

Interview with a CEO who stopped a workplace bully

1st March, 2011. Hadyn Olsen.

(Names and identifying characteristics have been removed for privacy)

Interviewer: Can you briefly describe what happened?

CEO: Sure, I am happy to. I was employed here to realign a toxic culture. I had been on the staff about two weeks when a member of the team who had been on the staff for over ten years came and told me she had been bullied for the last four years by another staff member. She told me a whole range of things this person had done to her such as taking away her workload, giving her minimal work of any real interest and excluding her from meetings. Generally taking every opportunity she could to minimise her. The target told me of going home nearly every day crying about what was happening. She wasn't able to leave her job for a number of reasons and so she basically had to stick it out.

She didn't want to put her complaint in writing. So following that disclosure I had a chat with our Board Chair. The Board was not aware of the particular problem because the previous manager had hidden the problem and not done anything about it.

Interviewer: So who was doing the bullying, was it a co-worker or manager?

CEO: The bully was a line supervisor who had the responsibility of giving her the work. She kept the work on her own desk and didn't give it out. It was a case of the bully building up her own ego saying, "See how important I am?" I have done extensive work with the target since then and her work capacity and competence is very high. After the bully left she has taken on much more of the work she was supposed to have been doing. No problems.

Interviewer: Did the target tell the previous GM what she was experiencing?

CEO: The bully and the previous GM were in it together. The more that the bully took to herself the more the general manager liked it. The manager was abrogating her own role. She would come in late and leave early. There were signs of a co-dependency between the manager and the bully. The target had complained to the manager but nothing had been done. She didn't take the matter to the board because she didn't have confidence to do that. The target's family had come in also to try and sort the situation out but with no success. Everything had stopped with the GM and she wouldn't allow staff to approach the board. I have changed that. I am happy for staff to approach the board and only ask that I am kept in the loop.

Interviewer: Had there been any kind of formal investigation into the target's complaints.

CEO: No. Not until I came along. The target was isolated from anyone who could help and that isolation was maintained by the bully working in cohorts with the manager. This had gone on for about four years.

Interviewer: Did others know about it in the office area?

CEO: No. No-one else recognised it except for one other person who was close to the target. That person had also tried to do something about it unsuccessfully. She had spoken up to the GM and the GM had closed it down.

The interesting thing was this GM had policies set up in intricate detail but failed in the application of it.

Interviewer: Were there other forms of bullying besides the isolation and undermining of the target's work?

CEO: There were examples of aggressive communication and body language. The line supervisor would turn her back to the target. There were blockages put in place to prevent communication. The annual appraisals were done poorly and with the lack of wage rises. The Board were unable to get the GM to change her practices. She became confrontational with them. The GM did not instil confidence. The environment also reflected this. When I came in there was archiving back to the 1970's that had to be done. No-one had done any archiving. The whole organisation was living in the past. There were conflicts with other organisations. There were multiple signs that things were not right and the Board had done everything possible.

Interviewer: So when the target first approached after you had been in the job for two weeks, what did you make of her?

CEO: She was terrified. There is no other way of describing it. Her eyes were like a possum in the headlights. She had no idea if I was friend or foe. I was appalled at what I was hearing. Instead of becoming emotional about it I promised her a couple of things. First, she would no longer be reporting to the line supervisor. She would come straight to me and I would be managing her work. Secondly, that I would do a formal investigation into what was happening immediately and that I would respond to her initially within seven days so that she had a timeline. Everything I said I would do, I did. She didn't need me letting her down as well.

Interviewer: What other steps did you take to ensure her safety during the investigation, especially with the perpetrator being close by?

CEO: Well the perpetrator trusted me. She was ingratiating toward me. The first thing I did was to have a chat with the chairperson and the HR consultant. I told them what I was going to do in terms of the process and the chair asked me to work with the lawyer as well. I had all my ducks in a row before I went into my first meeting with the perpetrator. I had to admit I was shocked when I first heard that this had been going on after four years.

I became quite methodical in my thinking rather than allowing my emotions to take over and the absolute disgust at what I was hearing. I knew that to get the information from the bully I had to be casual about it.

When I talked to the perpetrator I said, "So and so said that you had been bullying her." She said, "Oh yes. I do that when I am stressed." Then she added, "I really feel like I can talk to you." So I then asked her what stressed her. She answered, "My job." So I said that I needed to look at her job with the option of restructuring her role etc. And her job was impossible. No-one could do it. In a sense that in itself was a form of bullying. I found that she was doing

one and a half roles and the target was doing a quarter of a role. The bully had taken all this work off the target to look good in the eyes of the previous GM.

So what I did was to restructure so the job descriptions of the target and the perpetrator were clear and more balanced.

But what happened then was the bully would go back to the target and do nasty intimidating things such as aggressive body language, sneering at her and all of that kind of thing. In the end I had to ban the bully from going into the victim's office. She wasn't allowed in there unsupervised.

Interviewer: How did the bully's behaviour change toward you as you began to manage this situation? You mentioned that at first she was ingratiating toward you...

CEO: I saw a wide range of behaviours. Sometimes she would come to work quite shaky, other days angry. Sometimes she would be relaxed and smiling. Every day there was a different stage show. So in the end I recommended to her that she start counselling. She did that and I think it did help. It helped her to see what her triggers were and why she was behaving that way. But as soon as it stopped she completely reverted back to her old ways within two or three weeks.

Interviewer: When you challenged her about this, what sort of reactions did you get?

CEO: By this stage I was doing the process for dismissal. We had done the restructuring. We had done separation of the staff. We had done the counselling. I had to warn her. The target was coming to me twice or three times a week stating she was back and doing this or that. One incident involved a request by the target for a simple power cord to be placed along the wall in her office. The bully deliberately put it across the floor and put tape over it, sneering at the target and telling her there wasn't enough cord to take it around the floor. There were other cords long enough to actually do what the target had requested but the bully was again using an opportunity to demoralise the target. These things kept happening.

Interviewer: So even after telling her and trying to separate them, the bully was still going in and taking the opportunity to continue to bully?

CEO: Yes it was like she was getting some kind of reward for doing it. I think she was getting off on power at what she was doing. She was quite a powerless individual in her daily life. She benefitted personally from having someone more powerless than herself.

Interviewer: How long did this whole process go on for?

CEO: It went on for seven months. I also kept a diary documenting everything. I think that was really important. I found the bully would fudge history to suit her purposes. I would have to go back and then say, "No. This is what was said or this is what was agreed." I found she could be incredibly manipulative and would skew things the way she wanted them to be. If you are a busy manager and you haven't kept good records, it will come back to bite you.

Interviewer: At what point did you decide enough is enough?

CEO: When she reverted back a couple of weeks after counselling had finished. We had done everything we could do. I realised we were not going to change this person.

Interviewer: From a personal perspective how did you cope with that seven months? What did you notice about yourself?

CEO: Make no mistake. It is never easy. These kinds of situations are as draining as hell. The impact is on the whole team not just you and that employee. You have to do things to preserve your own temper. You need support and outlets. I had good support.

Interviewer: Did she ever complain about you or target you because you were taking this seriously?

CEO: Well it was interesting. Initially when she came to the first warning meeting she was pathetic. Poor me and all the rest of it. She didn't want to bring a support person because she said she would be fine. She did the same at the second meeting. Then at the third meeting she turned up with this guy who had decided he was going to investigate me and had done research on me. He told me that they were going to go to the employment tribunal and get people to speak out against me and she was sitting there as hard as nails. That was when I finally saw the real person. After that all my concern about her being vulnerable went out the window. She was the best manipulator I have ever seen. In that meeting where she was about to be fired she didn't have any tears. After he had attacked me personally she turned to him and said, "Enough thanks. That will do." She was the one in control. It was fascinating to watch as I had never seen this side of her before.

Interviewer: So the nice side, the victim who was vulnerable, all that was gone?

CEO: Yes it was just incredible. You wouldn't have believed it. To this day I believe that was the real person I saw.

Interviewer: After the dismissal, what changed in the team?

CEO: The next morning she turned up for work. I just stood my ground and said, "No. Please take your belongings and leave. You are no longer employed here." I kept all the team away. I didn't want them to feel humiliated or watch the bully being humiliated. Mentally I went into a neutral space.

One of the things I discovered after the bully had left was that her manager couldn't actually manage. She had bullied her manager and the manager was terrified of her to the point that she was unable to function.

So now we have a completely new culture. The target is still here. She is no longer going home crying and instead has a new sense of happiness. She became employee of the year last year. It has really just changed the whole place. It is a good place now. It has turned from a negative to a positive culture.

Interviewer: So it seems that you have taken this whole incident seriously. You approached it head on and took a route to try and resolve it. You have needed in the end to dismiss. Now some managers may take another line and throw their hands in the air because it is all so difficult. They end up saying to people, "Just harden up."

CEO: It doesn't work. The needs of people should be recognised. If you just try and sweep it under the rug it will come out somewhere else. If you don't address it when it is first handed to you it will get bigger and people will suffer more. I also believe that as a manager

you have a social responsibility to take on the needs of people you have in your team when they come to you for help.

It is important to have confidence in yourself because if you show the slightest weakness the bully will use that against you. She tried the workplace stress one. She tried the mental health issue. She tried to withhold information from everybody because she had such a valuable role. You have to deal with it all. I found out from another staff member that she was bullying that person as well.

Interviewer: Some managers have told me that when dealing with a perpetrator they sometimes begin to question their own judgement. Did you ever feel like this?

CEO: This is why it is important to have knowledge to fall back upon so you can evaluate what you are doing from a number of perspectives. If someone is going to take on a bully they need the support of others in management so that they are not sucked into the vortex with the bully. It can be really hard when the tears are flying and you are trying to deal with the emotional ups and downs of the bully. You have to be able to step back.

The main thing I questioned about myself when I was performance managing the perpetrator was, "Am I becoming the bully?"

Interviewer: So you allowed yourself to consider that and checked yourself on that?

CEO: Yes. Absolutely. I needed a sounding board and found one in the HR consultant.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for talking about this experience and also for dealing with this in such an effective way. I am sure others will benefit from your experience.