

Techniques to tackle the workplace bully

Understanding the psychology and countering the behavior

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Bullying in the workplace was highlighted in the early-1990s when a radio broadcast by journalist Andrea Adams evoked a flood of responses from employees affected by the problem (Adams and Crawford, 1992).

Unfortunately, despite increased awareness, it remains a common feature of working life. As a leadership coach for more than 20 years, I have worked with victims, bullies and their organizations and have seen at first-hand the damage it causes.

Typically bullies are more senior than their victims so their behavior is reinforced by institutional power. However, a bully may be so personally powerful that peers – even bosses – become victims.

In some cases, bullying characterizes the entire culture of an organization. This is particularly relevant in the current economic climate in which many leaders face relentless pressure.

Workplace bullying can be difficult to recognize or to tackle. Yet the cost of ignoring it is high. Among those affected, engagement, productivity and performance fall while stress-related ailments, absenteeism and turnover rise. The impact of bullying on some individuals can be deeply traumatic, with long-lasting emotional and professional consequences. As employers have both an ethical and legal duty of care towards their staff, they risk litigation, expensive settlements and reputational damage when bullying goes unaddressed.

The psychopathic bully

Workplace bullies come in many forms. One small but particularly dangerous group consists of individuals whose personalities fall within the psychopathic or personality-disordered spectrum. Entirely focused on their own interests, they lack integrity, an internal moral compass or the capacity to empathize. They persistently distort reality to serve their own ends. Their behavior is highly manipulative, ranging from charmingly charismatic to ruthlessly aggressive.

Psychopathic bullies cause immense damage but may go unchallenged for years because of their plausibility and skilful strategies for winning over those in power. They have no genuine motivation to change, are not coachable and should be managed out of the organization as swiftly as possible. Specialist help may be needed (Babiak and Hare, 2007).

The explosive bully

Most workplace bullies are capable of changing their behavior with the right help. Many are what I call explosive bullies. These are characterized by low emotional intelligence and poor self-control. Task-focused and driven, easily overwhelmed by their emotions when stressed, they lack the capacity to manage their feelings and lash out at others. Yet they identify with their organizations and want to make a positive contribution. Two individuals I have coached illustrate the type.

Rebecca was the recently-promoted finance director of a small division of an insurance company. Strongly committed, she worked hard and delivered results. However, she struggled with the transition to a more strategic role, remaining immersed in operational detail and micro-managing her team.

In a difficult market, Rebecca's boss was under increasing pressure and demanded complex cost-cuts. Rebecca responded by driving herself and her people to work ever-longer hours. Her interpersonal style, always direct, became aggressive. At team meetings her body language was hostile and she attacked anyone she perceived as not working hard enough. One junior colleague was publicly sworn at for an error when preparing Rebecca's slides for a board presentation.

Predictably, morale plummeted. HR knew about Rebecca's behavior but failed to act as one would complain on record. Concern increased when a team member resigned, citing Rebecca's behavior. Only when the company's employee survey revealed extremely poor results did senior management finally insist that her leadership style must change.

Desmond's bullying behavior was more entrenched. A senior partner in a large law firm, he was technically excellent, a top fee-earner and attracted new business. With colleagues, he could be charming and charismatic. He could go out of his way to promote bright team members. However, he became edgy and difficult when engaged in complex client deals or when he felt overloaded. He would be stubborn, argumentative and defensive when fellow partners questioned his point of view and sometimes lost his temper completely. He replied impulsively to e-mails in an abrasive style that left recipients angry and upset. Juniors who could not keep up fell quickly out of favor; one had recently been signed off work with stress. The turnover among his secretaries was particularly high.

For many years the firm had tolerated Desmond's behavior. Concerns were voiced, but his role as rain-maker and his popularity with important clients meant the issue was never energetically addressed. It was only when two associates brought formal allegations of bullying that the managing partner felt forced to act. She called Desmond in and told him that his aggressive behavior had to stop.

What drives bullying?

Both Rebecca and Desmond brought talent, passion and commitment to their work. Neither deliberately aimed to upset others. Yet their behavior threatened to derail their careers.

Understanding the emotional dynamics behind the bullying is key to explaining this. While their characteristic task-focus, energy and drive fuel the external achievements of this kind of leader, they can also generate a persecuting internal world colored by fear of failure and humiliation. The individual develops a powerful inner tyrant who pushes the person to succeed and berates the person when he or she does not.

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As a consequence, these people constantly strive to feel competent and in control. Their outer confidence may hide painful insecurity and self-esteem is often dependent on external recognition and meeting their own (unrealistically) high standards.

When these leaders feel in control of their work, they are excellent performers. However, many do not handle pressure well. When struggling with difficult goals, making mistakes, challenged by others, thwarted by events or physically exhausted, they quickly become stressed. As their inner tyrant assails them and they become anxious, they automatically defend themselves with a fight reaction. Adrenaline floods their body, their capacity to think rationally and regulate behavior evaporates and they experience a surge of anger, which spills out on to others in the form of criticism and blame.

It feels to the individual that he or she is the victim of the situation and thus justified in attacking others. Unleashing anger restores a temporary sense of control and discharges the negative emotion persecuting the person from within. The inner tyrant has become the outer tyrant (Sandler, 2011, 2012).

Many people go into fight when under pressure. It is when this behavior is regular, severe enough to hurt, upset and undermine others, and not acknowledged by the perpetrator, that it becomes bullying.

Rebecca struggled with a new role amid difficult economic conditions and feared appearing incompetent to her boss. Rather than acknowledging this, she attempted to soothe herself by controlling her team and, when things went wrong, accusing team members of inadequate performance.

When Desmond felt under pressure, he too became anxious without being aware of it. He attempted to reinforce his sense of self (which was both inflated and vulnerable) by demanding that his views and instructions be accepted without question. When challenged, or inadequately supported by his subordinates, he angrily belittled them.

In both cases, bullying was to some extent enabled by their organizations. Rebecca's chief executive was under enormous pressure and would also explode, creating a culture where anger and fear became the norm. Desmond's partners had avoided challenging his behavior. He was a valuable asset and the relationship-focused managing partner preferred to avoid conflict. As a result, he had little awareness of his impact on others. He recovered quickly from his outbursts and believed they did the same. He saw subordinates who resigned as simply not up to the job.

What can be done?

Confronting explosive bullies is not easy. When challenged, they are almost always defensive, denying or justifying their behavior and blaming others. They do not see themselves as bullies and are deeply upset by this accusation, especially given their commitment to the organization. However, when helped to understand the impact of their behavior, many do feel remorse for the distress they have caused. A firm but supportive approach works best.

- Senior management must be determined to deal with the problem, regardless of financial or professional cost.
- Evidence should be gathered, including from victims or witnesses who wish to remain unidentified. Those investigating should look for a pattern of complaints.
- The individual's behavior must be clearly labeled as unacceptable by the boss or another senior manager before external help is sought. HR can play a crucial role in preparing for this.
- Determination and persistence are vital when the bully is confronted. The message may need to be delivered several times and the negative consequences of the failure to change spelled out.
- Once effectively confronted, the bully should be offered an intensive coaching program, including 360-degree feedback, on a non-negotiable basis, with regular reviews built in.

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Those entering coaching under these circumstances are likely to feel a painful mixture of distress, anger, humiliation and shame. The coach must strike a balance between building trust on one hand, without which nothing will be achieved, and addressing the behavioral issues with honesty and firmness on the other.

Coaches who understand the psychological basis of explosive bullying are at a great advantage. They can affirm the coachee's positive qualities and acknowledge that they do not intend to upset or undermine others. This helps the individual to feel less persecuted, less defensive and more open to self-reflection.

The next goal is a joint exploration of the emotional process that lies behind their destructive behavior. The more individuals can recognize the anxiety their inner tyrant creates, the more likely they are to break the circuit. They should also be helped to identify situations that commonly trigger a fight reaction and to generate and practice new strategies for handling difficult emotions and using assertive rather than aggressive behavior.

The role of senior management, especially the individual's boss, and HR, is vital in offering continued support in the form of clear boundaries and feedback and acknowledgement of improved behavior. When organizations invest in a thoughtful, consistent and determined approach to explosive bullying, positive results can be achieved.

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About the author

Catherine Sandler has more than 20 years' experience of consulting to organizations and individuals on the human dimension of workplace life. Since 1998, she has specialized in coaching senior executives and teams at board and director level. She brings a blend of psychological skills and business knowledge to her work. She is a trained and experienced psychological counselor and has a doctorate from Oxford University. She has published several articles and a book on executive coaching for the Coaching in Practice series published by McGraw-Hill, part of Open University Press. She has a particular interest in interpersonal conflict at work and speaks and writes on the subject of bullying, having become involved with this issue in the early-1990s. Catherine Sandler can be contacted at: Catherine.sandler@sandlerconsulting.co.uk; www.sandlerconsulting.co.uk/

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