



When Bullies Rule the Boardroom

by Patti L. Murphy

Most people have had the experience of working under a subpar boss. And then there are people like "Kris," whose experience reads like a nightmare.

When the new boss arrived at the company, he told his administrative assistant, Kris, she was in for a shock. Her new boss informed her that she'd have to start working a 12-hour day, plus overtime on weekends--after all, he was new in town and had to get settled into his new office and a new home.

"I worked the 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. schedule that he came up with," recalls Kris. "I was meeting semitrucks at his apartment to unload furniture, delivering his personal vehicles, and then I'd start over again on weekends. It was hard, especially being a single mother with three young children, but I needed my job."

But soon, the boss went from merely using Kris to using her to lie to and manipulate her fellow staff members.

"He'd announce in meetings that he was going to cut programs, and the staff would plead with him to keep things the way they were. To be the good guy, he'd concede to their faces, but then afterwards he'd tell me we were moving ahead with the cuts, and for me to get it done. If I questioned why he told the staff one thing and me another, he'd say, 'Don't undermine my authority, just do as I say and tell the staff they need to suck it up and play by my rules.'"

After months of working beneath a boss with a Dr. Jekyll-and-Mr. Hyde personality, Kris finally decided to seek a transfer. Her boss didn't like this idea.

"He called me into his office, and he sat there ... with his feet propped up on his desk, hands clasped behind his head, and said to me, 'I don't know who you think you are, but if you even think about damaging my reputation by leaving me, you are mistaken. I will do all I can to make sure you never work in this company again.'"

Kris' boss was a classic example of what the United Nations' International Labor Organization (ILO) has called the fastest growing complaint of American workers--bully bosses. Bullies threaten, humiliate, ostracize and try to take away a worker's power. They keep mental lists of blacklisted employees and can add names without the target ever knowing why. Google the term, and you will get thousands of page results, making it clear that office bullying is more than a singular occurrence.

WHAT IS WORKPLACE BULLYING?

The ILO describes it as, "Persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating or insulting behavior, abuse of power or unfair penal sanctions which make the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable, which undermines their self-confidence and which may cause them to suffer stress."

Remember schoolyard bullying? Boy bullies threatened to punch you in the nose. Girls used psychological and emotional weapons--they ignored you, called you names and ostracized you from the group. As other children cheered on the bully and weak teachers ignored the situation, children who were picked on were left to defend themselves.

Fast-forward about 20 years, and the same basic scenario is happening in workplaces every day, except the stakes are much higher than simply not being able to play with the other kids. A bully in the workplace could cost you your livelihood, your reputation, even your mental and physical health.

For the inexperienced, it can be difficult to imagine being bullied at a job. After all, people work hard all their lives to succeed. Surely, if they are

honest, smart, competent professionals who get along with others, they will be treated with respect, or at least left alone to do their job. Right?

Wrong. Forget the vision of the milquetoast, loner employee getting beaten up in the boardroom by the tough manager. According to Tim Field, founder of the Bully Online (www.bullyonline.org), based out of the United Kingdom, workers who have smarts, are innovative, competent and are well liked by others are the ones who are usually targeted by bullies.

"The purpose of bullying is to hide inadequacy," writes Field, who was bullied out of a job in 1994 and subsequently suffered a stress breakdown. "Bullying consists of the least competent, most aggressive employee projecting their incompetence onto the least aggressive and most competent employee ... and winning."

WHO'S YOUR BULLY?

Being bullied doesn't necessarily mean having a screaming, psychotic boss hurling tape dispensers at you. Most bully bosses use subtle, psychological and emotional pressure--often behind closed doors--to terrorize employees and keep them off-balance. It comes as no surprise that more than three-quarters of all workplace bullying is carried out against employees by a boss. What might be unexpected is the high rate of female perpetrators. According to Dr. Gary Namie, founder of the Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute (www.bullyinginstitute.org), 58 percent of all bullies are female and half of all bullying is woman-on-woman.

A DIRTY LITTLE SECRET

Namie calls workplace bullying a "silent epidemic" and "a dirty little secret." He notes that one in six of our fellow American workers have been victims of workplace bullying, while most of the rest of us just stand by and let it happen.

"[Bullying] is witnessed by nearly 80 percent of workers, who don't do anything about it," he said in a 2002 *USA Today* interview.

So why don't people try to prevent it, or at least help their fellow employees who are being bullied? The most common reason not to speak

out is fear of the boss or of someone in a higher position who can wreck careers.

Also, according to Field, bullying can be so subtle, composed of numerous incidents that seem trivial in isolation, that bystanders often can't see the full picture. In this scenario, bullies often use a "divide and conquer" approach, beginning by isolating, excluding and disempowering the target employee. If the employee starts to question the bully's tactics, he or she can face accusations of not being a team player and be blamed for the problems. This creates strong feelings of fear, shame, embarrassment and guilt for the victim--the very emotions that will keep them quiet about the bullying.

"Sadly, after the target is gone, former co-workers will dump on the target person, blaming her for her fate, for simply not understanding office politics or for having a 'personality clash' with the bully," notes Namie. "The rationalization protects the co-workers left behind at the expense of the departed target."

THE HEALTH REPERCUSSIONS OF BEING BULLIED

Fields, who suffered a stress breakdown after he was bullied out of his job, notes on his site that physical, mental and emotional trauma are not uncommon for targets of bullying. Symptoms can range from anxiety, depression and hair loss, to fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome and heart attacks. Some targets of bullying show signs of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the same severe psychological reaction experienced by war-weary soldiers and witnesses of violent events.

"Nothing can prepare you for living or working with a sociopathic serial bully. It is the most devastating, draining, misunderstood, and ultimately futile experience imaginable," writes Field.

Namie adds that even studying workplace bullying has taken its toll on his health. "It is very stressful work, helping people who are going through such undeserved misery," he tells *BW* in an interview.

HUMAN RESOURCES ... AN OXYMORON

Some experts are reluctant to advise bullied employees to seek help from their human resources department. Field writes on www.bullyonline.org, "When push comes to shove, Human Resources do what they are told to do by management, regardless of the rights and wrongs." He also says on his site, "HR is not there for employees, since their role is to keep the employer out of court."

Namie agrees, as has often written, "Bullies bully because they can."

Bullied employees also concur. In a 2004 nationwide survey conducted through the Web site www.badbossology.com, 76 percent of respondents said they believe HR staff are not helpful when it comes to protecting employees from abusive bosses. Unfortunately, HR staff often work under the same bullies and have their own futures to consider. As such, they might write off bullying as nothing more than a "personality clash," and will tell the terrorized employee to just "work it out"--much to the delight of the bully who holds the key to their victim's livelihood.

FIGHTING THE BULLY

Shane Bengoechea, a Boise attorney with 23 years in practice, says he gets about 50 phone calls a year from people hoping to fight a workplace bully. On average, he agrees to take on about 10 of those cases.

"Most company handbooks have a policy against harassment, but it's hard to enforce in court because the handbook is not considered an employment contract," he says. "Many managers know that if an employee takes action against them for bullying, [employees] won't win."

Bengoechea says bullying is not covered under the federal employment discrimination laws that pertain to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, disability, or age, making it hard to fight in court.

Namie adds that he has introduced anti-workplace bullying legislation in five states, all of which have failed to pass.

"It's very difficult to get rid of a bully," he says. "I tell people that if they want to take action, they must document everything--every interaction, every e-mail, every phone call they have with the bully. They need to write down dates and times and who was there. When they get an assignment, get it in writing. They should also try to always have someone with them as a witness in meetings and conversations with the bully. Then, they have a better shot at showing a pattern of harassment, especially if they need to take documentation to their human resources department.

"A lot of companies simply don't want to do much about bully situations," Bengoechea notes. "It's sort of like a family in which one member is sexually molesting another family member. Life goes along fine for everyone who chooses to close their eyes to what's going on. But once the victim opens their mouth about the problem, they're suddenly the bad guy, because they've upset the apple cart and spoiled everyone's false sense of comfort."

Bengoechea believes most of the issues he hears about can be traced back to causes as simple as lack of respect and training. "People are just downright disrespectful of others, and they treat people like objects instead of human beings," he says. "I don't think supervisors and managers are adequately trained. They might know the job, but they sure don't have the people skills."

After representing the victims of bullying, Bengoechea admits, "I don't know why anyone would want to stay in a job like that. I've seen it affect people mentally, emotionally and physically." While he says he understands people need to work, he advises, "It's just not worth your health."

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Many bullied employees get fired or quit but generally do not sue. Why? Because bullying isn't illegal. Federal law prohibits sexual harassment, racial harassment and physical assault in the workplace, and unless a raging boss crosses one of those lines, technically he or she has done nothing wrong.

Georgia Smith, a spokeswoman for the Idaho Department of Commerce and Labor, says it's critical for both the employee and employer to

understand what they can do to prevent and respond to workplace bullying.

"We advise all employers first to have a policy in place that prohibits bullying," she says. "Second, companies need to provide education and training to all their employees on what constitutes bullying and the difference between bullying and management. Finally, they should have a clearly defined grievance procedure in place to address complaints."

Smith echoes Bengoechea in her advice to document everything and exhaust all their company's internal personnel procedures before seeking outside assistance. She says this could include going to a direct supervisor first and then to a human resources department. If these steps don't provide a resolution, bullied employees can contact the IDCL complaint specialist at 332-35700, extension 3194.

"Because there is no law in place prohibiting bullying, we would review the complaint information and, if there was any potential discrimination involved, we'd refer it to the Idaho Human Rights Commission."

If those avenues fail to resolve the problem, Smith says, employees should then consider consulting an attorney.

A FINAL NOTE

People who are being bullied should seek to build a support network of friends, family and even co-workers, if possible. The bully will always try to separate and isolate their targets, so having some support is crucial to maintaining emotional and psychological health. They also need to remember that they are not alone, and if they need proof of that, all they have to do is Google "bully boss" and get a reality check on how many other smart, talented people have been through--and survived--the nightmare of a bully boss.