

## Banish bullying to help everyone's stress levels!

It seems that there has been a large increase in the instances of bullying in the workplace over the last few years. Whether this is really the case or it is an area which is being spoken or written about more might be open for debate. I am not sure that it is bigger problem than it has been in the past. Also, bullying is not just something which occurs in commercial organisations, it also happens in the health service, the forces, emergency services and government - local and national, and may be even more prevalent in some of these.

What is bullying? Is it really bullying or just a perception from those who feel that they are on the receiving end? A definition of bullying is: "*a process of systematic and repeated aggression by a person or group towards a workmate, subordinate or superior*". There are a few key elements in this definition. Firstly, it is systematic and repeated – not just a one-off incident. Secondly, it involves an aggressive intent (and is often targeted at individuals who cannot defend themselves). Thirdly, it is not always about bosses bullying their staff, it can occur in any direction. Whatever the definitions, reasons or apparent causes bullying has a significant, and negative, impact on the organisation and individuals. As such, it is an issue which needs to be recognised and tackled where it does occur. At the same time, organisations need to help the people working there to understand the difference between being bullied and someone communicating poorly or inappropriately. In this politically correct day and age too many people feel that if a boss speaks to them firmly or even slightly harshly then it is bullying. Behind this is one of the biggest dilemmas in the whole bullying debate. The right of a manager, and an organisation, to demand certain levels of performance – and the perception and reaction of individuals to these expectations are where the problem starts.

### **Why do people bully?**

I think this depends on the context and the level of the people involved. When it is the "typical" downward bullying, i.e. boss to staff there might be several reasons.

- a) The manager is under pressure to produce results and is struggling, so behaves aggressively with their staff or an individual.
- b) The manager is out of their depth in the job, does not want to acknowledge it and get help, so they take it out on their staff.
- c) The manager has poor communication or interpersonal skills.
- d) The manager has low Ei (Emotional Intelligence) rating, especially around self-awareness and self-regulation and areas such as empathy and awareness of others.

However, if you look back at the definition of bullying, many of these reasons do not necessarily fit with the part which is about systematic aggression. Often, it is not the intention of a boss to bully, although their behaviour might come across that way.

Looking at bullying within peer groups it is often a result of someone perceived to be "different". Think back to school days and how some poor individuals seemed to be picked on quite frequently. The difference could be in someone's approach to work, in appearance, the way they behave or speak, or even their age. Unfortunately, if a loud or bossy person decides to start to pick on an individual there are usually a number of sheep-like colleagues who will follow them for a variety of reasons. The ringleaders of this type of bullying are often doing it to make themselves appear bigger and more important – whilst covering some insecurity or bigotry of their own. In many respects this type of bullying (sometimes known as "mobbing" when a group are doing it) can be more damaging for the recipient rather than that from a boss.

## ***What happens to people who are being bullied?***

There can be a wide range of reactions to being bullied, or feeling you are, and consequences for the organisation. For the individual it can lead to a sense of isolation, make them anxious, trigger feelings of depression and ultimately cause them to become stressed. Regardless of where the bullying is coming from, the reaction might go on to low morale or demotivation, lower productivity and possibly more errors happening within their work. They may not communicate properly with colleague at all levels. These various feelings may then be taken home, with knock on effects to personal lives.

For the organisation, bullying may lead to absence through stress related illness, or just feeling unable to be in the workplace. In extremes, it could lead to an increase in staff turnover, which is expensive! (Either of these might be compounded if the individual goes to an employment tribunal and proves they were bullied.) On a slightly less dramatic scale the organisation will suffer if morale drops, if more errors occur or productivity goes down. Therefore, it makes sense to put the issue high on the agenda of things to address.

## ***Preventing bullying within the organisation***

The simple answer is to create a corporate culture which encourages open communication, supportive behaviour at all levels and making sure that any form of bullying is seen as unacceptable. The corporate culture is shaped by those at the top – they need to be the role models of the behaviours they want throughout the organisation. There are a number of specific actions which might help in working towards this. If organisations want to take this subject seriously the need to become proactive and preventative in their approach.

Ensure that managers have the appropriate skills and training to do their job effectively. They need to have the appropriate job/technical skills and a good understanding of people, communication and interpersonal skills. Over this, incorporate specific elements about the risks of coming across in a way which might be perceived as bullying and how to handle situations where this might be a concern. It can also be useful to include some training on managing pressure and stress management, both for the managers and spotting potential problems within their teams and dealing with them constructively.

Be clear and consistent about people's roles and responsibilities. Everyone needs to understand that the organisation and its managers have to make decisions and achieve goals and objectives.

Do not assume people will behave in the right way all of the time! Be specific about what is acceptable behaviour with clear definitions. Consequences for not sticking to it must be made clear – and implemented! (This should include what is expected of managers' behaviour.)

Create a process where individuals can raise concerns if they feel they are being bullied. People need to feel that they can do so without any worries about reprisals or that they will not be believed. (It is important to remember that bullying is often about the perception of the person on the receiving end even if it is not the intention of the one who is being accused of doing it!) This is not always easy to achieve, as research suggests that most people who feel they are being bullied will tend to talk to friends, family or colleagues and few will discuss it with their bosses or others in the organisation. When the problem is peer to peer bullying, especially with a group involved, there is perhaps a greater fear of reprisals. Managers should take more responsibility for spotting when this form of bullying is happening and take action to stop it.

Consider some organisation wide training and development giving people the skills to raise issues in a clear, assertive manner without using over-emotive language or personal attacks. Encourage everyone to pay attention to behaviour and not applying labels or presumptions about people's intent.

### ***What can people do instead of bullying – or being seen as a bully?***

There are a number of things which someone could do to avoid being seen as a bully, or to make sure they don't use behaviour which might be given that label. One characteristic which some people have is to deny they are bullying and blame it on the recipients. Stop it! It may not be your intention to come across as bullying, but that is not the issue. Take responsibility for your behaviour. A simple starting point is to stop and think before you say or do anything. What is it you want the outcome to be? What will be the best way to achieve it? It can be helpful to put yourself in the other person's position and think about their situation or point of view. How do you think they might react to you?

If you find that you do get frustrated with others, or feel pressurised by workloads or anything, consider doing something to change your response. Possibly approach the organisation to have some training or coaching to help you develop more flexibility to deal with people. Maybe find yourself a mentor, or ask the organisation to find someone for you. If you find you do get angry or really irritated by situations or people to the point where it is potentially damaging think about some anger management training.

With these various options for development a key learning outcome should be to raise self-awareness about your behaviour and its impact on others. For many managers and individuals, there is no intent to come across as though bullying, but a lack of self-awareness means that they do not think about how they are perceived. By improving this, you can behave slightly differently and achieve even better results. If you do need to get people to produce more or to achieve certain outcomes, make sure you comment about performance or behaviour – and not personalities! By doing the former you can stick to facts and be more objective which is less likely to stand up to accusations of bullying.

### ***Solutions for individuals who feel they are being bullied***

If you feel that your boss is bullying you it can be intimidating. However, you do not have to react in a way which implies you are powerless or helpless. To do so is your choice – tough though it is to accept that! Remember, a one-off incident or criticism is not bullying, even if it is delivered poorly.

To help your develop more positive responses think about doing some, or all, of the following.

- 1) Get some assertiveness training if available within the organisation or check what you can find outside. You can then respond calmly and firmly explaining what you are not happy about. This also applies to instances of peer to peer bullying.
- 2) Focus on the message (rather than the way it is delivered) and if it is about something to do with your performance or behaviour acknowledge it and ask for clarification of what is expected. If it is about you as a person or your personality, either respond assertively or just ignore it.
- 3) Find some support, such as a mentor or someone whose advice you can trust. They might be internal within the organisation or external to it. It can be very useful to

have someone who will act as a sounding board for you to talk to, and talk through what is happening.

- 4) If you are the target of a peer, or group of peers, recognise that it is probably because of their own lack of confidence or esteem. You might be seen as “different” for some reason – which is their problem in reality, but if they are taking it out on you it seems as though it is yours! You could confront the person, or ringleader, and challenge them about the perceived issue or problem. Although it might feel threatening, make you feel depressed or isolated doing nothing will only make it worse.
- 5) Keep in contact with people who value and respect you to maintain your own self-esteem. You do not have to allow others to erode it.
- 6) If your organisation has any form of grievance process or anti-bullying policy, take advantage of it. It is not a weakness to do so. Quite the opposite, it can require courage to enter into the process. Generally, organisations which have these policies will be supportive of their staff, so use them.

It could be that bullying is on the increase. Maybe the fact that there is more publicity about the issue makes people think about it more. I believe that many organisations and managers do communicate with, and treat, their staff better than in previous generations. Possibly, these recessionary times are creating more pressures on managers and causing them to behave more aggressively, often without realising it. What has changed in recent years is that people expect to be treated with respect and do not accept some of the perceived bullying from bosses. Whatever the reality of bullying within organisations, it is an issue which will not just go away or be considered as normal. If it is happening, or the perception is that it is, then organisations need to address it. There will be wide ranging direct and indirect costs involved if people are feeling bullied – and there is the risk of forms of legal action. For a variety of reasons, it makes commercial sense to tackle bullying – and if people really are the organisation’s biggest asset, make sure they are treated properly.