

Project Bullies: Are You a Victim?

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Introduction

Bullying can be as harmful on projects as it is in schools and other areas of society, causing the well understood health impacts for the victims, plus a long list of challenges for project managers and the organizations where it is taking place. Sadly, the rates of workplace bullying are increasingly dramatically.

To complicate matters, workplace bullies are often hard to identify clearly. Bullying is a tactic used by the perpetrator to get ahead at the workplace. They are often highly skilled workers who are socially manipulative, targeting those who threaten their career path while adroitly charming those who serve it well. Thus, a senior manager or their supervisor may say, “That person seems great to me” or “She always gets results”. Remember, while good employers purge bullies, most promote them.



Up to 75% of the workforce is bullied

The good news is that there is a trend towards changes that may eventually see much better anti-bullying policies, strategies, and increased public awareness. Further, expanding illegalization of workplace bullying is helping open doors for efforts to prevent it. Employers are becoming more acutely aware of the human, legal, ethical, and financial costs associated with workplace bullying. The statistics are clear and irrefutable – workplace bullying is costing businesses billions of dollars annually. For every short-term result that a bully might create (i.e. a project completed on time and budget, or a previously struggling unit whipped back into shape), there is a long list of longer-term negative business impacts that far outweigh any temporary benefits. To quote Patricia Barnes, a workplace bullying author, judge and attorney, workplace bullying is likely the “*single most preventable and needless expense on a company’s register.*”

In order to directly and proactively address this issue, project managers and their organizations need to take action. Fortunately, there are many sources of information and tools available to assist them. This paper aims to provide both project managers and the organizations they work for with concrete anti-bullying action plans so that both individually and across their projects, they can ensure that there is a zero-tolerance for bullying.

Workplace Bullying is Increasing

According to a 2013 Harvard Business Review article, over the last few decades, the number of people who've admitted to being the target of workplace bullying has increased drastically. How many people are bullied at work? Recent research indicates that 35 percent of the workforce is bullied (CareerBuilder.com. 2012). Other international research has found that 53 percent (Rayner, 1997), and even up to 75 percent (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997), of the workforce is bullied. The percentage of people bullied will vary based on country, industry, gender, organizational culture, and many other factors.

These statistics and the harm bullies can cause has direct impact on projects and project managers – if there is a bully operating in a project, the impact on the project team can be toxic, which inevitably has negative impacts for the team

members and the project.

Workplace Bullying: A Definition

Projects are subsets of workplaces. Since project management is, for the most part, an activity that involves working very closely with others, the impact of a bully in a project is potentially lethal to project success.

Workplace Bullying is mistreatment of one or more persons (the Targets) by one or more perpetrators. The Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute (WBI) defines workplace bullying as "*repeated, health-harming mistreatment, verbal abuse, or conduct which is threatening, humiliating, intimidating, or sabotage that interferes with work, or some combination of the three*". The WBI is an excellent resource for anyone wishing to learn more about workplace bullying (<http://www.workplacebullying.org/recommended-books/>).

Workplace bullying includes behaviors that can be categorized into three types: aggressive communication, manipulation of work, and humiliation. The abuse runs the gambit from insults or offensive remarks to giving unmanageable workloads to withholding pertinent information to inappropriate email or social media to stealing credit for work.



*"It's a very special occasion...
You went a whole month without humiliating anyone."*

Project Interactions That Don't Qualify as Bullying

Not every unpleasant or challenging conflict with people at work or in a project is bullying – on the contrary. Conflict is a normal part of life and, as you know too well, conflict in projects are normal. So, it's important to contrast normal work behavior and interaction from bullying.

Here are some helpful examples of reasonable and regular conflicts that take place while working on projects that wouldn't qualify as bullying unless they also involved some of the behaviors noted in the definition of 'bullying':

- Expressing differences of opinion;
- Offering constructive feedback, guidance, or advice about work-related behavior;
- Reasonable action taken by an employer or supervisor relating to the management and direction of workers (such as managing performance, taking reasonable disciplinary actions, assigning work);
- Unpopular, yet defensible decisions related to project management (such as resource allocation, solving budget problems, project scale reduction, and scheduling decisions which increase workload.); and
- Project cancellation or delay.

The key is to approach each situation with a reasonable, objective perspective in order to properly assess if there is bullying involved. Seek the advice from trusted colleagues or human resources specialists (but best not to ask those within your organization for help until you've received credible advice). Ask other PMI credential holders who are

outside of your workplace to provide their insight. Use the PMI Ethics tools and the five-step Ethical Decision-Making Framework provided on the PMI.org website to assist in evaluating the situation (see References for links).

Who Gets Targeted in a Project?

Unlike schoolyard bullying, you were not targeted because you were a loner or weakling without friends. Most likely, you were targeted because your abilities or likeability and other positive characteristics posed a threat to the bully's desire for prominence. The perception of threat is entirely in his/her mind, but it's what he/she feels and believes. In the writer's opinion project managers are often perceived threats because by definition, they are bringing about change or because they are drawing resources toward their project – likely away from the bully or other projects. Also most projects occur in organizations where project team members report, not only to the project manager, but to a line manager as well. This dual reporting promotes conditions where multiple people who often have competing agendas task project team members. This environment presents added opportunities for bullying behavior.

WBI research findings from the [2000 WBI Study](#) and conversations with thousands of targets confirms that targets are usually the veteran and most skilled person in the workgroup. Common attributes of targets often include the following: Targets are independent. They refuse to be subservient. Targets are more technically skilled than their bullies. They are the "go-to" veteran workers to whom new employees turn for guidance. Targets are better liked; they have more social skills, and quite likely possess greater emotional intelligence. Colleagues, customers, and management appreciate the warmth that the targets bring to the workplace. Targets are ethical and honest. This is particularly true for PMI members – all of whom have committed to follow the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. Targets are people with personalities founded on a nurturing and social orientation -- a desire to help, heal, teach, develop, and nurture others.

What can you do if you are being bullied on a project?

If you are being bullied on a project it is likely that you are experiencing many emotions and challenges. You are miserable. You are stressed and exhausted. Your work is sabotaged, blocked, or stolen. You are isolated and afraid.

The Workplace Bullying Institute provides some very helpful advice for victims regarding how to respond to bullying. They suggest following 3 steps:

Step One – Refer to the behaviour in question as “Bullying”

Refer to what you're experiencing using a name it befits such as ‘bullying’, ‘psychological harassment’, or ‘psychological violence’

Step Two - Take time off to heal and decide what to do next

Try to accomplish five important tasks while recovering

1. Check your mental and physical health with a professional. Stress-related diseases rarely carry obvious warning signals (e.g., hypertension - the silent killer).
2. Get emotionally stable enough to make a clear-headed decision of next steps
3. Review your organization's workplace policies to see if you have recourse within. Search legal options (in a quarter of bullying cases, discrimination plays a role). Talk to a legal counsel.
4. Review options for stopping the bully and seek advice from trusted confidants.
5. Since you likely need to consider this reality, start a job search for next position.

Step Three – Report the bully

Reporting a bully is difficult and risky. The WBI has sobering but realistic advice – “*It is no riskier to attempt to dislodge the bully. Retaliation is a certainty. Have your escape route planned in advance*”

Conclusion

Increased global organizational and public awareness, recent research, and expanding illegalization of workplace bullying are having positive impacts. Project managers and employers around the world are becoming more informed of the many negative impacts and costs associated with workplace bullying. If employers, project managers and senior executives take initiative in addressing bullying early on, much larger financial, ethical, legal, human resource and project problems will be avoided. Eventually, these initiatives will lead to wider support for zero tolerance for bullying in the workplace regardless of circumstance, societal norm, or jurisdiction.

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