Pulling the Curtain Back on the Workplace Bully

Bullies are not as powerful as they make themselves out to be.

Over the years, I have had the unfortunate experience of observing or being on the receiving end of workplace bullying. Behaviours such as intimidation, public derision, ridicule and blame are some of the tactics bullies use to control the flow of information within a group in order to establish a narrative of heroes and villains. While on INSEAD’s Executive Master in Change programme, I became interested in how bullying behaviour inhibits a group’s ability to effectively solve problems.

Workplace bullies try to break the back of collaborative problem solving and rational sense-making. They strive to replace these activities with a fantasy that turns themselves into the hero and others into villains. In every case of workplace bullying that I have witnessed, the results are the same: An organisation’s ability to deliver value to its customers is severely hit.

It is often said that bullies are protected because they are star performers. Senior managers foolishly believe that people who use intimidation, public derision, ridicule and blame “get s**t done”. Nothing could be further from the truth. I have found that people who intimidate others create chaos in their organisation by manipulating information. No one gets the information they need to do their job well. Bullying inhibits people from thinking out loud and freely exchanging ideas.

One manager, known for his aggressive behaviour and use of intimidation, would make almost every request to his staff an urgent matter. In some cases he would give the same task to two different members of his department without informing either that he had done so. This created a situation of the right hand not knowing what the left was doing. His team was defined by chaos and confusion, to the extent that a person from outside the department asked in a meeting, “Do you people talk to each other?”

His leadership team made several attempts to address some of the dysfunctions in the department, but lost their cohesion as he played them off each other; bonding with some, humiliating others, then bonding with those he had publicly attacked. People in the department didn’t know when the rug would be pulled out from under them or when they would be publicly humiliated. Their sense of being competent professionals was constantly undercut. In private, people questioned the value they were actually delivering to the wider organisation. Cynicism, passive aggressiveness and defensive behaviour were rife.

Heroes and villains

In every case where I have seen a workplace bully protected, it was because a senior manager, far removed from reality on the ground, subscribed to
the fantasy of “heroes” and “villains” propagated by
the bully. Some researchers such as University of
London’s Sheila White propose that bullying in the
workplace is symptomatic of a leadership void. In
this analysis, bullying goes beyond a single “bad
apple”; it is a symptom of a wider cultural problem.

People who bully in the workplace are often skilled
networkers. Experienced bullies subtly play their
associates off against each other, strategically
controlling who gets what information. They
expertly charm those with power and often present
themselves as visionaries. In reality, I believe
bullies exploit senior managers who harbour a
strong sense of insecurity despite projecting an air
of confidence. To suppress their insecurity, they
surround themselves with people who give them
positive attention. INSEAD Professor Manfred Kets
de Vries describes this positive attention as a form
of painkiller. At management level, bullies nurture
paranoia. Anyone can be thrown under the bus,
publicly or privately. This creates an environment in
which everyone is on the defensive and covers their
backs.

Bullies do everything in their power to avoid
accountability. They are masters at combining
aggression with ambiguity. They may have a take-
charge voice and mannerism, but their words often
cannot be acted upon, are inaccurate or simply
nonsensical for the problem at hand. Those who ask
questions are quickly met with personal ridicule and
derision. To bring any sense of clarity into the
discussion requires a Herculean effort, if it is
possible at all.

Bullying can be looked at as a perverse form of
communication. The shame and self-degradation
that people on the receiving end of bullying often
feel are in fact the emotional experience of the bully
themselves. The bully is saying: “I am not strong
enough to experience these feelings myself. I need
you to experience them for me.” Psychoanalysts
refer to this form of communication as projective
identification – the recipient identifies with the
projected emotion as if it were their own. When you
are on the receiving end of this type of
communication, it is very difficult to discern which
emotions are your own and which are someone
else’s. This is what makes bullying so pernicious
and confusing: People who are bullied become
engulfed with feelings of inadequacy that are not
theirs to begin with.

What if you are bullied?

First and foremost, do not feel shamed or
inadequate. Bullies attack others’ sense of self-worth
to cover their own profound sense of emptiness and
shame.

If you can get out of the organisation, do so. Bullying
is indicative of a wider cultural and leadership
problem within the organisation.

Make extra effort to put your mental and physical
well-being first. Be willing to admit that someone
else’s behaviour is having a detrimental effect on
you. Take extra precautions to protect your own well-
being and that of your loved ones.

Become aware of how people who use intimidation,
public derision, ridicule and blame are trying to
destabilise you and others. The more aware you are,
the easier it will be to plant your feet firmly on the
ground.

Try to articulate specific behaviours the bully
exhibits and how these are used as intimidation
tactics. Become aware, too, of how bullies use
ambiguity and vagueness to hide from
accountability. What emotional responses do you
have to these behaviours and tactics? Can you
create distance between your emotional response
and your reaction? Simply pausing and taking a
deep breath in challenging interactions can go a
long way in helping you stay grounded.

Find people you can talk to. The more you can talk
about the situation openly, the less taboo it
becomes. Share what’s happening with your spouse
and family members. Make time to listen to
colleagues who are on the receiving end of bullying
behaviour. Simply listening to someone can be
extremely helpful.

Seek professional counselling. A good counsellor
can help you see how your behaviours may be
adding fuel to the fire and possibly making you
more vulnerable to attack. They can also help you
understand how your sense of self-worth is being
manipulated.

Don’t allow yourself to be played: Don’t participate
in the vilification of your colleagues.

Finally, don’t be silent. If you witness someone
being treated poorly, go to that person and say you
witnessed it. Bullying is a silent epidemic, and
silence is a form of consent.

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