

## Workplace Power Games

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There is a myth that it's 'wimps' who get bullied at work despite the fact that there are plenty of strong and capable ex-employees who have been driven out of their jobs by workplace bullying. Another incorrect assumption is that assertive people probably 'provoke' bullying. Even members of the Mediation Service have said that bullying is 'subjective' or in some cases merely a 'clash of personalities'. This erroneous thinking is based on an inadequate understanding of the power games that underpin workplace bullying.

People still tend to see bullying as a 'physical thing'. In reality most workplace bullying involves a complicated and devastating pattern of power games that can be difficult to prove to people who have not experienced the behaviour. What can compound the problem is that the bully is often a manager and therefore has the power to define the situation. If the target of bullying complains, the bully uses power games to redefine the facts and the rules to his or her advantage. Take a bully to mediation for example and he or she will shift the focus and argue that the target is the one creating the difficulties. Current mediation processes facilitate the bully's power games by cooperating with the bully who insists that they face their accuser: The mediation process can be used as another forum for power games where the target experiences the ultimate bullying and usually leaves with an exit package.

In an attempt to clarify workplace bullying some practitioners have tried to introduce concepts from other areas of law or from legislation being trialed in other countries. One theory puts the onus on the target of bullying to show 'intent'. But power games are not something that can be reduced to the perpetrator's intent. Power games are often so subtle that it can be difficult to show what actually occurred let alone reveal the perpetrator's intentions. Furthermore not everyone who uses power games is necessarily aware of their behaviour. If the behaviour is a long established pattern that has enabled a bully to succeed in life, he or she may not be aware that their power is founded on the unwarranted control of others.

More and more cases of workplace bullying are coming under the spotlight now that workplace stress can be more effectively dealt with under the Health and Safety Act. What is lacking in the current environment is an adequate means of identifying bullying and the use of power games in the workplace setting. Over time, test cases may provide practitioners with an appropriate framework in which to assess workplace bullying. In the meantime practitioners can use the available literature on power and control in violent relationships to identify and manage the use of power games in the workplace.<sup>1</sup>

### **What Are Power Games?**

When a complaint of workplace bullying has been made an employer needs to look for a pattern of power games. Kay Douglas and Kim McGregor define power games as "*the destructive use of power by one person over another. We are involved in a power game when we use our power to undermine someone for our own ends.* Power games are about control, winners and losers, scoring points and gaining the upper hand at the other's expense."<sup>2</sup> People using power games in the workplace employ a variety of strategies to confuse their targets: isolation, failure to consult,

cutting people out of the information loop, refusing to listen, bullying to force agreement, distorting facts, anger, intimidation, overbearing behaviour, and ambushing people when they are already under pressure, overloading staff and criticism or threats.

Bullies will always have seemingly plausible explanations for their behaviour. People who use power games often appear charming to those who have not experienced their manipulation and control. Power games are sometimes blatant. More often they consist of subtle put-downs, and control tactics or unfair criticism and sarcasm that leave the target increasingly confused. A target's skills and intelligence may be devalued or they may be made an example of, accused of under-performance or treated differently from other staff. "Some people who play power games are well aware of the destructive impact of their actions. They consciously use whatever means at their disposal to overpower others. Others manipulatively act out their unconscious desire for power,"<sup>3</sup>

It may take two to tango but it takes only one to play power games. "When power games are being played there is usually one person who is committed to having his or her way regardless of the impact on the other. In many situations the [target] is preoccupied with how to stop the conflict and will often make all kinds of attempts to do so, from confrontation to peacemaking to capitulation, all the time hoping the bullying will stop."<sup>4</sup> Both parties can get locked into a pattern. The person playing the games becomes increasingly aggressive in an attempt to maintain control while the target becomes worn down from trying to please, or continually trying to keep the peace.

Power games can be particularly difficult to deal with when they are used by a manager or supervisor who holds legitimate power over others. Authority over staff carries the responsibility to be considerate, respectful and accountable. An effective manager works with staff to achieve the organisation's goals. Managers using power games often lose sight of the organisation's goals in the pursuit of their own need to control others.

"Honest, clear and kind communication builds and strengthens relationships. A person misusing power usually does not want to explore the issues openly or take responsibility for their behaviour. Instead they use tactics that confuse, disempower, sidetrack or derail.... A smoke-screen of blame and accusations may be created when [people] attempt to discuss issues of concern. The person may deny the truth, tell lies, bait...by becoming hurtful or offensive, distract...by changing the focus of the conversation or overpower ... by refusing to let [people] have [their] say. These games often leave [a target] feeling bewildered and impotent."<sup>5</sup>

### **Mobbing**

When workplace power games are not dealt with, the behaviour often spreads through the entire workplace. Colleagues can offer support to a target of bullying. "Having strong alliances with colleagues usually helps us to feel more powerful. Colleagues can provide us with moral support, offer survival strategies and provide us with a reality check about the bullying we are experiencing."<sup>6</sup> When colleagues begin to fear attracting the bully's attention they may either withdraw their support or join in the power games themselves. Mobbing can bring its own rewards in the form of preferential treatment and a sense of power by association.

Once workplace power games degenerate into mobbing, both the target and the employer have a major problem on their hands. When mobbing has become the norm, retraining or removing the

bully may not resolve the problems. When a bully leaves employment the role is often assumed by another member of the mob. It is likely that the entire workplace or at least that work section will need comprehensive training and support to eliminate the pattern of power games.

### **Impact of Power Games on the Target**

Employers sometimes assume that the use of power to control staff is a legitimate or effective management tool. It is important therefore to distinguish between personal power and power games. *“Personal power is power that is characterised by integrity, sensitivity and respect towards ourselves and other people. Personal power involves honouring ourselves and honestly speaking our own truth. Personal power is about self-control, co-operation, equality and clear communication.... power games and personal power are very different types of power. Both influence other people, but in very different ways. When we use power games we may get our own way but we also disempower and alienate others, destroy trust and engender fear and loss of confidence. In contrast, when we relate from a place of personal power we maintain our integrity and the dignity of ourselves as well as the other person. We are also more likely to create co-operation, closeness and honesty, build trust and engender confidence in others.”*<sup>7</sup>

It is the personal cost to the target that will ultimately cost an employer under the Health and Safety Act. Power games undermine the target’s sense of personal power and affect their self esteem. Targets begin to feel increasingly powerless which Douglas and McGregor describe as feeling *“...vulnerable, alone, unsure, discouraged, overshadowed, impotent and fearful.”*<sup>8</sup> The resultant resentment, frustration and helplessness can create a range of health problems such as tension, headaches, depression and anxiety.<sup>9</sup>

Coping with power games in the workplace can leave a target feeling continually anxious. A bully’s erratic and often illogical behaviour can be a daily distraction from work duties that progressively undermines a target’s security and commitment. Because bullies often appear plausible to others, a target is *“likely to have a lonely uphill battle gaining support.”*<sup>10</sup>

Ongoing stress can cause physical symptoms such as *“nausea, headaches, dizziness, sleep disturbances and breathing problems.”*<sup>11</sup> Over time *“...power games whittle away the opinions, values, wants and dreams that guide our behaviour and define our unique self. If we continue to give way under pressure and compromise our integrity we feel increasingly out of touch with who we really are and what is right for us. As our stress levels rise we often lose concentration and clarity; our thoughts may become scattered and our emotions intense.”*<sup>12</sup> Under unwarranted pressure employees can neglect their own needs, overwork, skip breaks and focus their dwindling energy on holding themselves together. The inevitable result is burnout.

### **Impact on the Workplace**

Power games in the workplace sap employees’ energy, destroy honesty and trust, and foster fear and resentment. Power games will eventually undermine even the most committed employees. *“When people are subjected repeatedly to overbearing behaviour they eventually become worn down, anxious and afraid to be honest. They often live with the sense of being under siege, ever ready for the next power struggle.”*<sup>13</sup> Managers using power games lose the respect of their staff.

Employees cope with power games in different ways. Some ignore power plays and protect themselves by withholding information from a bullying manager. Some complain to anyone who will listen and even make disparaging comments to customers or clients. Neither response is a solution; ultimately a target can become 'punch drunk' which is a short step away from burnout.

When a target of power games becomes stressed he or she will look to colleagues for support. As employees line up either with or against the bully, mobbing develops as the workplace becomes divided and ultimately dysfunctional. An employer who fails to deal with complaints of bullying and workplace power games risks facing a claim under the Health and Safety Act. A less visible cost is that the organisations' credibility can suffer as knowledge of the dysfunction spreads.

### **What to Look For**

Investigating a complaint of workplace bullying requires an open mind and a willingness to consider behaviour that may not be immediately apparent. Avoid at all costs blaming the target. It can be frustrating for an organisation to have to disrupt usual work practices in order to uncover elaborately concealed behaviour. The costs of not doing so however can be great if an employee's health and safety are jeopardized by an inadequate or unfair investigation processes or by undue delays in resolving the problem. Ensuring a complainant's safety during an investigation process is crucial. And don't be distracted by the desire to look for 'intent', not only will that course lead to a pointless investigation but also it play's into the hand's of the person using power games.

Workplace bullying can be identified by assessing whether there has been a repetitive pattern of behaviour. The behaviour is often subtle and the accused is likely to cover his or her tracks with a smokescreen. If a pattern of behaviour exists an investigation needs to consider the impact of that pattern. Consider whether the behaviour has been warranted, fair or appropriate. Look at the impact on the complainant, has the complainant's behaviour changed? Are they feeling insecure, unsafe, undermined or disadvantaged? Avoid the trap of judging the complainant's character which merely adds to the abuse. The issue is not about personality. It is about warrantability, fairness, trust and confidence, and health and safety.

Sometimes a target of bullying will welcome an opportunity to face the accused in a safe environment. This option should only be considered when the complainant feels comfortable and has professional support. Bullies are highly skilled in the use of power games and can use the opportunity to finish their target off. Once a complainant has been interviewed and the accused has had an opportunity to respond, the complainant should be afforded a right of reply. It may take some time to work through the smokescreen and identify the true nature of the problem.

The costs of workplace bullying are too great to wait until precedents have been established. They include not only the costs incurred from personal grievances or claims under the Health and Safety Act. There is the impact on staff morale and staff turnover and the ongoing damaging effects of allowing employees to use power games to control others in the workplace. It is in every employer's interests to identify and manage workplace bullying. It makes good sense for employers to create an environment where personal power is promoted and power games are eliminated. Employees who feel empowered, confident, supported and safe at work are more likely to develop their full potential to the benefit of themselves and their employer.

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<sup>1</sup> This writer has had extensive experience in dealing with workplace power games. The work of Kay Douglas & Kim McGregor, Power Games, Penguin Books (NZ), 2000, has been used in this article to support the writer's observations of power games in the workplace setting.

<sup>2</sup> Kay Douglas & Kim McGregor, Power Games, Penguin Books (NZ), 2000, p25. Author's italics.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 27-28. Author's italics.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 29. Author's italics.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

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