Project Bullies – What Can You Do?

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Introduction

Bullying can be as harmful in the workplace and on projects as it is in schools and other areas of society, causing the well understood health impacts plus a long list of challenges for project managers and the organizations where it is taking place. Sadly, the rates of workplace bullying are increasingly dramatically; studies show that up to 75% of the workforce is bullied. Projects are subsets of workplaces and since project management is, for the most part, an activity that involves working very closely with others, the impact of a bully in a project is potentially lethal to project success.

To complicate matters, workplace bullies are often hard to identify clearly. They can be highly skilled yet socially manipulative, targeting "threatening" employees while adept at charming those they deem will serve their career path well. Thus, a senior manager or their supervisor may say, "That person seems great to me" or "She always gets results".

The good news is that there is a trend towards changes that may eventually see much better anti-bullying policies, strategies and increased public awareness. Further, expanding illegalization of workplace bullying is helping open doors for efforts to prevent it. Employers are becoming more acutely aware of the human, legal, ethical, and financial costs associated with workplace bullying.

In order to directly and proactively address this issue, organizations, project managers and their organizations need to take action. Fortunately, there are many sources of information and tools available to assist them. This paper aims to provide both project managers and the organizations they work for with concrete anti-bullying action plans so that both individually and across their projects, they can ensure that there is a zero-tolerance for bullying.

Workplace Bullying is Increasing

According to a 2013 Harvard Business Review article, over the last few decades, the number of people who've admitted to being the target of workplace bullying has increased drastically. How many people are bullied at work? Recent research indicates that 35% of the workforce is bullied (CareerBuilder.com. 2012). Other international research has found that 53% (Rayner, 1997), and even up to 75% (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997), of the workforce is bullied. The percentage of people bullied will vary based on country, industry, gender, organizational culture, and many other factors.

These statistics and the harm bullies can cause has direct impact on projects and project managers – if there is a bully operating in a project, the impact on the project team can be toxic, which inevitably has negative impacts for the team members and the project.

Workplace Bullying: A Definition

For the sake of brevity, references to bullying in this paper refer to workplace and/or project bullying. As already noted, bullying can be as harmful to both the project and the people in the workplace. It is a laser-focused, systematic campaign of interpersonal destruction. It has nothing to do with work itself. It actually prevents work from getting done and after all, that is precisely what project managers are responsible for doing – getting project work done through the efforts of others.

Workplace Bullying is mistreatment of one or more persons (the Targets) by one or more perpetrators. The Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute (WBI) defines workplace bullying as "*repeated, health-harming mistreatment, verbal abuse, or conduct which is threatening, humiliating, intimidating, or sabotage that interferes with work, or some combination of the three*". The WBI is an excellent resource for anyone wishing to learn more about workplace bullying (http://www.workplacebullying.org/recommended-books/).

Workplace bullying includes behaviors that can be categorized into three types, as outlined below. (This is a list of examples and not exhaustive.)

Aggressive Communication

- Insulting or making offensive remarks
- Shouting, yelling, angry outbursts
- Going around co-workers in order to avoid communicating with them
- Harsh finger pointing, invasion of personal space, shoving, blocking the way
- Sending angry emails or other e-communication

Manipulation of Work

- Removing tasks imperative to job responsibilities
- Giving unmanageable workloads & impossible deadlines
- Arbitrarily changing tasks
- Using employee evaluations to document supposed poor work quality and without setting goals or providing the tools needed to improve
- Withholding pertinent information needed to do one's job effectively
- Excessive micromanagement
- Failing to give credit, or stealing credit for others' work
- Preventing access to opportunities like promotions or raises

Humiliation

- Humiliating or ridiculing, excessive teasing
- Spreading rumors or gossip

- Ignoring peers when they walk by
- Playing harsh practical jokes
- Taunting with the use of social media
- Hinting that someone should quit, nobody likes them

Project interactions that don't qualify as Bullying

Not every unpleasant or challenging conflict with people at work or in a project is bullying – on the contrary. Conflict is a normal part of life and, as you know too well, conflict in projects are normal. So, it's important to contrast normal work behavior and interaction from bullying.

Here are some helpful examples of reasonable and regular conflicts that take place while working on projects that wouldn't qualify as bullying unless they also involved some of the behaviors noted in the definition of 'bullying':

- Expressing differences of opinion;
- Offering constructive feedback, guidance, or advice about work-related behavior;
- Reasonable action taken by an employer or supervisor relating to the management and direction of workers (i.e., managing performance, taking reasonable disciplinary actions, assigning work);
- Unpopular, yet defensible decisions related to project management (i.e., resource allocation, solving budget problems, project scale reduction, scheduling decisions which increase workload, etc.); and
- Project cancellation or delay.

The key is to approach each situation with a reasonable, objective perspective in order to properly assess if there is bullying involved. Seek the advice from trusted colleagues or human resources specialists (but best not to ask those within your organization for help until you've received credible advice). Ask other PMPs who are outside of your workplace to provide their insight. Use the PMI Ethics tools provided on the website and the five-step Ethics Decision-Making Framework to assist in evaluating the situation (see References for links).

Who Gets Targeted in a Project?

Unlike schoolyard bullying, you were not targeted because you were a "loner" or weakling without friends. Most likely, you were targeted because you posed a "threat" to him or her. The perception of threat is entirely in his/her mind, but it's what he/she feels and believes. In the writer's opinion project managers are often perceived threats because by definition, they are bringing about change or because they are drawing resources toward their project – likely away from the bully or other projects.

WBI research findings from the 2000 WBI Study and conversations with thousands of targets have confirmed that targets appear to be the veteran and most skilled person in the workgroup. Some of the common attributes of targets often include the following: Targets are independent. They refuse to be subservient. Bullies seek to enslave targets. When targets take steps to preserve their dignity, their right to

be treated with respect, bullies escalate their campaigns of hatred and intimidation to wrest control of the target's work from the target.

Targets are more technically skilled than their bullies. They are the "go-to" veteran workers to whom new employees turn for guidance. Insecure bosses and co-workers can't stand to share credit for the recognition of talent. Bully bosses steal credit from skilled targets – there are likely many project managers who have experienced such "credit theft".

Targets are better liked; they have more social skills, and quite likely possess greater emotional intelligence. Colleagues, customers, and management appreciate the warmth that the targets bring to the workplace.

Consider the fact that since project managers infrequently have enough positional authority to carry out their responsibilities, they must increasingly rely on other methods to motivate team members to accomplish the needed project work. The most effective of these other methods is relationship based; by forming relationships with team members, project managers can often motivate them even when positional authority is lacking. And that is precisely the kind of situation bullies can exploit. Consequently, project and project management can be more prone to even more bullying.

Targets are ethical and honest. This is particularly true for PMI members – all of whom have committed to follow the PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct. Targets are people with personalities founded on a nurturing and social orientation -- a desire to help, heal, teach, develop, and nurture others.

Most Common Bullying Scenarios

According to a 2014 study undertaken by the WBI, in the context of the workplace, supervisor-to-subordinate bullying remains the most common scenario; the majority of project bullies are bosses. This makes perfect sense when we examine what motivates bullies. Very rarely does a bully engage is what is commonly referred to as "bullying –up" (bullying a person higher up the organizational hierarchy than the bully). Men and women are equally likely to be bullies. Women bullies famously target other women in 80% of cases. Finally, the bullying is completely legal unless the employer operates in a jurisdiction that has anti-bullying legislation or the behavior involves race, age, or another status group membership characteristic can be claimed pursuant to the discriminatory harassment laws in effect.

What Motivates Project Bullies?

Bullying is about power & control. This aligns with the research – since bosses hold the power, it makes sense that a lot of bullies are bosses. According to Pinsky (p. 69) *"bullying behaviour was purposely employed in militaristic, male-dominated command and control workplace cultures and formed the foundational cultural model of many workplaces up until quite recently. Bullying is like bacteria. It needs the right environment in which to thrive. In business, that environment is a disrespectful workplace culture."*

Exhibit 1: Most Common Bullying Scenarios
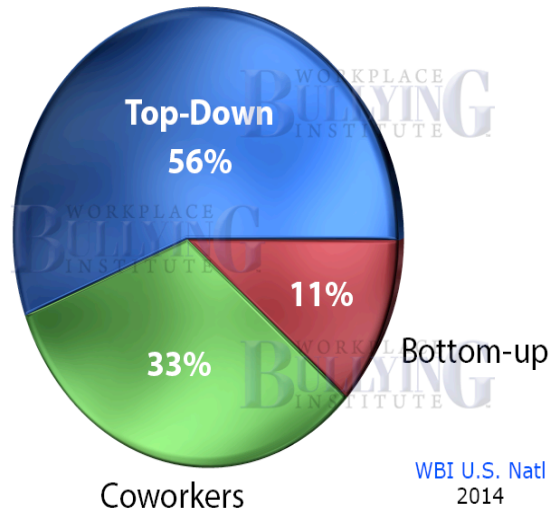
From this cultural model comes workplace attitudes that promote win/lose, competitiveness and "*the desire to dominate.*" (Pinsky p. 69). Organizations that embrace such a traditional power-based culture are ideal environments for bullies. They usually get rewarded for getting results and the methods they use to achieve success are ignored. "*Typically, bullies are very clever and manipulative. The face they present to their own bosses is charming, solicit and agreeable'. Their managers usually view them as "efficient, able to deal with touch issues and situations, someone who gets results.*" (Pinky p 78)

Bullies are motivated by deep-rooted insecurity, envy and jealousy. They generally target those they perceive as a threat. Again, this aligns perfectly with the characteristics of most targets who actually are the most competent and well-liked project team members. One can see how a bully could easily perceived such competence as a threat.

Consider the fact that since most projects occur in a matrixed organization where project team members report, not only to the project manager, but to a line manager as well. This dual reporting promotes conditions where multiple people who often have competing agendas task project team members. This environment presents added opportunities for bullying behavior. One, or more, of the project manager's bosses may resort to bullying to get the project team member to do as told. Or, maybe even worse, the project manager resorts to bullying behavior.

Following a militaristic command methodology, bullies generally approach their targets and colleagues using fear, intimidation, and threats. They are malicious, arrogant, sneaky and underhanded. They commonly treat people like children. They encourage conflict and above all, they create a work environment rife with stress and fear. In short, they are workplace terrorists.

How is bullying different from harassment?

Most organizations have some form of Respectful Workplace Policy or Expected Guidelines for Employee Behaviour that includes what we commonly refer to as "harassment". Most policies provide a

broad definition of what is considered unacceptable behaviour. The best way to present 'harassment' as it is usually defined in a Respectful Workplace Policy is with a good and common example. In Canada, under the Federal Government's *Policy on Harassment Prevention and Resolution, harassment is defined as:*

"*Improper conduct by an individual, that is directed at and offensive to another individual in the workplace, including at any event or any location related to work, and that the individual knew or ought reasonably to have known would cause offence or harm. It comprises objectionable act(s), comment(s) or display(s) that demean, belittle, or cause personal humiliation or embarrassment, and any act of intimidation or threat.*"

The most important points about harassment and bullying in the context of Respectful Workplace Policies are:

1. Respectful Workplace Policies are entirely voluntary – each organization chooses to implement such policies without any legal requirements to do so.
2. If an employee is accused of violating this policy, it is an internal matter and managed exclusively from within. Any investigating, resolution, punishment is a corporate affair.
3. Bullying that takes place in a disrespectful workplace may look and feel like harassment within most of these policies.

In bullying situations, the behaviour may represent a breach of 3 different policies/laws; a violation of organizational Respectful Workplace Policy; a violation of the applicable human rights legislation (if such laws exist); and, if anti-bullying legislation exists, a violation of anti-bullying laws. Each one of these must be discussed in detail in order to understand their applicability.

Workplace Harassment and Discriminatory Harassment

The first possible recourse in a bullying situation is to turn to your employer. If you are fortunate, there will be a workplace harassment policy like the ones discussed above. If your organization has no such policy, you have only human rights laws and anti-bullying laws upon which to base your recourse strategy. For the sake of clarity, when we refer to "workplace harassment" we mean behaviour that violates an organization's Respectful Workplace Policy.

Pinsky refers to this type of workplace harassment as bullying that is "*status blind harassment.*" (p. 62). *"By 'status' they mean what we call…the prohibited grounds like race, sex, or religion, which are listed in human rights legislation.* The bullying certainly looks and feels like harassment. It is harassing, as commonly understood. However, it doesn't involve behaviour that is discriminatory based on one of the protected grounds within applicable human rights laws.

Some countries have state/province and federal civil rights laws that are designed to protect workers from discriminatory and disparate mistreatment. For example in Canada there is federal legislation includes harassment within the meaning of the *Canadian Human Rights Act (i.e. based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, family status, disability and pardoned conviction).*

If, and only if, you are a member of a protected status (grounds) group and you have been bullied by a person who is not a member of a protected group, you might be able to claim that you were harassed within the terms of this legislation. If such laws are in place and the bullying is based on one of these protected grounds, the bullying may actually be illegal. Only a local legal professional can advise you on this.

HR must respond to your complaint and the entire anti-discrimination procedure begins. According to the WBI, illegal discriminatory harassment is estimated to occur in only 20% of bullying cases - which means that 80% of bullying is legal.

Bullying that Violates Anti-Bullying Laws

The last and, sadly, least likely ground of recourse for workplace bullying is through anti-bullying laws. While there is a clear legislative trend to make workplace bullying illegal (usually as a health and workplace safety issue), this is very much still evolving. At the moment, we see the world leaders on this front as the European Union, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. The US still has not national anti-workplace bullying legislation although one is being proposed and slowly moving through the political processes.

If you are fortunate enough to live in a jurisdiction that has anti-bullying laws in place, then you may be able to use such legislation as a ground of recourse. The important difference between this process and a workplace harassment process is that it takes place outside of and beyond the control of the employer. This is usually a complex and lengthy investigation process that is handled by experts (often by the government department responsible for workplace health and safety). There will be challenging interviews with the target, the target's witnesses, the bully, the bully's witnesses and any other persons of interest the investigators deem relevant. We note this not to discourage anyone from seeking recourse under the law (on the contrary!). However, we feel you should be well informed before you make any illegal bullying allegations.

The terms of the laws guide the process and the potential outcomes. Most anti-bullying laws have a wide range of recourse orders they can make – from recommendations to establish Respectful Workplace Policies to terminating the bully.

Currently, there are no statistics to inform us what percent of bullying cases fall within anti-bullying legislation. This is likely because most laws are relatively new and it will take time for good data to become available. It bears repeating – according to the WBI 80% of bullying is legal.

Project Impacts of Workplace Bullying

There is a wide range of direct negative and financial impacts which bullying has on projects. The most obvious are impacts on project success, team performance, budgets and timelines. And, since projects are temporary endeavours, the impact of bullying extends well beyond the term of a particular project. What employee, given the choice, would decide to join a subsequent project with project members who have a track record of bullying?

Exhibit 2 - 80% of bullying is legal

"It's a very special occasion...
You went a whole month without humiliating anyone."

In a 2014 Guardian article on the problems created by workplace bullying, writer Ian Erickson, references an article on Stuff.com, in which New Zealander, Shane Cowishlaw, writes that workplace bullying costs his country "hundreds of millions" of dollars. Australia reports losses in the billions. Not surprisingly for companies in the much larger United States, workplace bullying related costs are estimated to be over $200 billion. According to *New Zealand News*, workplace bullying affects about one in five employees.

Mr. Erickson also discusses how workplace bullying harms profits. He notes that: "*The Workplace Bullying Institute describes workplace bullying in part, as behaviour that prevents work from being finished. Losses are caused by staff members struggling to cope at work, high rates of absenteeism and talented employees leaving in favour of a more harmonious place of employment*".

Experiments and other reports offer additional insights about the effects of bullying. Here are some examples of what can happen.

a) Project team and individual creativity suffers.

In an experiment that the WBI conducted with Amir Erez, a professor of management at the University of Florida, participants who were treated rudely by other subjects "*were 30% less creative than others in the study. They produced 25% fewer ideas, and the ones they did come up with were less original.*

b) Performance and team spirit deteriorate.

WBI Survey results and interviews indicate that simply witnessing bullying has negative consequences. In one experiment WBI conducted they reported "*people who'd observed poor behaviour performed 20%*

worse on word puzzles than other people did. We also found that witnesses to bullying were less likely than others to help out, even when the person they'd be helping had no apparent connection to the uncivil person: Only 25% of the subjects who'd witnessed bullying volunteered to help, whereas 51% of those who hadn't witnessed it did".

iii) Customers turn away.

People are less likely to do business with a company with an employee they perceive as a bully or rude, even if the bullying isn't directed at them. Disrespectful behaviour makes people uncomfortable, and they're quick to cease business relations with an organization that permits bullying.

iv) Employee turnover.

Bullied people often end up quitting for one reason or another. This has a significant negative impact on projects, especially when the organization has to replace the best and brightest (the bullied ones). Turnover costs can be significant and the harder-to-calculate lost production cost during the entire process can be enormous.

v) Lost opportunity cost.

We know that adults targeted for bullying at work pose a threat to their bullies. Envy and jealousy are two powerful motives for bullying. That means that when the more talented target is driven from work, either through termination or constructive discharge or quitting, the company loses the value that worker created. For project managers, the loss of top talent can be fatal to project success.

Employer Responsibility

Employers define all work conditions -- employee selection, job descriptions, work assignments, creation of the management group, compensation, leave policies, termination without cause (except in rare circumstances). So, bullying - the system - can only be sustained or eliminated by employers. However, everyone employed within an organization can play an anti-bullying advocate role to encourage change.

Stopping bullying requires nothing less than turning the workplace culture upside down. Bullies must experience negative consequences for harming others. Punishment must replace promotions. And only executives and senior management can reverse the historical trend. To stop bullying requires employers to change the routine ways of "doing business" that have propped up bullies for years. Bullies are too expensive to keep, but convincing executives, the bully's best friends and supporters, is difficult.

In conclusion, the ultimate solution fixes responsibility for both the cause and cure squarely on the shoulders of senior management and executives. They put people in harm's way and they can provide safety by undoing the culture that may have inadvertently allowed bullying to flourish. Of course, if executives instruct others to bully from the top, targeted employees can never be safe.

Anti-Bullying Action Plans for Organizations and Project Managers

a) What can employers/organizations do about bullying?

Business-savvy organizations are taking increasingly proactive steps to confront workplace bullying, reinforcing the value of ethical awareness and policies predicated on building trust, protecting employees and instilling confidence in those who work for the organization and those who do business with them.

Anti-bullying advocates and experts offer tips to companies and project managers. Some of the most practical, proactive tips are the following:

1. **Create organizational anti-bullying policies, effective methods to report and investigate alleged bullying, and make training mandatory:** All organizations should establish clear and effective bullying policies and procedures for addressing bullying allegations. Training, awareness, and education are critical to the success of such policies. If your organization has no anti-bullying policy, project managers should lobby hard for change.
2. **Consider long-term project and organization well being when addressing bullying**: While bullies create many negative, long-term problems, they are often highly intelligent, manipulative and laser focused professionals that appear to get the job done where others have failed. Since workplace bullies often get short-term results, employers--particularly senior management level staff--too often tolerate them. Thus, in spite of their negative qualities, bullies often get away with abuse and even receive positive evaluations from their supervisors. However, it is far better to proactively and directly address the bullying than to permit spreading poison throughout the organization.
3. **Lead by example from the top:** From the organization's highest levels, it should be made clear that bullying isn't acceptable. Even the slightest hint that it might be tolerated is often enough for a bully to cause damage. So, from the CEO and project managers all the way down to lower-ranking staff, the message must be one of zero tolerance for bullying.
4. **Respond to all types bullying behavior:** Bullying often begins with small actions such as eye rolling, sneering, or demeaning a colleague, either in private or publicly. While such behavior may seem insignificant, it is unprofessional and project managers must address it immediately. The effects of bullying arise from these types of indignities and often lead to more serious problems if left unchecked.
5. **Take bullying claims seriously but tread carefully:** Assuming a bullying allegation is merely a conflict between two work mates who should sort it out between themselves represents a misunderstanding of bullying. It's much more one-way and requires authoritative intervention. Take bullying allegations seriously, but don't assume they're true – that is for the investigation process will determine. Ensure that you take the initiative to respond and report and let the experts take over.
6. **Bullying investigations must be impartial, fair and fulsome:** In order for a project team or the organization as a whole to feel safe and have faith that it takes this issue seriously, it is essential that investigations are unbiased, free from political interference and result in appropriate responses if allegations are proven. An impartial investigator should be engaged to conduct this sensitive work and be permitted to speak to anyone who may have witnessed the activity. Fair treatment for all victims, bullies and witnesses is needed to engender trust in the process.

Exhibit 3 – A Bullying Action Plan

b) What's can Project Managers/Leaders do about bullying?

There are a number of important steps project managers can take to confront project bullying and protect their team members. As a starting point and reminder, PMI members commit to act ethically and professionally when they become and renew their membership (PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, 2006). They must meet the manditory elements within the Code to demonstrate responsibility, respect, fairness, and honesty, and are strongly encouraged to adhere to the aspirational sections of that document as well. PMI members also have a five-step Ethical Decision-Making Framework (EDMF) they can use to guide them when confronted with an ethical dilemma involving bullying (PMI Ethical Decision-Making Framework, 2012). The EDMF can help to frame bullying problems, clarify goals, examine assumptions and options, discern hidden values, evaluate evidence, and assess conclusions.

It can take constant vigilance to keep the workplace civil and free from bullying; otherwise, rudeness tends to creep into everyday interactions. Project managers can use several strategies to keep their own behaviour in check and to foster civility among others.

1) **Managing yourself:** Project Managers set the tone, so you need to be aware of your actions and of how you come across to others.
2) **Model good behaviour:** In a survey, the WBI found that *"25% of managers who admitted to having behaved badly said they were uncivil because their leaders—their own role models—were rude. If employees see that those who have climbed the corporate ladder tolerate or embrace bullying behaviour, they're likely to follow suit. So turn off your iPhone during meetings, pay attention to questions, and follow up on promise"*.

3) **Ask for feedback:** You may need a reality check from the people who work with or for you. Such feedback can prove very insightful and helpful.
4) **Teach civility.** It's amazing how many project managers don't understand what it means to be civil. One quarter of manager offenders WBI surveyed said that they didn't recognize their behaviour as uncivil.
5) **Create group norms.** Start a dialogue with your team about expectations. As your project team to produce and take ownership of concrete norms for civility, such as arriving on time and ignoring e-mail during meetings.
6) **Reward good behaviour.** Collegiality should be a consideration in every performance review, but many companies think only about outcomes and tend to overlook damaging behaviours. What behaviour does your review system motivate? All too often we see organizations badly miss the mark. They want collaboration, but you'd never know it from their evaluation forms, which focus entirely on individual assessment, without a single measure of teamwork.
7) **Penalize bad behaviour.** Even the best companies occasionally make bad hires, and employees from an acquired firm may be accustomed to different norms. The trick is to identify and try to correct any troublesome behaviour. Companies often avoid taking action, though, and most incidents go unreported, partly because employees know nothing will come of a report. If you want to foster respect, take complaints seriously and follow up.

A warning to those who think consistent civility is an extravagance: Just one habitually offensive employee critically positioned in your organization can cost you dearly in project delays and costs, lost employees, lost customers, and lost productivity.

Conclusion

The good news is that increased global organizational and public awareness, recent research, and expanding illegalization of workplace bullying are having positive impacts. Project managers and employers around the world are becoming more informed of the many negative impacts and costs associated with workplace bullying. If employers, project managers and senior executives take initiative in addressing bullying early on, much larger financial, ethical, legal, human resource and project problems will be avoided. Eventually, these initiatives will lead to wider support for zero tolerance for bullying in the workplace regardless of circumstance, societal norm, or jurisdiction.

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