Chapter 1

Introduction to workplace bullying

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Introduction

Human beings have the potential to abuse one another with physical violence, verbal abuse, threats of violence, back-stabbing, undermining and a range of other bad behaviours. History is littered with examples of the individual and group cruelty meted out on unfortunate victims by victorious armies, vicious leaders, violent masters and vindictive family members. However, attitudes and responses to these behaviours are strongly influenced by the culture, social climate and meaning of the behaviour to the target. In this chapter we look at the names that people have used to describe negative interpersonal behaviours, the history and development of the construct of bullying in the workplace, the features of individual, group and organisational bullying and ways to differentiate between healthy conflict, strong management and workplace bullying.

What's in a name?

> 'When I use a word,' said Humpty Dumpty in a rather scornful tone,
> 'it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.'
>
> (Carroll, 1998)

Harmful interpersonal behaviours have largely been defined by people who perceive themselves as targets or victims of this behaviour. Adjectives such as abused, victimised, coerced, harassed, terrorised, mobbed, undermined and bullied are everyday descriptions of how these negative behaviours are experienced by victims. The phenomenon of workplace abuse has been give a number of names. Generally these negative behaviours are divided into two groups: (a) harassment for

behaviours involving discrimination on the grounds of race, sex, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, age, language, social origin or other status (UN, 2008); (b) the more generalised behaviours that can affect anyone are called emotional abuse or petty tyranny by the French (Bukspan, 2004), bullying in the English-speaking world (Lewis *et al.*, 2008), while in other countries, particularly Scandinavia, Germany and Italy, there is an additional term used to describe bullying involving a number of people attacking an individual (Leymann & Gustafsson, 1996).

Evil by nature or intent?

It is not surprising that people having experienced bullying use terms like evil, bully, tyrant and oppressor to describe the person they view as having treated them harshly or unfairly. Whilst it is possible that some people get pleasure out of hurting others (Vickers, 2002), people should recognise that not everyone who engages in bullying is wicked or evil. Damasio, a neurobiologist, has studied the interactions between the body, emotions and feelings and suggests that positive social behaviours have significant evolutionarily benefit and without these altruistic attitudes humankind would have become extinct long ago (Damasio, 2003). Instead of regarding the person who bullies as intrinsically evil, a more useful approach would be to see their behaviour as an aberration caused by an absence of positive attributes and an arrested state of development (Esselmont, 1980).

Workplace bullying

It is difficult to be precise in identifying the origin of workplace bullying. There are early descriptions of coercive and destructive behaviours within armies, monasteries, households and guilds. However, it is only with the industrial revolution and the move away from the cottage industries to labour intensive factories, foundries and offices that bullying has had the opportunity to develop within the workplace. Some of the earliest working communities were attached to the monasteries; 1500 years ago St Benedict recognised the negative effect of bullying and cautioned the following: 'If a brother, without the abbot's command, assumes any power over those older or, even in regard to boys, flares up and treats them unreasonably he is to be subjected to the disciple of the rule' (Benedict, 1982). Roman legions were well known for dealing with soldiers harshly, with floggings, breaking of bones and death sentences

being used to enforce discipline, particularly among those in lower ranks (Fields, 2006). In the sixteenth century Machiavelli (2001) wrote his influential political treatise *The Prince*, dealing with the acquisition and maintenance of power. Machiavelli posed the following question: 'Is it better for a leader to be loved or feared?' His response was 'It is far safer to be feared than loved when one could not do both.' In Britain, Mrs Beeton (2000) provided nineteenth-century women with advice on how to manage their households. She criticised the abuse of servants and advised her readers that servants should be treated as reasonable human beings with no excuses being made for their shortcomings. At the beginning of the twentieth century Robert Tressell (2008) described the plight of a young woman in domestic service as a series of petty tyrannies, insults and indignities and years of cruelly excessive work which began two or three hours before the rest of the household were awake and only ended when she went exhausted to bed, late at night. Tressell also drew on his own experiences of working as a house painter in his description of bullying and oppression suffered by building workers where the older workers were constantly in fear of losing their jobs. An even more extreme bullying was found in the experiences of children working down mines, in textiles and other manufacturing industries. Interviews undertaken in the mid-nineteenth century by the Earl of Shaftsbury showed that the children were regularly beaten and bullied as they toiled by day and often at night in conditions of Dickensian squalor (Barkham, 2007). Up to 50 years ago fear was still a predominant feature of working life, with workplaces being hierarchical and autocratic, exposing workers to demeaning and oppressive behaviours with impunity (Snook, 2008). It is only during the past 30 years that western society has begun to recognise that bullying in the workplace is unacceptable and a cause of distress, illness and reduced productivity (Vega & Comer, 2005).

Bullying defined

Throughout this book the term bullying is used to cover the range of negative interpersonal behaviours observed in the workplace. There are many definitions of bullying, but one of the most useful was developed by Einarsen and colleagues:

> *A definition of workplace bullying*
> Bullying at work involves repeated negative actions and practices that are directed at one or more workers. The behaviours are

unwelcome to the target and undertaken in circumstances where the target has difficulty in defending him or herself. The behaviours may be carried out as a deliberate act or unconsciously. These behaviours cause humiliation, offence and distress to the target. The outcomes of the bullying behaviours have been shown to cause clinically significant distress and impairment in social, occupational, and other areas of functioning.

<div style="text-align: right">(Einarsen et al., 2003: 15)</div>

In this definition of bullying there are four main features: (a) the behaviours need to be perceived as negative and unwelcome; (b) they have to be persistent and long-term; (c) they need to involve an imbalance in power; (d) they do not have to be intentional to cause bullying to have taken place.

Negative behaviours

The negative behaviours found in bullying fall into four main types:

1 *Personal derogation*: this includes the use of humiliation, personal criticism, ridiculing or demeaning comments to undermine the standing or integrity of the target.
2 *Intimidation*: where threats of physical violence or psychological intimidation, the misuse of power or position are used to create a situation where the victim feels unable to defend themselves or to take other forms of action.
3 *Work-related bullying*: in which the withholding of information, removal of responsibilities, work overload or where the credit for work undertaken is 'stolen' or not recognised as being undertaken by the target.
4 *Social exclusion*: where the target is cut off, isolated, scapegoated or sidelined by other employees.

Persistent and long term

To be classified as bullying the negative behaviours need to be repeated and persistent. Whilst it is unpleasant to be the target of someone's occasional aggressive behaviour, occasional behaviours are generally excluded from the bullying criterion. However, a single incidence of extreme bad behaviour can be regarded as bullying when the intimidating behaviour is of such a severity that the target is left in a

permanent state of fear and anxiety. In some instances the bullying is subtle. Whilst it may be reasonable for a target to ignore or forgive an occasional expression of unwarranted irritation, when this occurs on a regular basis it should be regarded as bullying. As most of the bullying behaviours are commonplace it is not unusual for some bullying behaviours to continue for weeks or months before their true nature is recognised.

Imbalance of power

Whilst two or more workers of equal power having a difference of opinion may experience the exchange of views as a conflict, it is unlikely that this exchange would be regarded as bullying. However, when there is an inequality in the balance of power and this is used by the more powerful individual or group to undermine or subjugate another individual, this is bullying. Managers tend to be the main source of power in an organisation. However, there are more sources of power including the following:

- *Positional power*: this power is derived from the person's role or position. Managers and supervisors can abuse their power to impose unfair restrictions or rules affecting one or more people.
- *Relationship power*: this power relates to groups which may be established in order to usurp the rights and freedoms of workers outside the group. In some situations this group will be based on characteristics such as race, gender or ideology.
- *Resources power*: having access to resources is important, be it having the required technology, contact with senior management or the time to complete a piece of work. Removing scarce resources essential to the achievement of objectives can be an abuse of power.
- *Psychological power*: some people have the power to recognise a target's psychological vulnerabilities and then to exploit this knowledge to the target's detriment.
- *Knowledge power*: the abuse of this power can be observed when important information is delayed or withheld.
- *Delegated power*: this is an abuse of power at second hand. The abuser uses the power of their relationship with a second person to persuade them to undermine and/or threaten a target by proxy.
- *Personality power*: some people have a personality and presence which makes it difficult for others to challenge them or their

behaviours. These personality-driven behaviours can then be used to bully and intimidate.

Intent

The decision on whether bullying has taken place is not determined by the intention of the offender but rather by the nature of the behaviour. The defining principles used in establishing whether bullying has occurred are (a) was the behaviour unacceptable by normal standards of behaviour? (b) has this behaviour been disadvantageous or unwelcome to the target? However, intentionality does become relevant in understanding the impact of the behaviour on the target and in choosing the most effective intervention for the offender and target. There are three levels of intent:

- *Wilful intent*: where the behaviour was directed at the target with the intention of causing actual occupational, physical or psychological harm.
- *Instrumental intent*: where the negative behaviour was an unintended side-effect of a behaviour that was directed at achieving another goal.
- *Unintentional*: where the offender has a lack of sensitivity or awareness of the negative impact of his or her behaviour.

On occasions, the bullying associated with instrumental behaviours can be intentional. In these circumstances, the offender may attempt to hide his or her personal responsibility for the negative behaviours by blaming it on organisational policy or procedures or on other factors.

Individual bullying

Much of the literature on bullying, particularly that produced by support groups, has focused on individualised bullying involving a single bully bullying and one or more targets. In these accounts the descriptions are written by people who perceive themselves as being the innocent targets with the bully being described as behaving in ways that are at best dysfunctional and at worst psychopathic. Although some researchers have suggested that there are bullying and victim personality types (Randall, 1997), this is not a conclusion which has gained universal support (Einarsen, 1999). The more commonly held view is that there are important situational factors including culture,

organisational change, poor training and an excessive use of competition that lead to higher rates of bullying (Hodson *et al.*, 2006). There are several types of individualised bullying: predatory, dispute related or escalating.

Predatory bullying

Predatory bullying occurs when the target of the bullying has done nothing to warrant the negative behaviour. The bully may be using the innocent victim to demonstrate their power to others or perhaps the victim belongs to an outgroup and is attacked because they are different and not part of the group. Predatory bullying occurs more often in organisations where the culture permits this kind of behaviour as the bully recognises they are unlikely to be punished for their negative activities. Targets of predatory bullying often find it difficult to understand what they have done to warrant the negative behaviours. This is not surprising as they do not need to do anything wrong to become targeted.

Predatory bullying – case notes

A secretary joined a media organisation working for a senior manager. Within a few days, she found that he was behaving very badly towards her. He would criticise her work pointing out errors in front of visitors. He would become angry whenever he was kept waiting. The secretary found out that he had behaved in the same way with all his secretaries and that no one had stayed long.

Dispute-related bullying

Dispute-related bullying develops out of a perceived slight or conflict that has been allowed to get out of hand with the result that the social climate in the workplace has become soured. Each participant in the dispute-related conflict comes to perceive the other person as having caused them harm. The attacks and counter-attacks escalate until the destruction of the opponent becomes the overriding goal. Dispute-related conflict can involve intense emotions leading individuals on both sides to experience feelings of fear, suspicion, resentment, contempt and anger.

Dispute-related bullying – case notes

Two research scientists had been working on a project. When one of the researchers made a breakthrough, he wrote a paper that failed to recognise the work undertaken by his colleague. From that time the two men would not work together and at every opportunity they would undermine each other. This attitude spread to their teams with the resultant loss of co-operation and support.

Escalating bullying

Escalating bullying can be explained by the way people attribute the reasons for their own and others' behaviours. When people consider their own behaviour they tend to attribute positive aspects to their personality and values and negative aspects to external circumstances such as their health or pressure at work. Typically, people looking at the behaviour of others see it the opposite way round. Negative behaviours are seen as due to personal characteristics and positive behaviours the result of external circumstances. In an escalating conflict, neither person is passive. As each perceived negative act occurs, the other player will respond according to their attribution of the intentions behind the act. As the atmosphere deteriorates, it is possible that both players come to believe that the other person is responsible for the breakdown of relationships and either may accuse the other of bullying.

Attribution of intention – case notes

A supervisor was walking down a corridor talking to a colleague. As they came to a door the supervisor held the door open for the colleague but let it close as Jill, another member of his team, walked up. Jill saw this as a deliberate act and felt upset. During the next week Jill thought about what had happened and began to notice more things about the supervisor and started to behave negatively towards him. This continued for a few weeks during which time the supervisor

and Jill only noticed the negative behaviours of the other. Independently they went to human resources, Jill complained that the supervisor was bullying her and the supervisor said that Jill was being obstructive.

Complex bullying

While there are complexities in understanding the origin and processes involved in the development of bullying between two people, the situation becomes much more complex in an organisational setting where there are a number of players, a range of motivations, hidden agendas and old scores to be settled. The following four examples describe some aspects of complex bullying in organisations.

Delegated bullying

Sometimes the person perceived as undertaking the bullying is unaware of the role that they are playing on behalf of someone else, generally their manager. In order for this kind of bullying to occur the target has to be painted in a poor light by the manager. The target will be described to the naive bully (NB) as lazy, unco-operative, ineffective or difficult. Having established this expectation in the mind of the NB, the manager exerts pressure on the NB to bring the target into line. Common corrective measures might include close monitoring, isolation and the setting of unreasonable goals. The NB would be expected to report their actions on addressing the target's 'failures' to the manager. If the target experiences the NB behaviour as bullying it is not uncommon for the NB to be identified as a bully and the manager to escape criticism.

Bystander bullying

It is not always the primary target of bullying that is most affected by the behaviours of a bully. In some instances, the bully creates a situation where one person is picked upon unfairly and other people stand by watching helplessly but on occasions may take part in the taunting of the target. Research (Tehrani, 2004) has shown that bystanders can experience a high level of distress as a result of their feelings of guilt at being unable to support the victim and fear of standing up to the workplace bully.

Bystander – case notes

A CEO insisted on total unquestioning support. Anyone who raised issues or foresaw problems in his ideas was verbally attacked in management meetings and described as inflexible and resistant to change. Meetings of the senior team were characterised by personal attacks and anxiety about when their turn would come. Efforts to assist the target were rare with most of the senior managers sitting silent, waiting for the tirade to end.

Merry-go-round bullying

Merry-go-round bullying is a variant of bystander bullying. In this case the bully selects one member of a team at a time to bully; after a while the attention moves on to another team member. The team is constantly on edge wondering when it will be their turn to be bullied.

Mobbing or gang bullying

Mobbing involves gang bullying where the target is typically a team member or a manager. As mobbing is group behaviour, the bad behaviour from a single member of the mobbing group need not be particularly bad or frequent for the impact of the group behaviour to have a major impact on the target. If challenged it is much easier for individual mobbers to justify their infrequent bad behaviours.

Mobbing – case notes

Elaine could not drink alcohol due to a medical condition. Her job required her to attend residential events with colleagues. One of her colleagues kept drawing attention to her sobriety and over time others would join in insisting she have a drink and commenting that it could not possibly be bad for her. Elaine found this situation difficult and started to stay in her room or travelled home whenever possible. Her colleagues

began to see her as odd and descriptions like 'kill-joy' and 'party-pooper' became commonplace.

Good guy/bad guy bullying

There are occasions when two or more individuals become involved in the bullying process. The good guy will befriend and appear concerned about the target while passing on information to the bad guy who uses the information to refine their bullying behaviour.

Good guy/bad guy – case notes

Judy was a homeworker, she had a good relationship with her previous boss but when a new manager joined the company she found his style brash and critical. She was having personal problems with her son who was playing truant from school. Sometimes she would talk to a colleague about how upset and vulnerable she was feeling. Her relationship with the manager grew worse and he seemed able to pick the most difficult times to put added pressure on her. After a few months her manager mentioned something that Judy had told her colleague in confidence. She then realised that he had been given personal information by the colleague and was using it against her.

Subordinate bullying

Although the power of the role or position can protect the jobholder from bullying, around 12 per cent of bullying in the UK is by subordinates (CIPD, 2004). Subordinate bullying can be subtle and may remain hidden for some time. Subordinates have the power to undermine, procrastinate, block, withhold information and fail to pass on important messages.

Subordinate – case notes

Sally joined an organisation as a middle manager. An internal candidate, George had been unsuccessful. A female subordinate

(Jenny), who was responsible for a key area of work, held back information that Sally needed to do her job. When Sally asked why information had not been given she would say 'I thought you would know that.' Sally also missed important meetings because messages were not passed on. Jenny and George began to talk to colleagues and others giving untrue examples of how Sally was unreasonable and incompetent.

Passive aggressive bullying

People use passive aggression as a way of undermining and manipulating others. Instead of being open in disagreeing, they will resist undertaking any tasks allocated to them and covertly sabotage or undermine the efforts of their manager and others. Passive aggressive bullies resist undertaking routine social or occupational tasks and constantly complain about being misunderstood or unappreciated. They can demonstrate a wide range of emotions depending upon what they wish to achieve. To a peer or subordinate they may be sullen or argumentative as a way of avoiding work. On the other hand, they may be playful and charming to get the attention of their manager. Passive aggressive bullies alternate between hostile attacks and contrition. They tend to emphasise their personal misfortunes, difficulties and needs as a way of manipulating others to provide them with help and support or to deflect blame.

Passive aggressive – case notes

Anne worked in a small office with Emma, another personal assistant. Some days Emma would be pleasant and cheerful but at other times she would not speak for days. Emma would put Anne under pressure to help her but when Anne did the work Emma would be on the internet doing her shopping. The situation got worse after Anne had booked a half-day's holiday and Emma left early leaving the office without cover. Emma insisted that Anne had deliberately failed to tell her that she was taking a half-day. A senior manager found Anne crying and met with Emma to discuss what was happening. Emma responded by raising a grievance against Anne.

Personality disordered bullying

Personality disorders are long-standing disturbances in personality that commonly begin in late adolescence and continue throughout life. People with personality disorders engage in repetitive patterns of behaviour in their occupational and other relationships. Usually the people suffering from personality disorders are unaware of the impact that their behaviour is having on others and frequently they do not believe that they have a problem. There are many types of personality disorder and some of the milder versions of the disorder are sometimes valued in the workplace where a single-minded approach can be viewed as an advantage. However, people with more developed personality disorders are difficult to handle due to the nature of their condition. They have difficulties in sustaining relationships with other people and see their own negative behaviours as virtues or strengths.

Organisational bullying

In recent years, it has been recognised that organisations can behave in a bullying manner (Liefooghe & MacKenzie Davey, 2001). Organisational bullying occurs in situations in which organisational practices and procedures are used to oppress, demean or humiliate the workforce. There are a number of different ways in which organisations can employ bullying tactics as a management style.

External pressure

Sometimes organisations are bullied by outside bodies including shareholders, customers and government agencies. Profit or performance targets may be set at a level that cannot be achieved without placing significant stress and pressure on the employees. A chief executive, managing director, head teacher or other leader required to bring about the changes is put in the difficult position where any failure to achieve the targets may result in some form of censorship whilst working to achieve the targets will cause extreme pressure and distress to the workforce.

History and culture

Organisational cultures tend to develop over time and are made up of shared beliefs, assumptions and behaviours. When organisational cultures are based on negative beliefs and assumptions then institutionalised

bullying can occur. The following are examples of cultures that lead to bullying: blame cultures, gossip cultures and victimising cultures.

Senior team tactics

In some organisations, the chief executive may appoint a henchman or woman whose job it is to carry out harsh and uncaring actions, leaving the CEO with clean hands. When challenged, the CEO may even appear genuinely concerned about the negative behaviours, and may decide to punish the henchman/woman if things go too far. This process results from the CEO's difficulty in handling the harsh and the caring require-ments of the role and splitting the role, allowing him or her to be caring while leaving his or her subordinate to hand out all the difficult and punishing messages (Hirschhorn, 1999).

Process bullying

When oppressive organisational practices are employed frequently and consistently, employees feel victimised by them. Examples of organisa-tional bullying can include organisations excessively using statistics to manage workflow, or punishments such as withdrawal of overtime for failing to reach unreasonable performance targets. In organisational bullying, employees often recognise that their line manager is not the source of the problem but rather the bullying is related to the way in which the organisation goes about its business.

Strong management, healthy conflict and bullying

Many managers accused of bullying find it difficult to recognise them-selves as behaving in a bullying or aggressive way. When line managers need to deal with a low performing team their role is to motivate the team to perform more effectively. The process of bringing about changes in the ways of working involves action in a number of areas such as agreeing standards, identifying and dealing with errors and mistakes, increasing productivity, achieving greater flexibility of roles, changing priorities and reducing unreasonable expenditure. If these changes are introduced and managed correctly they can achieve the required business improvements with little or no employee distress. However, if the line manager fails in his or her handling of the change accusations of bullying can occur (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Strong management versus bullying

Addressing poor performance in teams	Strong management	Bullying
The performance issue is identified.	The identification involves looking at all the potential reasons for the performance deficit.	There is no attempt to identify the nature or source of the poor performance.
The views of the team or individual are sought to identify the causes.	The team/individual takes part in looking for the source of the problems.	There is no discussion of the cause of the poor performance.
New standards of performance are agreed.	Standards of performance and behaviours are set and agreed for the team and manager.	New standards imposed without discussion of what might be appropriate.
Failures to achieve the standards are handled as performance improvement issues.	Support is provided for individuals who are struggling. Where there is an unwillingness to comply, action is taken.	Ridicule, criticism, shouting, withholding benefits, demotion, teasing and sarcasm are used to deal with failure.
Recognition of contribution.	Improvements are rewarded.	No monitoring leading to a lack of recognition for efforts and arbitrary rewards.

Healthy conflict and bullying

A certain amount of disagreement and conflict is unavoidable in working life. When handled well conflict can lead to interesting and creative solutions. Healthy conflict occurs when people clash over their wish to pursue differing goals, competition for scarce resources or through a misunderstanding. It is important that differences of view are not suppressed as unless differences are brought into the open and dealt with they can fester and cause problems in the future.

One of the ways to distinguish between healthy and destructive conflicts which may lead to bullying is to identify the underlying reason for the conflict. Conflicts can either be related to an issue, idea or task or to personal values and beliefs. The resolution of issue-related conflicts is

generally easier to achieve than a conflict related to a strongly held value or belief, although both could lead to bullying. Destructive conflict and bullying are more common in organisations where there is role ambiguity, a lack of co-operative working, a failure to share goals and objectives, a low level of trust, poor communication and a lack of respect (WHO, 2003). Bullying differs from healthy conflicts in that bullying always involves an abuse of power whereas in healthy conflict the participants are able to discuss the issue without wishing to undermine or show a lack of respect towards the person holding a different view on the issue.

Discussion

This introduction to *Workplace Bullying: Symptoms and Solutions* briefly sets the scene for the rest of the book, providing the reader with an indication of the nature and extent of workplace bullying. However, the main focus of this book is not to describe workplace bullying as a phenomenon but rather to show the negative impact that it has on workers and their organisations, and then to provide the reader with some well-tested and proven interventions and techniques to deal with workplace bullying. One of the most challenging aspects of working with bullying is the need to reflect on the nature of human relationships and to explore whether it is ever helpful to regard one party in a conflict as wholly evil or guilty and the other as totally innocent and blameless. Organisations and employees need to move beyond bullying and to deal with the antecedents, triggers and pressures which can lead to bullying.

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