

Organizational Culture

Create a Bully-Free Workplace

by Nathanael J. Fast

March 18, 2010

A startling 37% of American workers — roughly 54 million people — have been bullied at work according to a 2007 survey by the Workplace Bullying Institute. The consequences of such bullying spreading to the targets' families, coworkers, and organizations. Costs include reduced creativity, low morale, and increased turnover — all factors that weigh heavily on the bottom line.

Among targets of bullying, 40% never told their employers and, of those who did, 62% reported that they were ignored. This suggests there's a significant opportunity to increase profits and beat the competition by eliminating the prevalence of workplace bullying in your organization. But how?

The first step is to identify the root of the problem. A set of recent studies conducted with Serena Chen, a psychologist at UC Berkeley, may provide some insight. We found that power is partly to blame. However, in contrast to the old adage that “power corrupts,” giving people power did not turn them into bullies. Rather, it was the simultaneous pairing of power with feelings of inadequacy that led people to lash out. In our studies, the power holders who felt personally incompetent became aggressive, not because they were power hungry or had domineering personalities but because they were trying to overcome ego

threat. Put simply, bullying is a cheap way to nurse a wounded ego. (For more on workplace aggression, read, “How to Stop ‘Mean Girls’ in the Workplace”).

These findings, published in *Psychological Science*, may come as no big surprise to those who work directly with a bully boss, but they run counter to a commonly held assumption that personality traits are primarily to blame and offer a roadmap for creating a bully-free workplace. Here are a few steps you, as a leader, can take to prevent bully bosses from taking over your organization:

- When hiring managers, set the bar high with regard to interpersonal skills and leadership experience. Resist the common tendency to hire and promote solely based on technical expertise and/or academic achievement. Put your company in the hands of managers who are psychologically secure and have a strong sense of inner confidence (not to be confused with outward arrogance) in their abilities.
- Help new managers feel comfortable in their high-power roles. You can do this by providing training, reminding managers that it is normal to feel underprepared, and connecting them to experienced mentors or coaches to whom they can turn in times of trouble.
- Remind managers to focus on core values. Our findings show that threatened power holders are less likely to become aggressive when asked to reflect on a value that is important to them, regardless of the value (e.g., family and friends, professional achievement, personal growth).
- Design jobs in such a way as to avoid heaping unrealistic expectations onto individual leaders. For example, teams are often used effectively to distribute the weight of responsibilities.
- Educate yourself and your managers about the psychological consequences of power. Doing so will help you to identify and address counterproductive patterns early on and avoid the common pitfalls that bring ruin to so many organizations.

I'd enjoy hearing your thoughts. Have you encountered bullies? What strategies have you used to effectively minimize bullying in your organization?

Nathanael Fast is an assistant professor of Management and Organization at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business.

Nathanael J. Fast is an assistant professor of management at the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California. His research examines how self-related processes influence people's abilities to form accurate judgments, make sound decisions, and lead effectively.