

Being a “Target” at Work

Or William Tell and How the Apple Felt

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Bullying is psychological or physical abuse. Bullying is 4 times more frequent than sexual harassment.^{1(p28)} *Workplace bullying* is variously defined as “persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating, malicious, or insulting behavior; abuse of power; or unfair penal sanctions”^{2(p776)} or as “persistent harassment, both physical and—primarily—psychological in its nature, which demeans, devalues and humiliates individuals.”^{3(p14)} *Adult bullying* is defined as “a form of violent antisocial behavior that hides behind societal norms and institutional rules.”^{4(p1)} As one can see from the definitions, some bullying behaviors are very subtle while others are overt.

Not confined to any particular type of workplace, bullying among healthcare workers is increasing. Bullying is often found in what might be described as toxic workplaces. These toxic work environments are often a result of downsizing, aggressive, tough “macho” management styles, economic rationalism, and increasing competition, both internally and externally.

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WHO BULLIES?

According to Mann,⁵ bullies or, more accurately, abusers usually have low self-esteem, poor communication skills, and insecurity in developing personal relationships. In many cases, abusers, some of whom were once victims themselves, are in a position to work out previously unresolved issues suffered earlier in their careers, believing they have the right to inflict their controls and expectations on others. Bullies, often through their dominance over others, “devalue and demean the strengths, abilities, competencies, intelligence and integrity of others because to acknowledge these qualities as ‘good’ is to damage their own, already low self-esteem.”^{5(p2)} In the workplace, “the abuser uses their position to exaggerate or fabricate weaknesses in others to cover up their own inadequacies and insecurities on the job.”^{5(p2)}

Estimates are that 81% of bullies are bosses, 14% peers, and 5% lower rank staff.⁶ Not all bullies have to have formal or positional authority to abuse those around them. Bullies just need a “target.”

WHO GETS BULLIED AND WHY?

A person who can be bullied unconsciously conveys signals to the ever-alert predator abuser. A stereotype of a bullied person is a weak “fading

violet,” an oddball, space cadet, or loner. The reality is very different. The target of an adult bully will often be a capable, dedicated staff member, with an ability to cooperate, a nonconfrontative interpersonal style, and is well liked by coworkers.^{7(p2)} “Targets are predominately 40-ish, educated, and veteran employees, specifically people who have experience with the employer before the bullying interferes with their careers.”^{8(p14)} The abuser/bully perceives the target as a threat and goes about the process of psychologically cutting the target down.

HOW DOES BULLYING WORK?

Bullying or workplace psychological abuse occurs because adults carry many of the psychological issues accumulated over time with them throughout their life. Children who are bullies often grow up to be adult bullies. Targets often have been targets a good part of their lives and believe what the bully is telling them and making them feel. And the institutions in which bullying occurs either sanction or turn their backs on such behavior. In addition, other people in the organization—the abuser and the target’s colleagues—do not confront the abuser about her or his behavior but actually assist in the abuse. This collective abuse is called *mobbing*.

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The abuser can bully in a number of ways. The workplace bully can subject the target to unjustified criticism, trivial fault-finding, humiliation, especially in front of others, as well as ignoring, overruling, isolating, and excluding the target. Boss bullies may set the target up for failure by setting unrealistic goals or deadlines, denying necessary information and resources, overloading the target with work, taking all work away (sometimes replacing proper work with demeaning jobs), or increasing responsibility while removing authority.⁷ There can be explicit threats of violence or subtle threats of retaliation. Bullying takes many forms but most people recognize it when they observe it. Certainly, targets feel that something is wrong. Targets have the blame projected on them and they often become confused, have “trouble perceiving correctly, and accept that (s)he is incompetent and to blame.”^{9(p1)} Past research has linked bullying to suicide and posttraumatic stress disorder in targets.¹⁰

WORKPLACE BULLYING OUTCOMES

When bullying occurs in the workplace, everyone is a loser. Psychological abuse/bullying/mobbing has psychological and physical ramifications for the target, psychological and behavioral ramifications for the abuser, and financial and personnel ramifications for the organization¹¹ in which the abuse occurs.

The psychological ramifications of bullying can range from increased stress to diagnosable mental illnesses such as depression, acute anxiety disorder, and posttraumatic stress disorder. Physical ramifications can include hypertension, weight loss or gain, cardiac palpitations, irritable bowel syndrome, and heart attack.¹² Business ramifications can include high personnel turnover, physical violence, decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, law suits, and increased illness with commensurate increased health insurance costs. Bullies poison the

work environment with low morale, fear, anger, and depression.

The target's family also suffers with the target as it is affected by the target's stress, anxiety, anger, and, eventually, by the target's obsession regarding her or his situation. The additional support of friends is also often threatened by the target's obsession with her or his situation.

BULLYING IN YOUR WORKPLACE?

In June 2004 issue of *Nursing Management*,¹³ a summary of the Institute for Safe Medication Practices (ISMP) survey (N = 2000) on workplace intimidation reported the following:

- Almost half the respondents experienced intimidation that caused them to change the way they handled an order. Sixty-nine percent of the harassers were prescribers.
- About 40% of respondents accepted an order because they feared the intimidating prescriber.
- Physicians/prescribers were condescending or impatient with questions. Other clinicians could also intimidate. Intimidation included subtle questioning of professional judgment to explicit threatening behavior.
- Forty-eight percent of respondents were threatened within the past year.

This study clearly illustrates the effect of bullying on healthcare workers involved in filling prescriptions or administering medications. As can be seen from the ISMP study, bullying is not an unusual occurrence in healthcare.

Bullies are often charming, manipulative, intelligent, and status-conscious people. They are very good at buttering up their superiors.¹⁴ Yet the impact of the bullies' behaviors on those persons with whom they come into contact should alert man-

agement that something is not right. Grievances by employees against their manager, declining performance of usually good employees, poor morale in a work unit, expressed fear of a fellow worker by other workers, and other symptoms of widespread “depression” require action by responsible management. Bullies in the work environment indicate lack of leadership.¹⁵

Further evidence demonstrates that there are rising numbers of workers' compensation claims and hostile work environment law suits.¹⁶ These legal outcomes add to the costs of staff turnover, increased illness, etc. Managers who tolerate bullies pay a high price. The end result is a process of adverse employee selection in which bullied employees (often the best and the brightest) leave and the company is left with the bullies.¹⁷

ADDRESSING BULLYING IN THE WORKPLACE

Although countries such as Scandinavia, Canada, and the United Kingdom have laws protecting workers from workplace bullying/mobbing, the United States offers no such legal protections. US laws address sexual and racial harassment but do not provide protection from bullying or other forms of psychological abuse/harassment.

The first step in battling bullying in the workplace is to name it for what it is—psychological abuse. You must name something before you can recognize it and do something about it. Abuse is destructive and totally unacceptable.

Once named, what can be done about it? First, the target must build a support system at work. The target of abuse is suffering and needs and deserves support and protection. As long as the target is “left out on the limb by herself/himself,” the abuser will continue unabated or until he or she moves on to another target. Colleagues need to clearly and publicly confront abusive behavior when

it occurs. Do not pretend you do not see when the target is being abused. Confront the unacceptable behavior. Remember, however, that abusers usually do not limit their abuse to one person indefinitely. Everyone is a potential target.

Educate staff and managers to recognize abuse in the workplace and how to address it. Develop an evaluation/reporting form and systematically encourage its use. Make sure that the organization has a written policy about abuse in the workplace, which applies to everyone in the organization. In unionized workplaces, include an article in the contract forbidding bullying/mobbing or any forms of psychological or physical abuse to or by any employee (either management or staff).

When the abuser is a manager, the general rule is that the target must go at least 2 management levels above the problem manager to find impartial help.⁹ Do not dismiss complaints of abuse by managers. Investigate with an open mind.

Whether unionized or not, management and staff must work together to outline and implement an intervention plan to assist both the abuser and the target. Both people need help. If there is mobbing, be sure to include in the intervention plan all those persons involved in the abuse. Help each person according to his or her needs. Simultaneously, make it very clear that abuse will not be tolerated. Everyone involved must understand that bullying is psychological abuse and it needs to stop immediately.

ABUSE IN THE WORKPLACE

Psychological abuse is a fact in workplaces. It is easy to ignore in the short term but in the long term, the abuse will injure not only the staff but also the business. Increased staff turnover, increased healthcare costs and personnel absences, law suits, and the known outcomes of such highly stressful situations will cost the organization many things, the least being money. Best of all, prevent bullying. If you find it in your workplace, stop it and help its victims. Ask yourself if you are unwittingly a bully and seek counsel. Most important, do not tolerate psychological abuse in the workplace.

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