

Bullies at Work by Darren Hardy

Do you have one in your office?

Think about bullies and you imagine the schoolyard or, in the wake of the Miami Dolphins' scandal, the locker room. The stereotype bully is a big doofus or a "mean girl" who uses an unfair advantage to brutalize or denigrate a weaker counterpart.

Bullies grow up—and not all get drafted into the NFL. They go to work just like the rest of us. Like the stereotype, they seek to undermine a weaker person to gain power. Unlike the stereotype, workplace bullies aren't meatheads; they're often politically astute, possessing strong leadership skills and the capability to ace a performance evaluation, according to research.

Could you have a bully in your organization? Quite possibly, experts say. Would you know it? Not necessarily.

Workplace bullying happens at all levels of an organization; in startups and corporations; in every industry; across genders, ethnicities and cultures. Thirty-five percent of workers in the U.S. have been bullied firsthand and 15 percent have witnessed it, according to the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI). That's 50 percent of workers affected by bullying.

Aside from the toll it takes on victims, bullying can bring down a company through higher turnover, diminished performance and innovativeness, greater job tension, lower job satisfaction and increased absenteeism.

But who are bullies? What are their tactics?

For starters, workplace bullying follows a top-down trend, with 72 percent of bullies being bosses, 18 percent co-workers and 10 percent subordinates, according to WBI. The majority of bullies are males (62 percent) who usually target men (56 percent of the time). When women are the perpetrators, they target other women 80 percent of the time.

"We look at bullies as big, stupid people who can't do anything else except be aggressive and mean," says Darren C. Treadway, Ph.D., associate professor at the University at Buffalo's School of Management and faculty affiliate for the Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention. "But if that's the case, why do they continue in organizations?"

The answer may lie in the findings of a study led by Treadway that shows how political skill in the workplace strongly correlates with a bully's success. "Politically skilled people who choose to do bad things do those bad things really well," he says. "A bully who is politically skilled or socially confident can understand or sense what their target is most insecure about. That's when bullying becomes effective."

Bullies may have the general intelligence, emotional intelligence and social skill of a good leader, but they'll use it to their sole advantage, he says. In fact, their individual job performance likely improves as their power increases. But when they get ahead, problems mount for their organizations as a whole, Treadway says.

He cites the example of Miami Dolphins guard Richie Incognito, accused of bullying by teammate Jonathan Martin, an offensive tackle who recently left the team after the situation came to a head. Incognito had a history of problems with other teams—including picking fights with teammates during practice—that stretched back to his college days when he was kicked off the Nebraska team. But it seemed like there was

always another team that wanted him, at least until the recent allegations, which led to the former team captain's suspension.

Like football, where aggressiveness is encouraged on the field, companies that focus solely on performance may tacitly endorse bullying behavior. "When you're rewarding individuals, make sure that you're rewarding them not just for task performance but also for the values that you perpetuate in your organization—not only as a good performer but for doing it the right way," Treadway says. "Taking someone who is not walking the right path and putting them on a pedestal leads people to think that's the way to be successful. All of a sudden, we are surprised we created a culture of victimization."

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) defines workplace bullying as "persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating or insulting behavior, or unfair actions directed at another individual, causing the recipient to feel threatened, abused, humiliated or vulnerable."

In a 2012 survey, SHRM found that among organizations that experienced incidents of bullying, 73 percent reported verbal abuse, 62 percent malicious gossiping or spreading rumors and 50 percent threats or intimidation.

Deborah Keary, vice president of human resources at SHRM, says some warning signs may seem subtle to a manager—like the person who is always giving orders without showing personal interest or compassion for others, using negative body language like turning away from the person while talking, micromanaging, or showing public disrespect by yelling or even using all caps in emails.

The bottom line is that what is or is not abusive is determined by the person who is being targeted. "If that person says 'I feel harassed or abused, or this is affecting me,' then it's bullying," Treadway says.

No matter the means of attack, bullying is solely about power, and a bully's actions and attitude create fear and insecurity in the workplace—not only among victims, but others who see what happens to those who don't side with the bully.

"It's very typical for individuals who are abused to simply try to get along with the abuser," Treadway says. "They think if they're friendly to them, it might go away."

Is it possible to bully-proof your organization? What's a leader to do?

Although some 25 states have proposed legislation that would bar bullying in the workplace, no laws exist now. "The bill is important because it provides an incentive for employers to do what they should be doing voluntarily now," says Gary Namie, director of the Workplace Bullying Institute.

But leaders don't need a law to set the standards. Creating an anti-bullying environment from the get-go is vital. Leaders have to foster a culture of respect. The office, or the field, needs to be a safe place where people want to come every day.

"At the very least, run your due diligence in reference checks and ask the right questions [in the interview process]," Treadway says.

Make it clear to employees what will and won't be tolerated, as well as the consequences for disobeying the rules.

Call out aggressors immediately. "If you, as an employer, see disrespect in a meeting, you call them on it right that minute. Ask if they have something to contribute to the discussion or have them apologize on the

spot,” Keary says. “You can’t ignore it when you see it; you have to fix it so employees know it’s not tolerable.”

Model respectful behavior: Hold meetings or informally ask team members for their thoughts, and respond to what you hear; share information about how the business is doing; make sure your people know how much you appreciate them.

If you're an entrepreneur with a startup, you might face greater challenges since your focus is likely on getting your idea to market—rather than workplace culture. You don't have to ratchet back, but be mindful of the culture you want and articulate that to team members.

Following the Dolphins scandal, other coaches have said they don't even go into their locker rooms. But leaders can't ignore what's going on. “You have to have the guts to walk around and talk to your employees, build relationships,” Treadway says. “At the end of the day, that’s your job.”