
Pulling the Curtain Back on the Workplace Bully



By John Young , Director, RedElephant (INSEAD EMCCC '15)

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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