

Leadership or Workplace Bullying

It was shocking to see recently the photos of torture and abuse that have exposed the corruption within the US military in Iraq. Many have been asking, "How can it be that people can feel so little for their fellow human beings so as to act with such cruelty and even seem to enjoy it".

The old adage that "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" appears to be true. It is frighteningly clear that when many normal people gain a measure of power over others they often cannot resist the urge to abuse it and treat those below them with cruelty, indignity and contempt.

This same kind of corruption can easily happen within the workplace as well. It is known as workplace bullying. Studies show that most of it happens from a position of power down and it is surprisingly common with estimates of one in four being affected. In some occupations this figure is even higher.

While workplace bullying may not include the physical torture of people as we have seen in the images displayed on television, workplace bullies inflict forms of psychological abuse and systematic victimisation that are immensely destructive.

In the last year the issue of workplace bullying has gained increasing exposure. Many people have contacted EAP providers, Help-lines, unions and organisations to make complaints. Some of these people have so systematically abused they have been suicidal, many have been anxious, stressed or depressed. One common feature is that they have lost a huge amount of self-confidence and this has affected their self-esteem, their health and their performance.

Another surprising feature of those who have been targeted by workplace bullies in management positions is that they are usually confused about what is actually happening to them. They do not understand the clear difference between an acceptable management style and abusive behaviour. They often blame themselves for the bullying because they imagine their personality must be clashing with the bully and they think they have somehow brought on the attacks because they lack some personality trait that other 'normal' people may have.

In fact the problem generally has usually nothing to do with the target. They are not to blame for the bullying. They don't 'bring it on' and cause it to happen. It is all about the inadequacies of the bully.

Workplace bullying is not a form of tough management nor is it a leadership style. It is an abuse of power that needs to be exposed as a significant Health and Safety hazard and something that should not be tolerated.

Unfortunately most workplace bullying is hidden and conducted in secret. To many senior managers the manager-bully below them may appear to be a high achiever with plenty of confidence and charm. To those below, the bully is a Jekyll and Hyde character who is feared and despised.

The temptation that many in senior levels face when a complaint surfaces, is to protect the bully and further victimise the complainant. The complainant leaves shortly after and this may appear to have resolved the problem, however the

opposite is true. The bully has been rewarded and the message to other employees is, “Don’t complain or rock the boat> Put up with it or leave.”

In one organisation a bully who was a first line supervisor, faced a complaint from an employee. On receiving it, the bully broke down in tears in front of his employer and immediately offered his resignation. The employer refused this and affirmed the right of the bully to a fair investigation. The bully then left the office and secretly contacted all his team members individually challenging them about the complaint. This effectively shut them down. The employer, after having a ‘quick chat’ to those employees the next day found a reluctance to substantiate the complaints and therefore contacted the complainant (who was off work on stress) to tell her it appeared the respondent was not a bully. The complainant ended up leaving feeling totally invalidated and further victimised.

How can organisations prevent this kind of thing happening? How can employers ensure they are taking all practicable steps to eliminate this hazard and create a culture that is intolerant of workplace bullying?

To put it simply – it comes down to leadership. The key component of a bully intolerant organisation is true leadership. Bully intolerance must start at the top and must be consistent all the way down.

The differences between managers who bully and those that don’t (and instead lead) are often vastly different. Some of these differences that we have found are;

Leadership Characteristic

Bullying Characteristic

Humility

The ability to carry authority while maintaining connection and empathy with others. To be able to honour the humanity of others and work alongside them. This is a key component of effective communication and respectful relationships with others.

Arrogance

A characteristic that may show up as an indifferent, apathetic or dismissive manner. People feel they are ignored, disrespected and treated without dignity. Communication is often adult to child rather than communicating on the same level as adults.

Integrity

This characteristic maintains a values focus and creates clear relationship boundaries where people sense they are being treated honestly and in good faith. It is firm but fair.

Deceit

Self-deceit is the basis of this characteristic and people also feel they are being manipulated or used according to the agenda of the bully. Unfairness, changeableness and inconsistent and unclear boundaries are also

characteristic of this trait.

Emotional Competence

Good leaders are self-connected. They accept their own emotions and connect effectively with the emotions of others. They are more even tempered and take responsibility for their own emotions.

Emotional Dysfunction

Bullies are often emotionally dysfunctional. They have suppressed emotions and often exhibit light and dark moods. They blame others for their emotions and they often misinterpret the intentions and emotions of others around them. This causes distrust.

Collaboration

Good leaders work with others to gain powerful and creative results. They share the results with others and celebrate achievement. They are team players as well as being able to stand out and take a leadership role.

Autocracy

Bullies are 'one man' or 'one woman bands'. They dominate, destroy and divide teams. They often personalise conflict and do not work through issues effectively. They are often insecure and mask this with charm and displays of confidence.

Inspiration

Leaders inspire and call the best out of people. They facilitate a shared vision and generate commitment and the realisation of greatness within others.

Coercion

Bullies impose their vision and then use coercion and threats to gain commitment from others. They create an environment of insecurity and fear and are often threatened by the skills of others.

The trouble many employers face is that bullies are not often clearly recognised. They may possess a sense of charm and get results. They may appear to have excellent skills and attributes. They may be able to give you a thesis on effective teams and conflict resolution however when it comes to action they are largely deficient in these areas. They have the talk without the walk.

It is vital that organisations understand the difference between true leadership and workplace bullying. True leaders create followers. Bullies create victims. They may get KPI results but destroy people along the way.

The commitment to a dignified and respectful working environment is the responsibility of all employees however the predominant onus is upon managers to set the example and maintain the values of a dignity and respect.

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www.wave.org.nz