BULLYING USING ORGANIZATIONAL PROCEDURES

by
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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps the greatest difference for bullies between the schoolyard and the boardroom is the scope in the latter for demeaning other people using organizational procedures.

In "the schoolyard," most of a bully's power is drawn from a personal physical power over or personal information about the bullied person.

In "the boardroom", and in the organizational corridors and elevators leading therefrom, the bully can exercise positional power; this is an attribute afforded to the bully by the mixture of hierarchies and procedures in an organization that allow the bully scope for demeaning subordinates and clients through the maladministration of those procedures and through the abuse of those powers.

AIM

This paper offers a description of the bullying that occurs in organizations through the medium of an organization's procedures for the conduct of its work and its administration. A categorization of bullying is attempted from the many anecdotes, cases, and complaints that have come to the knowledge of in duties as a manager, workplace representative, auditor, investigating officer, and executive member of a professional association, trade union and two whistleblower organizations.

DISCUSSION

The Individual Bully

In support of the bully continuum, "schoolyard to boardroom", a categorization of procedural bullying in organizations is outlined using descriptions from school environment. These descriptions are:

> Gatekeeper bullying
> Sandpit bullying
> Toilet bullying, and
> King bullying

The gatekeeper bully at school took up a strategic position, say, on stairs, the door to the library, the walkway across the creek, or the like, and decided who could pass.

In the organization, gatekeeper bullies deny their subordinates, without reasonable grounds, applications, priority, funds, meetings and/or briefings necessary for the subordinate's work, training and experience necessary for gaining qualifications, and/or enjoyment of family life. Thus a subordinate may be consistently denied:

- Recreation leave during school holidays
- Computer capacity sufficient for standard work software
- Nomination for training that is a pre-requisite for promotion
- Attendance at meetings related to their work

Gatekeeper bullies establish barriers to be overcome and gauntlets to be run by officers in their working lives.

An organization heavily influenced or dominated by gatekeeper bullying is relatively slow in the tempo of its operations. Indications can be lack of delegations to managers, a lack of initiative amongst employees, managers limited to working within boundaries poor communication, little networking amongst staff and poor morale. A relatively large number of personal grievances are lodged within organizations dominated by a gatekeeper bullying culture.

The gatekeeper bully at kindergarten kept other children from entering or leaving the sandpit. The sandpit bully, on the other hand, kept knocking down or otherwise ruining any sandcastles or other structures made by other children in the sandpit. This open behavior included forms where the bully would help build the structure only to destroy it before it could be used or admired. More secretive behavioral forms also occurred. Sandpit bullies stole pieces of the jigsaw puzzle others were putting together, threw the cricket ball into the creek, or ruined the display with graffiti.

In the organization, sandpit bullies are more proactive than gatekeepers. Sandpit bullies restructure successful teams in order to split them up, assign experts to generalist duties, send achievers on wild goose chases, reassign leaders to tasks without purpose, and personally takeover projects when success is assured; sandpit bullies also cancel holiday leave approvals without substantial cause, deny use of company resources for inhouse training courses, refuse relief arrangements while the bullied are away from the office, give officers directions that are ruinous of the relations that the officers have with other staff.

Sandpit bullies are spoilers. Sandpit bullies undermine the progress, achievements, growth and success of targetted officers in their employ. The situation where the spoiling outcome is greatest for the bully is where the pre-existing condition is excellence or potential excellence. Indicators that an organization may be heavily influenced or dominated by sandpit bullying is the presence of mediocrity; mediocrity can be present at both the general level of organizational performance (productivity, client satisfaction) and also at the specific level of individual achievement (qualifications, publications, commendations, outcomes for clients). Achievers leave organizations dominated by sandpit bullying.

The most hurtful bullying at school has been largely associated with toilet areas and change sheds. These areas are where the school organization affords the bully the greatest degree of privacy and freedom from supervision and inspection. These most hurtful forms of bullying include head flushing, slanderous graffitti, physical torture, extortion, removal of clothing, king hitting, personal ridicule and open threats.

The toilet bully in organizations also prefers to operate where inspection by others is most difficult. The privacy of toilet areas and store rooms is not discarded, but with respect to organizational procedures, the "privacy" opportunities utilized by the toilet bully include the one-to-one interview or counselling interview, selection interview and the like. The area of greatest operation of the toilet tactics, however, is within the "privacy" of the **discretionary power** afforded to the superior officer by the organization in decision-making affecting the subordinate officer.

Instances of toilet bullying, as part of the procedures of an organization, include falsifications and vilifications in performance reports, punitive transfers and secondments, personal threats, ridicule and slander during interviews and/or "confidential", "private", or "off-the-record" meetings, unjustified referrals for psychological assessment, unfair and unsafe work assignments, hardship rostering patterns, extortion of favours and/or coercion into cooperative bullying of others or into complicity with breaches of proper procedures.

Toilet bullies are vengeful. Their focus is to leave a permanent and hurtful mark on the person rather than a temporary frustration on the person's work. Indicators that an organization may be heavily influenced or dominated by toilet bullies are a proportionately large number of personal grievances and complaints about supervisors and managers made to external authorities rather than to the organization itself. There are also likely to be complaints from past bullied employees that they were "pursued" by the toilet bully in employment, business or professional respects after the bullied employee left the organization. Repeated performance failures are symptomatic of a toilet culture in an organization.

The most developed form of the organizational bully is the King Bully. At school the king bully had a gang, and they "expelled" the bullied person from the playground; the bullied person had to either join another gang or leave the school. Territories for gangs were defined, and rules were established, both within gangs and across gangs.

The king bully in an organization "expels" officers, expels them from locations, from careers, from favoured groups, from special projects/collaborations/committees, and from organizations. The reason, it will often appear, for the expulsion is almost arbitrary, but can typically be for a slight affront; and the expulsion as it is delivered carries with it the strong connotation of "never to return".
        "It will be as though you never were"
is a quote from a movie portrayal of an act of a king bully (The Charge of the Light Brigade:1968).

Within organizations, the king bully is an organizational or locational chief or professional head, and operates in the open with apparent impunity. Other king bullies are accommodated, their "territories" even respected. There is no place, however, in the king bully's domain for independents; only favoured officers and hired hands are allowed. Expulsions are effected by subordinate bullies in the organizational "gang", of the sandpit variety (or the toilet variety if the bullied person shows resistance); the "never-to-return" sentence is enforced by subordinate gatekeeper bullies.

King bully organizations are rogue organizations – they are out of the control of external authorities, such as the shareholders, or the membership, or the government.

King bullies are feudal. King bullies are possessed with a sense of 'ownership' of an industry, of a sport or other community activity, of the administration of a public policy. Indications that an organization is dominated by a king bully are the co-existence, on the one hand, of open and repeated breaches of procedures, with, on the other hand, zero or near-zero grievances by employees. Alienation of the 'clients' of an organization can develop with organizations ruled by king bullies. King bullies usually have attached to their history one of the classic whistleblower cases from that industry or jurisdiction.

The Organization as the Bully

The king bully and the rogue organization are examples of an individual bully and subordinates mis-using or abusing the procedures of an organization so as to exercise their collective need to demean targetted individuals. The organizations rules are being misused and abused, and the fault lies with the individual, not the organization.

The emerging pattern of bullying from case studies, anecdotal evidence, media accounts and law reports, of organizational behaviour in stress-prevalent situations, may be that some organizations and jurisdictions, at the highest level, are legitimizing and validating the "bullying" option as a frontline or fallback strategy for coping with problems faced by those organizations, industries, or jurisdictions. The facilitation of the bullying option is achieved by a deliberate "sapping" of the integrity of the procedures of the organization with defects that allow the bullying option to be mobilized.

In this case, the value system giving rise to the keeping of the bullying option "in the drawer" is not some residual psychiatric disorder from the school-yard days of the organization's chief executive, but is the value system of the boardroom, led by that benchmark of values of executive management, namely *pragmatism.*

The resort to the bullying option out of a sense of pragmatism can be a boardroom response to "impossibilities" in governance experienced or perceived by the boardroom. In the private sector, the perceived "impossibilities" can be
- using ethical practices in a competitive marketplace
- complying with the law while meeting commercial expectations of majority shareholders

The "impossibilities" can be remarkably similar for the counterpart doyens in the public sector

- competing on a level playing field with the private sector, while held to the accountability burdens of the public sector
- enforcing laws that are detrimental to the commercial interests of major industries

While PR, OD, HRM, CLO, EEO, and IR work units are expected to construct an edifice of compliance with the ethical, legal, accountability, and/or enforcement imperatives of the organization, the bullying option can be taken up to ensure workplace compliance with the pragmatic strategies adopted by executive management so as to cope with these "impossibilities".

The establishment of the bully option for the organization requires the same sophistications as for setting up the more respectable management control systems adopted by responsible executives, so as to ensure congruence by staff with organizational goals. Aspect of such control systems include

- Strategic planning
- Industry economics
- Organizational structure
- Managerial style
- Organizational culture

as set out in Figure 1, taken from Horngren and Foster (1987).

Figure 1. A Model of Factors that can Transform or Coerce Organizations

The parallels in establishment of the bully option include the following:

- Strategic planning and scenario development processes, using the results of analyses of the competitive environment faced by the organization, can be used to demonstrate the "impossibility" faced by the organization, and to explain the need for the pragmatic solution. Debate can identify areas of opposition to the pragmatic strategy, and afford opportunities to give examples as to how opponents to the pragmatic option will be treated
- The formal organization's structure can be subordinated to the purpose of securing control of the implementation of the bully strategy. Restructuring can be used to release non-dependable officers. The procedures for restructuring can provide opportunities where candidates for key positions, including PR, OD, HRM, EEO, CLO, and IR, can be given acting appointments in these roles and then made to submit to 'integrity tests' concerning the implementation of the procedures of restructuring. These integrity tests give the acting appointees the opportunity to demonstrate their commitment to the pragmatic solution
- The managerial style favoured by the need to implement the bully option can become essentially coercive, rewards and punishments being derived according to displays of "loyalty" or "disloyalty". Paternalism can develop, particularly towards those who are "found out" by external authorities because of breakdowns in the PR/OD/HRM/EEO/CLO/IR edifice
- The dominant emotion in the organizational culture can become fear, whether that fear be a fear of being "found out", or be a fear of not complying with the pragmatic strategem. Executive chiefs can respond to the first fear by exercising displays of bully power so as to reassure the actively compliant, and to give reminders to the passively compliant.

A dynamic to the procedures of organizations implementing the bully option is the role in those procedures of what can be termed "innocent parties". Innocent parties are an essential part of the PR/OD/HRM/EEO/CLO/IR edifice behind which the bullying proceeds, for their innocence lends credibility to the façade. An innocent party is a party to the bullying procedure whose contribution to the procedure is without blemish, but whose contribution is only part of a total procedure which total procedure contains the act of bullying. Particularly where the innocent party is at the downstream end of the process, without the opportunity to question the outcome of the procedures completed upstream of their contribution, that innocent contribution can be used to represent the total procedure. Consultants, external investigators, auditors, and staff can also find themselves in this innocent party role.

Examples of "innocent party" contributions to overall bullying procedures can include:

- Participating in public relations events, videos, and/or brochures that misrepresent or mislead in their presented form
- Completing reviews and investigations, in conformity with prejudicial terms of reference

- Participating on selection panels for positions already compromised by irregularities in the procedures effected earlier in the selection process (eg, restricted advertisement, bias in the selection criteria)
- Provision of an opinion on the legality of a proposed action, to a brief based on information selected to avoid critical legal impediments
- Conduct of disciplinary procedures on an individual, driven or provoked to the breach of procedure by bullying, and/or denied a proper defence by the destruction of evidence or the intimidation of witnesses

An indication that an organization is operating with the bully option may be any display by the watchdogs within an organization (for example, the governance board, auditor, safety officer, quality assurance chief, EEO ombudsman, environmental chief) of tolerance for or cover up of breaches by the organization in their respective areas of responsibility. An indication that a jurisdiction may have adopted the bully option is where the tolerance and cover up extends to anti-corruption bodies within that jurisdiction, its grievance bureaus, public prosecutors, ombudsmen and/or public information custodians.

CONCLUSION

Within organizations, employees can be subjected to the tactics of:
- Blocking
- Spoiling
- Hurting, and
- Expulsion.

That experience can be imposed through the procedures of the organization

The experience can be the product of the state of mind of an individual supervisor, or of an organizationally led control strategem to ensure compliance by employees with a rogue solution to the problems of the organization.

In the latter circumstances, the 'natural' at bullying has skills that meet the perceived needs of the organization, particularly in the central PR/OD/HRM/CLO/EEO/IR functions and in its management teams. Thus organizational cultures are developed that are deep seated in the problems that bullying brings to organizational performance.

The consideration of "Bullying" within the context of individual bullies and individual victims does not expose the full harm that bully cultures bring to the effectiveness of organizations. The individual context encourages the bully problem to be seen as the province of the HRM Manager, and so it is, but only in small part.

In systemic bullying, the HRM Office will have "moon-faced men and red-dressed women" already tested and selected for their skills in gatekeeping, and one or two will have experience in the support of higher forms of bullying, including expulsion.

It is only with an understanding of the organization as the bully that full focus can be brought to bear on the disadvantages that bullying has for organizations. Then the pragmatism that might have launched the bully option may oppose the proposal. Then the scope of the task of recapturing organizational governance from bullies and their culture may be fully understood.

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