

Classy culture or vulture culture?

Bullying at school is not restricted to children, says organisational psychologist LEANNE FARADAY-BRASH.

The rise in awareness of bullying over the past two years is nothing short of meteoric. Like eating disorders, bullying has probably always existed. Perhaps we just didn't have a name for these and other human conditions we have yet to define. However, while there might be compelling anecdotal and clinical evidence to suggest that eating disorders are on the rise, whether the same applies to the incidence of bullying is not so clear. What is becoming a lot clearer, however, is our understanding of the extraordinarily damaging impact of bullying on victims, their family, their school, the workplace and the community.

School yard bullies grow up

If one links the words 'bullying' and 'schools', one inevitably thinks of school yard bullies. It may well be that some school yard bullies grow up to become workplace bullies. Some even become educators, and end up back in the school yard! In this article, I will explore some of the contextual drivers for a good, if not great, workplace. I will also attempt to define bullying and explain how it may differ from harassment, as well as explore and explode some myths about bullying, power and authority. It is important to distinguish between the existence of an *individual* bully and a *culture* of bullying. Finally, I will explore some attributes of a healthy culture where school leaders act as ruthless protectors of the school's emotional environment.

The stakes are high. Teaching is like parenting. Kids learn from us when we want them to. And they also learn from us when we don't want them to! The responsibility of all staff in schools is to model healthy and respectful ways of relating to others. This seems obvious but the rational and ethical don't always connect. The media seizes on anything remotely to do with bullying like a terrier at a trouser leg and won't let go. We saw this in Victoria with the first high profile case years ago, involving students at an eastern suburban independent school, and interest has not waned.

Retaining talented staff

Here, as in the USA, there is a dearth of exceptional educators. These are people Peter Drucker would have called 'archetypal knowledge workers'; those who actively share their knowledge and wisdom, by making their ideas explicit. The real challenge today, in a context of skills shortages, is to attract and retain talented staff. To do so, we must have an 'attractive' culture and a good 'brand'. This marketing of vocations will become increasingly important with the rise of Generation X and Y, who will be much more

discerning about where they want to work, and, as consumers, will consider what the prospective employers 'brand' represents. Government schools are facing increased competition from private schools as parents seek to extract maximum value from their children's education, in order to afford them better choices. Thus, there are issues of competitive advantage that must be addressed by schools if they wish to become institutions of choice for parents, students, educators and other professional staff. As with any organisations this starts, but does not finish, at the top.

Non-physical bullying

In days gone by, the word 'bullying' more commonly had physical connotations. Bullying would now be understood by most people as having emotional, psychological or physical dimensions and overtones. Some is subtle (for example, consistently withholding information critical to someone's success on a task) and some is overt and obvious (for example, public and ongoing ridicule or verbal intimidation).

Bullying doesn't have to involve physical abuse or intimidation but it does involve the exercise of power. And this power can even be exercised by those who have no *prima facie* authority. Therefore, I am suggesting that bullying is not always perpetrated by senior staff against junior staff. In fact, I have worked with organisations where the board and its chairperson are bullying the CEO or the principal. I have also worked with organisations where a whole team is bullying a supervisor, or a shop floor union delegate is bullying an executive.

People can behave inappropriately but that behaviour is not necessarily hazardous to peoples' health. Some people, including Holocaust survivors or Somalian refugees, have witnessed horrific things, but experience few apparent long-term effects. They appear quite able to live functional lives. Others are exposed to lesser trauma or hazards but succumb to post-traumatic stress disorder and never recover. Clearly, there are individual differences in the ways people react to trauma, irrespective of its level. However, the impact must be considered in the context of the severity, and the cumulative effect, of the trauma.

Common denominators of bullying

The common denominators in all bullying are that it, unlike harassment, usually involves:

- some pattern of abuse, that is, it is not a one-off event
- some physical or psychological harm or potential harm to the individual
- much more than unwelcome attention.

The other key distinction between bullying (repeated behaviour) and harassment, (could be an isolated incident) is the absence of any obvious protected attribute or prejudice as the underlying basis for the negative attention or abuse. Under federal Equal Employment

Opportunity (EEO) law, harassment (unwelcome attention that offends, humiliates or intimidates) is unlawful when the basis of that attention is linked to a prohibited ground of discrimination, for example, race, sexuality or marital status. Bullying is typically defined under various state occupational health and safety laws as repeated unreasonable behaviour that creates a risk to (physical or psychological) health and safety but does not have to go to a protected attribute at all.

At the end of the day, the distinctions themselves probably don't matter at all to the victim of either the harassment or the bullying. We must still recognise, however, while bullying is regarded as a safety issue because it is hazardous to our welfare, our concern with it is also based on our moral, social and organisational beliefs as to what constitutes a good culture. People have a fundamental human right to come to work and feel safe. But freedom from bullying is not the hallmark of a good place to work, it is a baseline expectation.

The trauma people may experience at the hands (or the tongue) of a malicious bully is no different to the recurring nightmares that may play back in the minds of those involved in an horrific car crash, the palpable fear felt by those who have been held at gunpoint or the abiding memories of those who have undertaken several tours of duty in a war zone. Trauma is trauma and we only have a limited repertoire of physiological and psychological responses, (read as 'reactions') to trauma.

The motivation to bully

So bullying is hazardous and repeated - but is it necessarily malicious or intentional? There is no doubt that some of the respondents in grievances, brought by alleged victims of bullying in my consulting practice, have been incredulous and horrified at being accused of bullying. They may acknowledge some tension, overt conflict or the good old 'personality clash'. Certainly, they don't see themselves as bullies. Uncharacteristic of the real sociopath, they may show significant (genuine) remorse and be capable of modifying their behaviour quite spontaneously, and in a sustained way. These are, if you like quite unwitting bullies who may have thought that sarcastic, belittling treatment of others is 'light hearted fun or good old Aussie humour' or that screaming and swearing at someone is letting off steam or 'just' showing (justified) frustration.

At the other end of the continuum are those that really do experience satisfaction in making someone else shake and quake. They are the power trippers par excellence and only feel superior in the context of someone else's inferiority. There have been those who, when asked why they do what they do, say, in a moment of pure simple unbridled honesty that *'it's fun'*. I firmly believe the vast majority of employees in Australian workplaces are not sociopaths. That is not to say that those who bully, however unintentionally, can't wreak havoc in an organisation.

There is growing pressure everywhere to perform and be accountable. Ironically, many oft-identified bullies are senior in organisations and are known and promoted or

otherwise rewarded on their results. They may not engender employee engagement but they may just get compliance. And that may be more than some managers get in a month of Sundays, by consulting with everyone and agreeing on nothing. So, for those bullies, the end justifies the means and the company seems to like, or at least condone, the way they achieve their outcomes. With the pressure to perform can come some overzealous behaviour, so it is not a matter of style or substance, but more a matter of degree. These culprits don't inspire their people to perform - they push them. They don't direct or delegate - they order. They don't provide corrective balanced feedback - they emasculate. In many cases, these behaviours can be explained, but never excused, as poor interpersonal, leadership and feedback skills.

While we're on the subject of leaders and managers (that is, bosses), the flipside of the coin is the frustrating realisation that some managers will be intent on living up to their titles and will genuinely seek to manage, and that necessarily includes doing the hard stuff. I have both witnessed and mediated countless disputes between work parties, in which the manager appears to be making a reasonable attempt to manage unreasonable behaviour or chronic under-performance in a reasonable way but the defensive under-performer alleges 'bullying' because they don't want to be accountable.

I am not even going to suggest that, in some cases, the alleged victim doesn't believe their own publicity. Indeed, they may be genuinely stressed at the (reasonable) demands placed on them. However, schools, in particular, cannot be best-in-class (pun intended) if staff feel put out at being asked to earn their salaries or to acknowledge the need to do some things differently, in response to a different world.

While any comprehensive discussion of the industrial relations environment is beyond the scope of this article, any legislation, system or representative body (for example, a teachers union) that defends misconduct, chronic underperformance or bullying, undermines all the good work done for the benefit of students and community. I say this while recognising that lack of mentorship, skills development, consistency, visionary leadership and adequate resources may all contribute to lacklustre performance. All staff are entitled to be set up for success.

Offence as defence

This isn't the whole story, either. Not all bullies are sociopaths or incompetent. Some of them undoubtedly bully to guard against being bullied. They operate on the principle that the best form of defence is a good offence. This strategy may result from a long and torrid history of being pushed around when younger, and wanting to safeguard against this in adult life. Any educator charged with the responsibility of nurturing young people, and attending to their psychosocial as well as their academic growth, must be self-aware, emotionally intelligent and, again, accountable. If that means we need to do some work on ourselves to moderate our behaviour, then surely it is incumbent upon us to do so.

Not all bullies roam in packs. Individual bullies may be tolerated in organisations or perhaps marginalised. If we're lucky or supported, we may find it relatively easy to escape the attentions of a would-be workplace bully. The more insidious phenomenon is a culture of bullying where unwholesome competition, undermining, heavy politicking, dishonesty, rumour mongering, and taking credit for others' good work are rife. This has also been referred to as 'mobbing' and denotes the work of a pack mentality, even when a physical threat is not involved.

The risks of staying in those cultures are that we could:

- become one of them
- be irretrievably damaged by them
- stay, stand and fight the establishment and go under while trying.

Of course there is the chance we could just force a change in culture, but there would be a lot conspiring against us. No one person attempting to drive positive change is likely to have a desired and lasting impact unless he or she is the CEO or the principal. Taking on a critical mass would likely bury you in an industrial and ethical quagmire, unless you had the fearlessness of Lara Croft, of *Tomb Raider fame* or had the emotional resilience of a Jack Bauer (from the hit series '24').

Finding the balance

As with so many things in life, the answer lies in balance: balancing the right to expect high performance and commitment from staff with the right of staff to expect clear consistent laying down of ground rules, genuine consultation, professional development and mentorship, and every fair and reasonable opportunity to modify conduct or performance if it is under par. As a passionate EEO practitioner, I would always respect the rights of schools to demand a staff code of behaviour consistent with the religious tenets of its professed faith. However, in my work, I have witnessed numerous examples of cruel bullying and behaviour that is tantamount to constructive dismissal (a form of unfair dismissal). This is because schools have taken a stand on what they perceive to be undesirable private living arrangements and lifestyles for staff, on religious or sexuality grounds that would, in any other context, constitute discriminatory treatment on a prohibited ground of discrimination.

I have genuine sympathy for any institution trying to balance the needs and rights of its staff, its students and the principles on which the school was founded. This is not easy stuff in a contemporary world. I was asked recently (and far too late in the process) to support both parties in an attempt by a school to renegotiate expectations of a most dedicated school counsellor by a new principal, who wanted to re-invent the terms under which this person worked, the nature of the services being provided, and along with that, be granted sweeping access to confidential files. There was little trust between the two parties and the counsellor ended up resigning and pursuing compensation for unfair dismissal. What was being asked of this counsellor in another time and place was

probably reasonable but the relationship was not solid enough to withstand the pressure. In the end, nobody won. The staff member left after many years of service, aggrieved and embittered.

Bullying by parents

The pressures on families, reflected in the current rate of separation and divorce, and rising competition for tertiary places, all contribute to higher stress levels in parents. These then translate into growing demands on schools. Teachers and other staff have to withstand bullying by parents, too. Every school has a duty of care to safeguard staff from all manner of risks. Education of the parent body, consistent modelling, visible boundaries and clearly laid out consequences are paramount. And if that isn't enough, the growing challenge will be for schools to find strategies to prevent cyber bullying.

As the AFL has consistently advocated for some years, punishment after the fact is probably not going to be the answer in the long term. Ironically, education that empowers the wise exercise of free choice is the only sustainable answer. Principals and school senior management teams that accept and reward nothing less than a safe, respectful, transparent, accountable and team-oriented workplace will reap the benefits of an engaged, adaptable, innovative workforce that has the potential to shape the lives of the students in their charge. Every one of us is a custodian of culture in our respective workplaces. In the end, we get the culture we deserve; that is, the culture for which we are prepared to settle. Why settle for second best?

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