Workplace Bullying
Prevention, Management and Elimination
Strategies for Human Resource Professionals

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"Workplace bullying is likely the "single most preventable and needless expense on a company's register." – P. Barnes

Introduction

Bullying can be as harmful in the workplace as it is in schools and other areas of society, causing the well-understood emotional and physical impacts, plus a long list of challenges for employees and their organizations. More sobering are the clear and irrefutable statistics – workplace bullying is costing businesses billions of dollars annually. For every short-term result that a bully achieves, there is a list of longer-term negative business impacts that far outweigh any temporary benefits.

Workplace bullying is a particular challenge for human resource professionals. To quote Lisa Castle – Vice President of Human Resources at the University of British Columbia: "Its impact is Enormous: disengagement; lost of creativity and productivity; and sick leave, benefit, and turnover costs."

The good news is that increased public awareness, recent research, and expanding illegalization of workplace bullying have paved the way for efforts to prevent it and eliminate it. Both

employees and their employers are becoming more acutely aware of the impacts and costs associated with bullying. Bullying thrives in silence, with targets and coworkers feeling too intimidated to confront the bully or complain. If managers, human resources personnel, and senior level executives take initiative in addressing bullying early on, much larger financial, ethical, legal, stakeholder, and project problems will be avoided. These initiatives will lead to wider support for zero tolerance for bullying in the workplace regardless of circumstance, societal norm, or jurisdiction.

The Prevalence of Workplace Bullying

Workplace bullying is everywhere, in every sector, workforce, and country – and the levels of its prevalence should send shivers of concern through any organizational leader. In a February 2015 article in the Financial Post, Ray Williams noted: "Workplace bullying has become a silent epidemic in North America, one that has huge hidden costs in terms of employee well-being and productivity." The percentage of people bullied will vary based on country, industry, gender, organizational culture, and many other factors.

> *Everyone… likely has a bullying story, whether as the victim, the bully or as a witness*
> - Michael M. Honda
>   U.S. Representative

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. The Workplace Bullying Institute conducted a 2014 survey on the prevalence of bullying in the workplace in the United States. Thee overall survey results are very clear (and quite shocking). Out of 1,000 people surveyed, 7 out of 10 workers are affected by workplace bullying. Twenty-seven percent responded that they have been or are currently being bullied.

Other recent research indicates that the prevalence of bullying is even higher. Jennifer Grasz reports that 35% of the workforce is bullied. According to Clare Rayner and Ståle Einarsen, both respected bullying researchers, 53% of the workforce is bullied and even up to 75% of the workforce is bullied.

The statistics are sobering. Bullies are prevalent and the harm they cause has direct impacts on people, workplace harmony, and profits/success. If there is a bully operating in your midst, the impact on the team will be toxic, which inevitably has negative broader impacts for the organization.

Why Are Organizations So Ineffective at Managing Bullying?

Bullying is sufficiently understood and prevalent that most employers should be prepared to effectively handle it. However, despite laws, irrefutable data and research, good intentions and ethical reasons to do so, most organizations are generally very unprepared. They haven't yet come to appreciate the costs of not acting or the most effective ways to confront the problem. Senior management say "People are our most valuable asset," but that is often a hollow cliché when it comes to bullying.

Zogby Analytics was commissioned to conduct an online survey of 315 U.S. business leaders in three market areas: San Francisco, New York City, and Washington D.C. The survey was completed January 21, 2013.[3] The leaders were asked the following question: Which of the following best describes your opinion of "workplace bullying"?

The answers were enlightening. The percentages for each response option were:
68% agreed -_It is a serious problem.
17% answered - I have never heard of it.
15% said - It is irrelevant, a non-issue, bullying affects only children.

If so many business leaders think bullying is a serious problem, why are most organizations terrible at managing it? There are many contributors to fully answer this question. Often more than one factor is involved. It helps to identify the most common reasons. They include the following:

A Focus on Results
In our hyper-competitive world there are intense and ever-present demands for results. Many organizations become so focused on short-term results that they ignore how they are achieved or the long-term impacts of the means used to get those results. Organizations willingly sacrifice a harmonious workplace culture in order to please shareholders, customers, and stakeholders with baseline results. They may believe their employees matter most but in actual fact, results trump everything.

Sadly, this focal point is candy for bullies. If there is one commonality amongst bullies, it's a gift for whipping up results (and those used to get them). Later on, when organizations see the fallout from the bully, they realize that the price they paid for those results far exceeds the benefits reaped from them.

Misinterpretation of a "Competitive Workplace"
Many organizations confuse healthy competition with a "survival of the fittest" model for workplace behavior. High tech is infamous for condoning bullying, viewing it as normal behavior in a competitive workplace. There have been stories (and articles, books, and movies) about Amazon, Apple, and other companies where staff is regularly challenged to out-perform and out-innovate their colleagues using draconian rewards for the winner.

Some argue bullies manage these organizations, which is why the workplace culture is so Darwinian (an entirely reasonable assertion). To quote Orrin Woodward, founder of Life Leadership and bestselling author: "You cannot expect your team to rise above your example."[4] If we assume that the CEO isn't a bully, I believe there is a lack of appreciation of the direct relationship between employee engagement and workplace culture.

It is my hypothesis that leaders fail to understand that it is possible (and in the best long-term organizational interest) to have both workplace respect and healthy competition. Staff don't need to be abused to perform to their fullest.

A Belief that Bullying Is a Leadership Style

Bullying is the opposite of leadership. In my opinion, executives that use this excuse to support a bully are likely in denial or afraid to confront the problem. If asked in a moment of unbridled honesty, they likely know exactly who the abusers are. They just don't have the skills or motivation to take action so they leave the mess alone, hoping it will sort itself out. They discount the level of the problem, rationalize it as a temporary issue, blame it on a very challenging time, or find another excuse to avoid actively engaging.

A Lack of Awareness

As hard as it seems to accept, there remains a small segment of leadership that has yet to become enlightened on the topic of workplace bullying. What's even more surprising is that their ignorance may be genuine. Rather than judge the poorly informed, it may be more useful to see their lack of awareness as an opportunity to empower them with knowledge. If they are simply acting out of willful blindness, there is a lack of leadership at the core of the problem.

Employers Are Afraid to Confront Bullies

While most leaders are aware of workplace bullying and that it is a severe problem, many organizations lack the training, tools, policies, and expertise to confront it. More importantly, they are afraid to step into the ring with the bully.

Bullying is a sensitive topic because it requires confrontation, conflict, and courage as much as it requires tools. Fear often feeds into the ignorance: fear of lawsuits, of the actual confrontation with the bully, of what else might be uncovered once an investigation is launched, of how many other victims might be in the organization. Having talked with plenty of executives and HR personnel, it is fair to state that fear of conflict is a serious impediment to eliminating bullying.

Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things.
- Peter Drucker

The result is that management walks on eggshells and is afraid to confront the "golden" bully. While HR does its best to deal with the complaints, conflicts, and impacts, the result is paralysis – and so the bullying continues.

However, there is a lost opportunity cost of doing nothing and, as has already been discussed, that cost is dear. Performance, productivity, and other ripple effects resonate throughout the organization. The bully continues to wreak havoc and this won't stop until the organization takes action – to get the guts to confront the bully. Remembering there are bully intervention experts who can effectively handle these difficult situations may help executives realize they don't have to take on the bully personally. Leave it to the outside, unbiased, and specially trained experts.

Lack of Effective Policies and Processes

It is remarkable how few organizations actually have taken all the evidence, information, and advice of experts about workplace bullying to heart. Whatever the reason for their inaction, there is a lack of effective policies and processes for dealing with bullying. For example, without a workplace respect policy (or similar), it is very difficult to frame the approach to address a bullying situation. On the other hand, if the organization has a robustly worded policy, the base from which to respond to a bully is well founded. Not only are the policies essential, but also the processes for actually managing bullying issues.

Most organizations have a respect or harassment policy that outlines what is unacceptable workplace behavior. However, many organizations don't have an effective complaints process. Without a fair, impartial, confidential, and effective complaints process, the policy is meaningless. How does an organization expect to deal properly with bullying if the complaint process requires a formal written complaint to the supervisor? Lest we forget that bullies are statistically most often the supervisor to whom the complaint would have to be made. It is also helpful to remember that no alleged bully should be presumed guilty without due process. Thus,

the process is essential to defensible and trustworthy outcomes.

Further, it is equally difficult if the human resources department is considered the best place for the complaint management. In my opinion, this is neither neutral nor fair for anyone involved, including HR. Organizations need a complaints process staffed with trained people who understand the challenges of dealing with bullying. That unit requires the authority to create a process that is managed by unbiased, bully-trained investigators who have ample authority to carry out an investigation. This includes the power to interview anyone they deem appropriate and to be provided access to the workplace and people in order to do this difficult job.

Often, the best means to achieve this end is to establish a relationship with a consulting firm that has both the expertise and lack of bias to do this work. Perhaps this isn't common knowledge but there are firms throughout the world to help organizations resolve bullying challenges. These firms specialize in the prevention and management of workplace bullying issues and conflicts. They usually incorporate talented counselors, psychologists, and conflict-resolution experts to ensure they have all the tools necessary to assist. They have no preconceived notions, nothing at risk, and, provided they can do their job free from influence and intervention, this is a superb choice of process.

The difference outside subject matter experts can make is often the difference between a successful intervention/resolution and a HR, financial, and employee-morale disaster. Unbiased, outside experts get to the root of the issues quickly, find opportunities for effective intervention, and address the complex interpersonal challenges. Most importantly, they often resolve difficult problems so that everyone feels satisfied and relationships are preserved.

Finally, there must be proper conflict-resolution processes available to effectively manage the next steps. Using standard models for dealing with normal conflicts doesn't work with bullying. Workplace bullying consulting firms support this view. Unless the conflict-resolution process is sensitive to the power dynamic at play and the nature of victim/offender relationships, most interventions won't succeed.

Experts use a specially constructed form of mediation that incorporates the relationship dynamic and prevents the dysfunction from poisoning the process. The process must be fair to all and, ideally, the investigators and conflict-resolution facilitators must be able to make binding decisions. Once the power play is stifled, the process can focus on collaborative resolution. It is amazing to watch the "impossible" take place with the help of a talented facilitator. Fear, hate, and revenge can move to compromise, understanding, compassion, and healing.

Lack of Trained Human Resources Personnel

Despite their best efforts and intentions, many HR personnel are unprepared or lack the authority to address bullies. They also face a difficult choice – they have the organization's best interests as their priority but they see what is really going on. Often, they don't have the training or capacity to take action against the bully. Regardless of their best intention and desire to help, the most common result is that they fail the organization and contribute to the problem.

This plays out to the benefit of the bully and the detriment of the targets. Most of the time, the moment a target raises the bullying flag to HR, they respond with fear and think about the organization's protection. Usually that means that they view the complaint as a threat to the company, a liability, a lawsuit waiting to happen, and a PR nightmare in the shadows. As professionals working for the company, they go into risk-management mode, often seeking

advice from legal, and likely developing an exit strategy for the target. In effect, they focus all their effort on managing the target and protecting the bully.
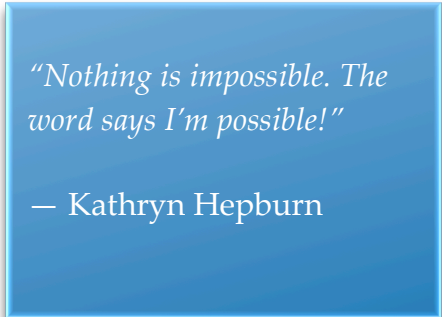
Most organizations haven't grasped that HR staff aren't prepared or trained to deal with bullies. None of the standard conflict-management strategies are effective because bullies can't be reasoned with. People tend to believe that they can persuade, apply logic, or collaboratively resolve bullying conflicts. This ignores the general nature of bullies and the genesis of their motivation.

The above are the main reasons why organizations fail to respond effectively to bullying situations. There are undoubtedly others that I have failed to mention. What is important is that even though the vast majority of leaders acknowledge bullying is a very serious problem and should be eradicated, very few actually do.

An Anti-Bullying Action Plan for Human Resources Professionals

As your organization's chief "people persons," human resource professionals have the potential for significant influence. You regularly advise the executives and have a unique perspective to share with them. You have a deep awareness about what's going on with everyone working throughout the organization. In fact, HR professionals are often the only ones with a complete picture of the workplace culture. As a result, I believe you are a critical pivot point for change and that you wield persuasive power to help eliminate bullying.

"Nothing is impossible. The word says I'm possible!"

— Kathryn Hepburn

I appreciate that HR also finds many challenges when attempting to prevent and respond to bullying. As I've noted, many organizations lack awareness of both the nature of workplace bullying and the depth of its impacts. Further, senior executives regularly condone and even support well-known bullies thanks to their talent for achieving short-term results that impress.

Some workplace cultures have even entrenched bullying as a leadership style. This means that you will encounter ignorance, disinterest, and even dismissive attitudes when implementing your anti-bullying action plan. You'll need courage, persistence, and a carefully laid out plan. As a former senior executive who regularly intersected with HR, I empathize that human resources personnel often feel "caught in the middle": You see the bullying problem (and who the bullies are) and what it's costing (sick leave, stress leave, loss of talented staff, conflicts, team de-motivation, reputation loss). You may also feel conflicted in your role – when acting in the best interests of your organization, you may feel that you're forced to do things that support a workplace bully. In effect, you have to choose between the bullies and the "others" who are impacted by the bully.

HR is often mistakenly used as the bullying complaint office and expected to handle complaints, investigations, and conflict resolution. Simply put, HR staff aren't prepared for properly trained to deal with bullies. This isn't your fault but that of your organization. . Many executives fail to appreciate that bullying situations are highly complex and require bullying experts in order for the situations to be effectively resolved. HR lacks training in counseling, psychology, and the power-dynamic-laden conflict-resolution process, all of which are needed to manage bullying situations Further, HR isn't appropriately placed to ensure that complaints processes are fair, unbiased, and free from influence.

Despite these potential hurdles, if HR can provide solid reasons to implement change and frame their arguments using words and approaches that executives relate to, I believe there are many opportunities for positive change. Employers are slowly becoming more informed of the many negative work culture and organizational costs associated with bullying. By demonstrating many examples of quantifiable impacts that affect organizational success, innovation, employee engagement, and the bottom line, human resources personnel can make a difference.

There are some very recent studies that provide HR with some powerful, research-based evidence of the real costs of workplace bullying. In a 2015 study on the cost of bullying in US post-secondary institutions, Leah Hollis makes some powerful quantifications:

"The fiscal cost of workplace bullying in higher education can potentially compromise the institution's commitment to meeting its objectives. Through this study, the cost of workplace bullying was confirmed by calculating the amount of time wasted and the salary cost per hour. The enormous cost of turnover was associated with the background checks, advertisements, lost productivity, the cost of a search, rehiring, and retraining procedures. Furthermore, the employees who leave are often the high performing ones and hence highly sought after talent in the field."

Based on her research Ms. Hollis concluded that: *"A college with 1,900 people on staff was potentially losing more than US$8 million by allowing workplace bullying. A large university with 22,000 on the staff was potentially losing more than US$93 million. A medium-sized school with 1,100 on the staff was potentially losing more than US$4.6 million annually because staff were disengaging from work to strategize or worry about the tactics of a bully."*

There are tools and information available to HR personnel that could make an impact. I recommend an anti-bullying action plan that focuses on an approach unique to HR and on ensuring the people in the organization are paramount. It also incorporates the need to articulate impactful arguments that quantify the cost of a bully in your workplace. Your job is to provide executives with irrefutable data that inspires them to act.

Specifically, your action plan focuses on the following:
- To become well informed about bullying;
- To convince executives to invest in anti-bullying training, policies, and processes;
- To improve organizational awareness;
- To develop methods to quantify the costs of bullying in your organization;
- To ensure HR doesn't become the bullying complaint in-take and resolution office; and
- To take action within your sphere of control and influence to prevent, effectively manage, and eliminate bullying.

Get informed
In order to appear credible when approaching your stakeholders, it's important to have the knowledge and capacity to speak with authority. There is a lot of information about workplace bullying available and experts available with whom you can consult. It's essential that you know about the benefits of a bully-free workplace – in particular, the cost savings of taking action to prevent and eliminate bullying.

As an HR professional, you already have a deep awareness of your organizational culture and historical reality. You also are fully informed about the legislation, if any, that affects your workplace. I have no doubt that you know the bullies and the problems they are creating. To persuade decision-makers to change, you'll need to identify your allies and the change intolerant. Appreciate the hurdles that you and the organization will need to overcome.

Get a plan
As with all complex projects (and this is a real project), you need to draft a well laid-out business plan and strategy. Identify and consult with all stakeholders. Begin conversations with your cheerleaders to plant the seeds for change. Demonstrate proof of the costs of the bully and quantify them wherever possible. Seek the assistance of subject matter experts. Devise a plan and move it forward. Be courageous and expect resistance

This project will encounter some unpleasant and difficult people – stand firm. You are doing your job to create the best workplace environment and support everyone in your organization. Known bullies will immediately begin to work against you, using their supporters in the executive ranks. Expect arguments. Stay steadfast in your commitment.

Focus on costs and impacts
As HR, you have information that no one else does – what the bully is costing (sick leave, stress leave, loss of talented staff, conflicts, team de-motivation, reputation loss). This is your most important tool for gaining the attention of the executives. Stay away from the personal when making a pitch for action. Instead, prove that the bully is costing the organization money and show how. Further, prove that the cost of inaction is far greater than the cost of prevention or addressing an active bullying problem.

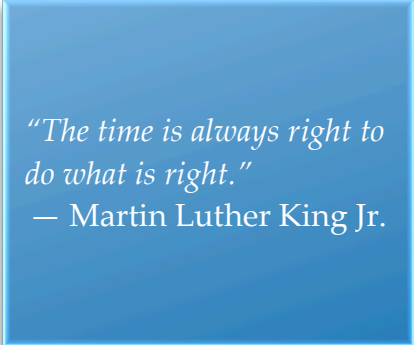*"The time is always right to do what is right."*
— Martin Luther King Jr.

For example, you have data on how many sick leave days were taken in the bully's unit. You know how many talented employees left their roles. You know how much it cost to replace them (the general rule is replacing an employee costs 1.5 times their salary). You know the costs of severance, investigation experts, and legal advice that were paid. If you can use information from previous bullying events to support your arguments, this will add credibility to your position. Pull all this information together and present it in a concise, factual summary.

If you don't have all the costs, then focus on the impacts. Use as many facts as you can and avoid anecdotal references and stories (unless they are really helpful). When you have someone's ear, focus the conversation on how the bully's behavior is hurting the workplace. Talk about how it's affecting morale and performance. Speak the language that executives relate to – motivate them by putting yourself in their shoes and finding an undeniable "what's in it for me" proposition.

Finally, make sure you present the executives with practical, implementable solutions. Carefully consider what is realistic given your workplace culture. Offer a range of options and make a recommendation. In other words, draft a business plan for going forward. Make certain it's a document that executives are comfortable with and will appreciate. Make it as easy and clear as you can. Show them the return on investment of implementing your recommendations. Ask yourself – "What does the executive need to hear from me?" That will guide you to crafting powerful persuasive arguments they will be motivated to act upon. Prove that taking preventative steps to confront workplace bullying is far better than permitting spreading poison throughout the organization.

Work on establishing effective anti-bullying policies, procedures, and best practices

In the background, you can influence positive change towards your organization's overall anti-bullying program. Bring your HR perspective, skills, and influence to the table to convince your

organization that it needs to take action. There are a host of proactive and preventative measures HR personnel can take (or at least influence and support). These include the following:

• Be inspirational leaders – courageously lobby for change.
• Establish or revise Respectful Workplace Policies to specifically include bullying.
• Initiate workplace bullying awareness campaigns.
• Invest in bully training adapted to each audience (i.e. executives, managers, and staff).
• Improve performance management strategies that include behavioral components that enhance workplace culture.
• Address bad behavior immediately and set a strong leadership example. Wherever possible, avoid HR become the bullying complaint office.
• Establish investigation processes that are impartial, fair, and fulsome.
• Take bullying claims seriously but be cautious –until there has been a thorough assessment of the complaint by unbiased and trained personnel, the organization should remain neutral.
• Use conflict-resolution processes that are sensitive to the power dynamic at play and the nature of victim/offender relationships.
• Seek the advice of workplace bullying experts – treat bullying as you would treat any other complex problem that requires specialized professionals to advise and assist. The investment is small compared to the risk your organization is eliminating.

There are many things HR personnel can do to confront bullying, motivate change, and help implement an anti-bullying strategy. As trusted advisors to the senior executives, you are a critical pivot point for change. You wield persuasive power to help eliminate bullying. Use it.

Conclusion

Regardless of whether governments have yet to take action, it is reassuring that every organization can take action that will have tremendous permanent impact. There are experts to help, training and tools that are readily available, and a lot of online resources to guide the way. It requires investment, committed leadership, and a sincere desire to implement change; however, the investment is small compared to the risk that organizations are eliminating.

You have enemies? Good. That means you've stood up for something, sometime in your life.
 - Winston Churchill, Former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom

Human resources personnel can play a major role in leading the effort to eliminate workplace bullying. By focusing on the business reasons to eliminate bullying, I believe change will happen. If the only way that CEOs and Presidents will respond to bullying is by being fed the business case for eliminating it, then HR can provide them with the diet of numbers and statistics that will motivate action. You can prove what bullying actually costs if you need to.

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