliating by mocking or name-calling, aggressive proxemics or blocking egress.
- Relational Aggression (Quiet Bullying) involves manipulative or dishonest actions that have the effect of destabilizing and undermining an employee's reputation and performance. This includes spreading negative misinformation, sharing private information about a person, providing too much or not enough work, constantly changing expectations, delivering unwarranted cruel feedback, misrepresenting others' view of a person.
- Mobbing (Group Bullying) involves a group of individuals stigmatizing a person based on a shared negative view of the person, and together engaging in relational and explicit acts of aggression that grow more aggressive over time with the ultimate goal of causing the person to quit or be fired.

Organizational Risk Factors

Bullying is more likely to happen and even to be considered normative in organizations with strong hierarchies or with "front office" and "back office" models, such as professional firms, academia, and medicine. Concentrated power and status attached to "producers" has the potential to relegate support staff to a secondary tier of value causing the organization to be less attentive to their well-being. In these organizations, there are often "superstars," who are viewed as indispensable to the organization by virtual of their productivity or skill, and who acquire more power through abusive treatment of others. Accountability is not always forthcoming.

Politicized work environments, and in particular organizations with strong management-labor conflicts or a history of such conflicts are at risk for bullying as adversity is part of the work culture, supervisors are often poorly trained and turn to abusive strategies to try to direct work, while "cowboy cultures" of hazing and intense sensitivity to perceptions of unfairness can ripen the environment for coworker to coworker or mob bullying.

High internal competition is a risk factor as is a conflict averse culture where superficial "niceness" is more valued than self-examination or candor. Such organizations fail to address and retain known bullies because they lack the will or skill to address the conduct.

Special Topic: Bullies in the Virtual Workplace

While virtual work has reduced (but not eliminated) the opportunity for explicitly aggressive bullying, relational aggression thrives in an environment where backchannel and triangulated communications, unequal access to information, and isolation inevitably exist. Virtual work fosters failures of shared knowledge due to a tendency to poorly communicate and retain contextual information, uneven distribution of information, and the challenge of interpreting the meaning of silence. In these conditions, gaslighting, social sabotage and actual sabotage are easier to inflict without detection. Leaders need to be mindful of these dynamics and control for them.

Hybrid work is both the best of both worlds and the worst of worlds – best in terms of balancing the needs and desires of organizations and employees, and worst for developing implicit and explicit "insiders," and "outsiders" in workplaces and teams. Political organizational behavior allows weaponization of the presence of some and the absence of others, and manipulative bullying thrives in such an environment. Cultivating negative impressions of those absent is far easier when claims of underwork or lack of team commitment cannot be examined or validated/invalidated by those hearing such claims. Bullying in this setting can involve intention reputational damage, information hording, and claiming credit for the work of those not present, among other ways to leverage situational inequity. It is not rare for cultural rifts to develop between those who are "showing up," and those who "stay home" based not on actual difference in performance, engagement, or availability, but on affinity bias. All this is fertile ground for bullying to occur.

Impact of Workplace Bullying

In recent years, the importance of psychological safety in the workplace has been touted by academics and industry alike. Defined as, "the belief that you won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes," the presence of psychological safety is robustly linked to performance, learning and innovation in organizations. It is also a precursor to genuine inclusion.

Bullying is anathema to psychological safety. It creates generalized fear, lack of trust and a culture of self-preservation. In addition to the toxic impact it has on those who actually experience bullying, it is demonstrably harmful to those who are not being targeted. The threat created by bullying leads to reduced effort, failure to address problems before they are at a crisis stage, and a culture of disrespect.

Bullies and Human Resources

Crafty quiet bullies—often "superstars" may delegate their bullying to unwitting HR professionals. By sabotaging employees and manufacturing "performance problems," the bully may persuade HR to join in the machinery of destabilizing an employee. Anxious to be of service to the "superstar," HR may accept their version of events and begin a process of performance management or disciplinary actions that are often the final nails in the figurative coffin. Avoiding this "death by documentation" phenomenon should be integrated into ethics or functional training of human resources professionals. For a full discussion of this issue, see https://www.sepler.com/frans-blog/blind-spots-human-resources-and-the-toxic-leader

Justifications – The Bully Rarely Agrees They are a Bully

When confronted about their treatment of others, bullies tend to justify their behavior. Because bullying destabilizes the target, bullies often point to the failings of that target as a justifiable reason for harsh treatment. Supervisory bullies often deny they have been abusive and claim that they were just holding an employee accountable. Effective performance management starts with efforts to diagnose the source of the performance deficit, to assist the employee to succeed, and to provide developmental feedback. While this may involve blunt messaging, it does not include disparagement, humiliation, or labelling.

A second justification bullies offer is that the target of the bullying was an organizational irritant, and that no one could get along with them. Often, a close look will reveal that the alienation of the target from coworkers was the result of things said or done by the bully themselves, such as spreading false information or pointing out personal characteristics that they found annoying.

The third justification bullies offer is mental illness – suggesting that the target is delusional, paranoid, or fabricating the entire experience. As with the second justification, bullies who offer this excuse have often manufactured the very destabilization they point to. One of the effects of gaslighting is making one doubt one's own reality, which can lead to erratic behavior, seeking validation of facts from others (who might perceive such requests to be intrusive or odd,) and unstable emotions.

It goes without saying that none of the justifications typically offered should be accepted without a careful examination of the actual bullying behavior alleged and whether others have been treated in a manner similar to the target of the bullying.

Organizational Response to Bullies

When an organization identifies behavior that is bullying, but considers it, "just" bullying because it is not unlawful, it sets a dangerous standard. Organizational training and policies should be geared towards respectful behavior and civility as an expected standard, and should prohibit bullying, making clear that there is a difference between abusive behavior and effective supervision. Claims of bullying

should be handled in the same manner as claims of unlawful harassment; multiple resources for reporting, rigorous and neutral investigations, and appropriate follow up.

Investigators looking into allegations of bullying need to be educated about the cumulative nature of abusive workplace behavior. As isolated acts of aggression, each incident might be considered only mildly offensive or even tolerable, but the escalation over time as well as the slow-burn of bullying are important to be able identify such patterns. For this reason, rather than focusing on the traditional employee-relations model of investigating specific complaints, organizations should monitor departments or teams for ongoing personnel issues, retention problems, increased pattern of FMLA usage and persistent interpersonal problems, and conduct proactive climate assessments to determine if there is a pattern of abusive conduct.

If bullying is occurring, the organization should be realistic about whether remedial action will be successful. To bring about real behavior change, the organization should be clear that mistreatment of people is considered a high-cost behavior for the organization. Therefore, a finding of bullying that will not result in termination should involve tangible consequences such as actual or deferred discipline or removal from the bonus pool, a requirement that the bully acknowledge the impact of their behavior, and high-quality coaching resources to work with the bully to make behavioral change. Asking the bullying person to take financial responsibility for such coaching is another way to establish accountability.

Even competent coaching has limited success with a bullying employee who has acquired bad behavioral habits. Measurable behavior plans, seeking continuous feedback and conducting 360 pulse surveys and "temperature checks" are essential follow up steps when the bullying person will remain in the workplace.