

How Leadership Can Develop Into Bullying: A Case Analysis

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This article illustrates how a leader became a bully through the interplay of a range of systemic factors such as external pressures on the organisation and excessive expectations. Psychodynamic concepts are used to give insights into the defences used by the bully and fellow employees. Implications for practice include a risk analysis and recommendations for the management of bullying.

KEYWORDS: Systems, splitting, envy, projection, boundaries.

Introduction

There is ample evidence that bullying is damaging psychologically and physically to employees (Adams, 1996, Field, 1996). There is also evidence that bullying is costly to organisations in terms of increased absenteeism, low productivity, low morale, high turnover of staff and litigation costs (Rayner, Hoel and Cooper, 2002). Although we know much about the outcomes of bullying, we have little empirical knowledge about how bullying scenarios are generated.

In this article I draw on my research on workplace bullying, in a public sector organisation, to illustrate how bullying is an

outcome of a complex interplay of systemic organisational factors. These include (i) the external environment of an organisation, (ii) the internal organisational context such as culture and structure, (iii) group dynamics, and (iv) individual behavioural dispositions.

The article is in four parts.

1. A case study of bullying.
2. De-coding bullying at work: how psychodynamic concepts can aid an understanding of bullying.
3. An analysis of the described bullying scenario.
4. Implications for practice.

1. A case study of bullying

BACKGROUND TO THE CASE STUDY

The case study is taken from my research on the psychodynamics of workplace bullying (White, 2007). I was particularly interested in the motives of individuals within bullying scenarios, *e.g.* why bullies bully, why some individuals become victims and the role played by the audience, *i.e.* those who are aware of bullying.

Access to the organisation studied was through an employee who was concerned about the high levels of bullying he encountered at work. In negotiations with the HR director it was decided that I could look at bullying as part of an on-going study of stress and was invited to carry out semi-structured interviews on stress with volunteers from three teams, which the HR director identified containing possible bullying scenarios. Data was also gathered from incidental observations, from my emotional responses and those of interviewees. My feedback to the organisation was in the form of a report on a systemic understanding of sources of stress and coping strategies.

THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

At the time of my research the organisation was undergoing a programme of radical change with many of the changes being driven by external stakeholders. There were government pressures on management to introduce new working practices, *e.g.* to become more customer focussed, to be more accountable and to have a more diverse workforce. The pace of change required was rapid, giving little time for the assimilation of new practices into the systems and culture of the organisation before the next change initiative arrived.

Top management failed to acknowledge the impact of these changes on the stress levels of their employees. There were few outlets for the expression of stress and, as admitting to being under stress was not deemed to be acceptable in this culture, many of these feelings were repressed.

Furthermore, communication from the top of the organisation was often unclear and ambiguous. For example, an announcement of staff cuts was made at the same time as employees were being 'ordered' to work in a more healthy way and go home early. Employees had become increasingly cynical of dictates from top management. They did not feel valued by senior managers or within the organisation as a whole and so sought recognition from within their teams.

THE BULLYING SCENARIO

The scenario described was derived from interviews with members from one of the teams.

The team leader, who had been appointed from outside of the public sector and in the face of internal competition from within his team, was unfamiliar with the ways of working in the British Civil Service. The appointing top managers had high expectations of the new leader and he, in turn, had high expectations of himself and of the project for which he was now responsible.

I interviewed him, and some of his team, about a year after he had been appointed. By then he had firmly established his authority but his abrasive management style was unfamiliar to his team and not welcomed by them. He openly criticised staff in meetings. An interviewee likened his behaviour to being given a public flogging.

The leader identified very strongly with the project for which he was responsible. As a team member said: "You prove your allegiance to him

because he *is* the project.” Another interviewee added: “We are focussed on one thing only, getting our project through the next phase. It is what is dictated. That’s what our output is going to be and hell, or high water, won’t stop us from that objective. It’s quite brutal. There is a leader at the top and we go where he tells us for better or for worse. He has a cutting edge—you will bloody well do it.”

It became apparent from my work that he did not trust his staff but constantly tested them by suddenly making demands, as if to see how they would react. For example, just as staff were getting ready to go on holiday, he gave them extra work or changed the way he wanted things done. These actions created high levels of anxiety, resentment and disillusionment and reinforced how team members generally found the leader to be inconsistent. He could be very decisive but often changed his mind late into the decision making process. He could be charming but would suddenly become angry.

The leader was particularly angry when he heard that key staff were leaving his team, especially when he had had specifically trained them for particular tasks. The situation was aggravated by some staff who withheld information from him. This action may have been their covert way of ‘hitting’ back at the leader and certainly increased the pressure on him.

Generally team members did not feel valued by him and to cope with the high levels of anxiety, they took defensive action. Some staff had left; others were planning to leave, or had fantasies of escaping. One employee idealised him as a defence against her anxiety. In summary, the team had fallen into subservience, unable to speak out and challenge him overtly. Staff became increasingly isolated from each other and as the team became less cohesive, an impasse developed in the team dynamics, which limited the potential for healthy employee interaction.

Over time targets had begun to slip and there were increasing difficulties with recruitment to the team that had developed a reputation for being a brutal one in which to work. Employees who were looking for promotion perceived this team to be a risky environment, from the point of view of career development, and avoided it.

The scenario described raises questions as to how, over a period of just over a year, the newly appointed external ‘highflyer’, on whom top management had such high expectations, came to be experienced as a bully by his staff and how the team had developed a deeply negative reputation. So:

Why did this leader become a bully?

How did the organisational context facilitate bullying?

How did team dynamics foster bullying?

The next section outlines theoretical concepts which can aid an understanding of the complex nature of bullying and the concepts will then be used to examine these three questions.

2. De-coding bullying at work: how psychodynamic concepts can aid an understanding of bullying

A PSYCHODYNAMIC APPROACH

Central in applying a psychodynamic approach to bullying behaviour is an assumption that bullying occurs not just on a conscious level but on subconscious and unconscious levels too; that unconscious ideas and desires have a determining and motivating influence on a person’s conscious thoughts, emotions and actions. As Gabriel (1999) comments, each of us is often unaware of these influences as they may relate back to childhood and/or are generated in

response to past traumatic events and experiences.

Four core psychodynamic concepts are used here to examine the case outlined above: 'splitting', 'envy', 'projection' and 'boundary testing'.

SPLITTING

It is often observed how bullies appear to have a Jekyll and Hyde nature, a personality that shows extremes of character, charming to some and evil to others (Adams, 1996). In psychodynamic terms this characteristic reflects a 'splitting' on subconscious and unconscious levels.

'Splitting' means precisely that; splitting of an 'object', be that a person, a value, or a concept, into two different parts that are exclusively identified as 'good' and 'bad' (Stapley, 2006:56).

But why might bullies choose to see people and situations in this way as either 'good' or 'bad'?

ENVY

Victims suggest that the motive of bullies is envy (Seigne, 1998, Vartia, 1996). Envy is the angry feeling that another person possesses and enjoys something desirable—the envious impulse being to take it away or to spoil it for that other person (Klein, 1957). The envy of a bully probably involves both 'stealing' and 'spoiling' something which the bully wants but which he, or she, sees the target of bullying as already possessing. As an example, bullies identify with objects, or with the goodness of others, which they then seek to take or 'steal', although such a decision may be taken on unconscious or subconscious levels.

Perversely, whilst they may then feel satisfied because they are identifying with the object,

or quality, of their desire, this may be insufficient to meet their needs. They may also have to get rid of their feelings of badness by 'spoiling' or 'poisoning' others. This toxic dynamic involves the concept of 'projection'.

PROJECTION

One way of getting rid of feelings of badness is to project such 'bad' feelings and vibes on to others. Projection here literally means throwing in front of oneself—rather like a light being projected on to a screen—those qualities, feelings, wishes, which the individual often refuses to recognise in him, or herself, on to another (*i.e.* the targeted) person. In this way the bully puts onto selected others his, or her, 'bad' feelings and feels better within him, or herself, for having done so.

BOUNDARY TESTING

When projecting their negative feelings on to others, bullies may also be testing them—for example, by criticising, humiliating, and undermining them (Field, 2006)—perhaps to see what they can get away with. At an unconscious level they are attempting to find someone who will become a 'container' for those feelings, *i.e.* someone who can own those 'bad' feelings on their behalf.

If, however, the target of the bully's projections has firm boundaries, such as a clear and realistic sense of self, they will be more able to stand up to the bully and resist the projections. However, if individuals have weak boundaries, as with a low level of self-confidence or sense of self, they are likely (perhaps unconsciously) to accept the negative projections of the bully and carry, or 'contain', such negative feelings for the bully. When this happens, the bully no longer has 'ownership' of those unwanted aspects of

his, or herself, and perhaps even feels fully justified by the bullying behaviour they exhibit because of the way the 'target' has, seemingly, taken-in the projections involved.

3. Analysis of the bullying scenario

Using these concepts I now look at the ways in which the organisational context and the team dynamics may have triggered, and perhaps sustained, the bully's behaviour.

The organisational context facilitated bullying through the following factors:

- External pressures and high expectations: envy and splitting

There were external pressures on the organisation to have a more diverse workforce. Appointed as an 'external', the bully came from a very different working background from his staff, and, with the high expectations heaped upon him, may have been envious of his staff's knowledge and familiarity with the organisation's existing systems and ways of working. In defending against the uncertainty and anxiety this may have provoked in him, he may well have identified very strongly with the team's project 'as if' it was an object for him alone to possess, control and successfully deliver and, through doing so, prove his worth.

Given his uncertainty, it may well have required him to diminish and denigrate the standing and role of his staff in order for him to feel good and more secure. In denying his dependency on others for his success, he perceived himself and the project to be 'good' and his staff to be 'bad'. Splitting into 'good' and 'bad' may have also been a defence against the potential for failure and shame intensified by the high expectations of top management and his expectations for the project.

- A clash of old and new ways: projection

The success of the team-based structure was dependent on keeping core expertise but the pay and promotion system had yet to be adapted to meet these needs. The bully seemed less able, than other leaders, to work through the difficulties this created, particularly in terms of generating loyalty within his team. He seemed to project these anxieties on to others as a means of defending himself against the possibility that he might actually be unable to keep key staff; they may, and did, let him down. He may also have projected his anxieties on to others as a means of defending himself against the possibility that he might be the cause of some of the difficulties being experienced in making the new systems work well.

- A repressive culture: projection and boundary testing

Negative aspects of the culture of the organisation, e.g. poor communication, repression of anxieties, lack of recognition and cynicism, were mirrored more in this team than in other teams. It would appear that the bully, unlike other leaders, was not able to work through these anxieties on behalf of his staff. One means by which he could defend against his anxieties about being in an unfamiliar culture and under high expectations from the top team was to project his anxieties on to others, testing them in different ways to find weaknesses in their boundaries and projecting onto others his anxieties for them to carry and 'contain' for him.

HOW THE TEAM DYNAMICS FOSTERED BULLYING

The four concepts, briefly outlined, provide some clues about why the leader began to work in bullying ways and the defences he utilised to protect himself from acknowledging his part in

creating the increasingly dysfunctional team he was leading. In addition, in this case, a vacuum of information and a vacuum of recognition contributed and fuelled the bullying behaviours observed.

- Vacuums of support within the team: fantasy Bullying occurs around vacuums in organisations (White, 2007) and in this case a vacuum of support developed beneath this bully. Created in two ways, (firstly, he was denied information from immediate staff and secondly, team members were submissive and were unable to work collectively to set boundaries for him), this vacuum, or void, made the leader feel even more insecure and anxious in his role as team leader. To defend against these feelings, his fantasies about 'his' ownership of the project and his expectations for it replaced reality and increasingly distanced him from those around him which in turn intensified the mutual anxieties that characterised this team's dynamics.

4. Implications for practice

This case analysis illustrates how a leader became a bully through an interplay of many different organisational factors, *e.g.* external pressures, inconsistencies in communication from top management, repression of anxieties, defensive responses of the leader to being in this organisational context, information blockages within his team, and other the defensive responses of individuals to the bullying behaviour. These findings would imply that for the prevention and management of bullying scenarios to be effective, an holistic approach is needed, *i.e.* one which looks across a wide range of issues, for example, identifying areas of risk, examining leadership styles and looking at the ways in which employees engage with their work and with others.

In summary: Bullying is more likely to occur in organisations where:

- There is a lack of appreciation of the value of human capital.
- There is little acknowledgement of psychological welfare.
- The culture of the organisation, or group, is unable to assimilate difference.
- Topics such as 'wellness' and mental health are platitudes rather than being of genuine concern.
- Communication is poor.
- Anxieties are repressed.
- Staff is new to the organisation.
- Clear boundaries are not set *e.g.* job descriptions are not clear.
- Expectations of performance are unrealistically high.
- There are vacuums of support.
- There is very strong identification with targets.
- There is a lack of group cohesion.

Given the contextual conditions shown above, the following generic recommendations are made for managing bullying scenarios and creating less toxic environments. There are no quick fixes and for actions to be effective they need to be context determined.

I. BOUNDARY SETTING AND CONTAINMENT

Firm boundaries need to be put in place if interventions to curb a bully's behaviour are to be successful, *e.g.* job descriptions clarified, complete with information regarding the legal obligations of line managers for the psychological welfare of staff.

Bullies channel much energy into defensive actions thereby giving themselves little opportunity to reflect on the impact of their behaviour on others. Reflective opportunities

need to be provided for them, e.g. through counselling, etc.

2. LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

HR directors, mediators and line managers could benefit from a broader toolbox of knowledge that would enable them to understand the dynamics of bullying. This might include:

- (i) Knowledge of concepts such as containment, splitting, projection and boundaries, and how these can give different insights into the more personal aspects of leadership (Goffee & Jones, 2006) and the roles played by the followers of toxic leaders (Lipman-Blumen, 2005).
- (ii) Knowledge of the subconscious and unconscious dynamics of organisational life, e.g. how impasses can develop in groups when individuals collude on subconscious and unconscious levels to defend against potentially toxic projections.
- (iii) An awareness of how organisational vacuums of support, such as delays in recruiting staff, overly slow or indecisive decision making, etc., generate the potential for bullying situations to take hold.
- (vi) An awareness that in times of constant and rapid change, whilst little time is allowed for mourning the passing of old ways, if the emotional processes of disruption and change are not acknowledged, anxieties will be repressed and may re-emerge as bullying.

Conclusion

The psychodynamic approach to understanding bullying offers a less familiar but nevertheless complementary one to the more conventional ways of studying bullying in organisations.

Rather than focussing on specific aspects of bullying, this paper illustrates how a bullying scenario arose from a complex interplay of factors, e.g. external drivers of change, structural, cultural and strategic aspects of the organisation, as well as the behavioural and emotional responses of the group and individuals.

Whilst the potential for the development of toxic bullying scenarios existed within the organisation not all the leaders there became bullies and not all the teams became toxic. The concepts of splitting, envy, projection and boundaries offered insights into the defensive responses used by the bully and team members. The bully tried to defend against the anxieties, generated within the organisation, within the team and within himself, in various ways such as splitting, projecting his feelings on to the team, and testing the robustness of the psychological boundaries of others. Within his team, not all members succumbed to his 'poisonous' projections and became victims but used a variety of defences, such as idealisation, fantasy and isolation, to counter their boss's bullying approaches.

The case briefly noted how when employees become emotionally disorientated there was a loss of effective engagement with others and with the tasks in hand, both of which adversely affected performance levels and personal well-being.

I have argued that through an understanding of the systemic nature of bullying, and of unconscious and subconscious processes in organisations, that the potential for bullying can be identified, preventative action taken, problematic scenarios more effectively managed and healthier working environments created.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Sheila White (MBA, PhD) is an independent consultant and trainer on workplace bullying. Her background is in teaching and the voluntary sector. She has presented papers on bullying at a number of international conferences and is a member of ISPSO (International Society for the Psychoanalytical Study of Organisations), OPUS (An Organisation for the Promotion Understanding of Society) and the Chartered Management Institute.

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