

Reverse bullying: Management teams deserve protection too

In her 20-year tenure as an employee, Brenda had firmly established her reputation as a bully. No one dared challenge her. She didn't hesitate to address her manager using foul language. Much of the time, she did whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted. She often used her power as union steward to stomp out of management-union meetings, complete with door-slamming.

Over the years management had tried numerous approaches to deal with this problem, to no avail. They transferred her from one department to another. They changed her managers. They initiated progressive discipline, to which she responded with grievances and harassment complaints. They changed her role description. By the time I arrived on the scene as a consultant, the management team was helpless, intimidated and demoralized.

The dynamic of a management group held hostage by one or two powerful bullying individuals is not unique to this organization. And yet, few are willing to label the problem for what it is — a bullied management team. It's a dirty little secret no one wants to talk about.

Interestingly, this phenomenon often occurs in organizations where management is well-intended, gracious and even progressive. Such management teams assume others will naturally mirror their own values and behaviours. Other times, there could be an unfocused management team or one who is preoccupied with real-life survival matters and views this as a lower priority. Like a heat-seeking missile, the bullies take advantage of the space management creates and securely lodge themselves where they can wreak the most havoc.

Paths to solutions

By the time management realizes it needs to shift its thinking to resolve the problem once and for all, the issue has reached the point of affecting morale, customer service, retention and engagement.



■ GUEST COMMENTARY

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The recognition something significantly different has to happen usually occurs only when someone with a fresh perspective (a new management team member or an outside consultant) enters the picture and is able to see how stuck the system is and then offer fresh solutions.

Here are a number of options to free a management team from bullying and, along with it, improve overall organizational health:

Call a spade a spade: Recognize the problem for what it is — a bully-in-the-making or a full-blown bullying situation that has resulted in management intimidation. Instead of classifying the problem as a "personality issue" or mere "incivility," label it as bullying and take a decisive approach.

Get all leaders on board: Anyone in management whose people interface with the bully's activities, even marginally, needs to be onboard, share the determination to take action and receive regular updates. Furthermore, the direct manager needs extra support from cohorts.

Cut your losses: If you need to fire the person, go ahead and do it. In the same way battered wives or bullied individuals make excuses for the bully, bullied management teams offer convoluted answers when asked: "Why don't you simply fire this person and pay them whatever it costs?" Fear of firing is particularly noticeable in unionized environments, even

though dismissal can be done in these contexts as well.

Develop a comprehensive approach to solving the problem: Bullied management teams mistakenly perceive the problem as a one-person concern instead of an organization-wide threat. However, the key to solving the problem is developing a multi-pronged approach that works on multiple levels. For example:

- Re-commit to your core organizational values, which often include concepts such as respect, integrity, community and diversity. Use these values to develop the determination necessary to deal with the problem and then leverage them in all interventions.
- Create a new and stringent respect/harassment policy and roll it out with a big splash. Bring in harassment training for management and employees and publicly declare all respect-related matters will be treated with utmost sternness.
- Appoint a strong direct manager who is willing and able to execute the new approach fairly and determinedly.
- Examine the underlying culture — what is it that enables people to behave in this way? How have management practices contributed to the problem? What do people believe about who we are, and what's OK or not OK to do here, that would sustain this problem behaviour?
- Create "team-operating agreements" where team members commit to specific ways of treating each other. This is highly effective in mobilizing the silent majority who has suffered in the situation and had no practical organizational tools to rely on.
- Rethink your approach to union issues. In many cases, a bully abuses her union position or is adept at misusing union-based tools to her advantage. In these cases, a new union strategy is crucial to solving the problem.

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