

Bullying

Damian Stoupe's workshop from the 2007 conference

Bullying seems to be the watchword of the decade; it is all around us in different guises and under different names. There is a lot of written material defining what behaviours constitute 'bullying', mostly written with the assistance of those who have been recipients of bullying behaviours¹. There is no legal definition of bullying and I am not going to try to define it here – it was covered in the summer 2007 issue of this journal².

In my experience, the impact of bullying often comes down to the perception of the level of hurt felt by an individual. While there are some people who do enjoy using bullying behaviours, I am convinced that these are few and far between; many of those who are accused of bullying do so without any malicious intent. This is not an apology that says such behaviour is acceptable; they do need to be aware of the impact of their behaviour on others, however, demonising them may not achieve the desired outcome.

I would question whether bullying will ever be eradicated given the present social structures, which emphasise the role of competition and 'survival of the fittest'. I do not see capitalist societies across the world collapsing in the immediate future! There is a need, therefore, to develop a strategy for engaging with those who use what are termed 'bullying behaviours'. This was the basic aim of the workshop.

So what is bullying?

My understanding of 'bullying' is personal and experiential; it is based upon my own experiences of being subject to bullying behaviours and, much as I am reluctant to admit it, using bullying behaviours on others. It is unique to an individual and its impact is also unique.

For me 'bullying' is an experiential word; it is active, not passive. It has a form and a function and we can allow it to stir things deep within us, often things we would wish to remain hidden. I know clearly what it invokes in me; however, Task 1 was to understand what it evoked in the delegates.

As I listened to the words being offered by each delegate I was transported into a world of pain and anguish; each person was offering a unique insight

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into their experience of the word. Words such as: *Shame, annihilation, isolation, ostracised, humiliation, anger, anxiety, destructive, nasty, dismissed, fear, uninvited, total indignation, shocked, disabled, target, victim, bully, perpetrator.*

Just looking at the words written on the board led some people to express their sadness at the language being expressed and also to make the link that this, in a strange way, may actually be what the 'bully' is also feeling.

What about the 'bully'?

Whatever language was used to communicate what the word meant to them there was a sense

Task 1

Spend a moment or two reflecting on the word 'bullying'. What is the first image, sound, word feeling that comes to mind for you? Try not to question it, write it down.

Task 2

Spend a moment or two reflecting back on a time when you were accused of being a bully by someone else. It may have been at work or at home, by a sibling, a child, a friend, someone at school, a lover...

If you have never been accused of being a bully imagine what it would feel like if you were to be accused of it now.

How did it feel? Did you feel it was justified at the time? (Not with the benefit of hindsight!)

of 'deliberateness' on the part of the 'perpetrator', as if they set out deliberately to cause as much harm to another person as possible. At this point I would like you to try Task 2.

Responses at the workshop included:

As a parent I realise how I can be a bully; devastated; bullying is a primitive response; shock, how did I communicate; internal bully; raises more questions than answers; role of perception; claim of bullying could be bullying; silence; the label itself causes problems.

Many people can demonstrate bullying behaviours without realising that they are doing so. Some, such as Tim Field, would argue that *'if the bully knows what they are doing, they are responsible for their behaviour and thus liable for its consequences to other people. If the bully doesn't know what they are doing, they should be suspended from duty on the grounds of diminished responsibility and the provisions of the Mental Health Act should apply.'*³

Listening to some of the delegates realising that in many different ways they could be seen as bullying, including with their children, would probably argue with their need to be sectioned! My preferred quote when working with those accused of using bullying behaviours is that *'responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments and other psychological and social factors.'*⁴

It is not judgmental; it forces me to look behind the labels that are being ascribed, what Winslade and Monk⁵ would term the 'totalizing descriptions' which are limiting and often destructive to be able to view and appreciate each individual's reality. It allows me to hear the two voices in the conflict free of preconceptions almost from a position of 'ignorance' which allows me to ask obvious questions.

Unfortunately, the language used in bullying, because of its judgmental and accusational overtones, may, in itself, be a barrier. In one sense it is a language that is loaded against the individual accused of bullying; they are labelled a bully or a perpetrator, they have been found guilty of hurting the victim

or target. Look at the Google images and type in 'workplace bullies' and have a look at the images and the language used⁶. No wonder, in most cases, those accused want to keep their heads below the parapet, or exist in a perpetual state of denial about their behaviours – the cost of seeking help could be too much for them.

Three descriptions of bullies

Keryl Egan⁷ has provided what I feel are some good descriptors of workplace bullies, although I disagree with her definitions. She identifies three types of bully; the accidental, the destructive narcissistic and the psychopathic.

For me the **accidental bully** is the individual who is genuinely unaware that their actions are being viewed as bullying by someone else and are often horrified by the thought that they are perceived in that way. The use of the label 'bully' for this individual is likely to trigger the same responses as we have seen from the counsellors. I would say the vast majority of 'bullying' instances that I have dealt with would fall into this category, and those who are willing to seek help are able to be helped.

I would use the term (self?) **destructive-narcissistic** bully to refer to the corporate climber; the individual who is willing to mould themselves to fit what they, rightly or wrongly, perceive as the 'correct' way to behave in their organisation. Organisations need to bear in mind that people will copy behaviours that seem to be successful; having anti-bullying policies is laudable but unless the directors lead by example, then they may well be worthless.

I find working with these individuals challenging as my experience is that they are focused on their career to the extent that all other issues, inside work, are blocked out: 'This is how I must behave inside work.' However, outside work is a different matter; they may be the exact opposite. In one sense they can be seen as a 'psychopath in a business suit'.

Egan's final descriptor is of someone who is a real **psychopath**, who enjoys bullying others for the enjoyment it provides. It could be argued that unless something really drastic happens, one is unlikely to turn up in the counselling room. If they do, as a result of being forced there, it is likely that they will use the experience to learn how not to be caught next time.

Unfortunately, in my experience, many of the organisational policies appear to be written without reference to the accidental bully, they are written around the serial bully. This means that they are not catching the vast majority of bullying incidents.

Two people are involved

In this article I have used quotation marks for the terms 'bully' or 'victim' or 'target'. This is deliberate

as bullying is an active behaviour and as such it takes two people to engage in it – one to give and one to receive. Both may be unaware of why they are giving and receiving. Does this mean they are to be blamed and labelled – one a weak victim, the other an aggressive bully? Blaming anyone does not solve the problem although it may make someone happy to be able to vent some anger and gain revenge. It is complicated because of the role of perception, the environment both parties are in, societal pressures, history and so on; they both bring the entirety of their past to the present. This does not take away the reality of the bullying, it means people need a safe place to be able to go and sort things out, individually at first and then maybe together.

The workshop seemed to be of the opinion that we need to move away from the language of judgment, blame and fear, towards a language that actually engages people, a language that makes it clear that the behaviour is the problem not the individual. I find this approach is very useful whether talking to a schoolchild or managing director, it allows for more active involvement. If people are afraid of being branded, all the best policies in the world will be useless, as people will be afraid of the impact of accepting that they may have a behavioural problem.

How would you work with someone?

Within the workshop we looked at what may be the best ways of working with someone accused of bullying behaviours. This can be summarised by the following observations from the groups involved:

- Colleague to colleague approach may be the best option, talking to the accused to gain their perspective on the situation.
- Focus on the observable behaviours/intent. Focus on positive behaviours – identify the whole package of attributes not just unacceptable ones.
- Be aware that communication causes problems; most people do not want to be bullies.
- When a problem is identified provide support – avoid inflammatory language and suggest possible training/developmental intervention.
- For counsellors:
 - reflect the language they (the accused) were using, focus on behaviours that got them into trouble, look at how behaviours can be perceived, only then perhaps mention bullying.
 - Acknowledge universality of bullying, normalise it, make it easier to talk about.
 - Be less directive, make no assumptions, explore the situation not the person and be aware of the dynamics and competing realities.

There was almost unanimity that profiling 'bullies' was unhelpful.

A way ahead?

Organisations are being held to account for not protecting the recipients of bullying behaviours. The Canadian Safety Council states that bullying 'represent(s) a grab for control by an insecure, inadequate person, an exercise of power through the humiliation of the target.'⁸ How long will it be before someone uses the argument that the organisation has played a role in the development of their bullying behaviours? We need to engage the accused for the benefit of all parties.

The aim of the workshop was to begin a dialogue between professionals regarding how to work in an area that is under-researched. I believe that the way ahead addresses five major issues:

- 1 Change the language to enable all parties to engage in the process.
- 2 More research is required as a matter of urgency, although this may not happen until we have de-coupled the person from the problem.
- 3 Understand the role of collective responsibility in this area. Where fear for any reason gets in the way it blocks communication and can raise the level of conflict⁹.
- 4 Organisations need to accept that they can exhibit bullying behaviours as a corporate body and actually encourage bullying behaviours within the business.
- 5 A framework for counsellors needs to be developed that benchmarks best practice across counsellors, mediators and coaches, and recognises the uniqueness of each client. ■

Comments about this article are welcome as part of the beginning of a dialogue and can be sent direct to Damian: damianstoupe@somersetcounselling.co.uk

References

- 1 For example, Tim Field profiles a serial bully in his web page <http://www.bullyonline.org/workbully/serial.htm>
- 2 Buon C, Buon A. The bully within. Counselling at Work. Summer 2007.
- 3 Tim Field at www.bullyonline.org
- 4 John Paul II. Catechism of the Catholic Church. London: Geoffrey Chapman; 1994.
- 5 Winslade J, Monk G. Narrative mediation. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 2000.
- 6 For a wide range of images take a look at <http://www.sangrea.net/bully/>
- 7 Keryl Egan http://unionsafe.labor.net.au/safety_reps/files/Keryl_Egan_Clinical_Psychologist.ppt
- 8 Canadian Safety Council <http://www.safety-council.org/info/OSH/bullies.html>
- 9 For a broader discussion of this topic see Debbie Dunn's presentation at <http://www.mediationconference.com.au/images/dunn%20debbie.pdf>