

AN EXPLORATION OF WORK-RELATED BULLYING

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Is Lukewarm No Good?

If you're anything like me, when you go to work, you do so with the very best intentions: you want to work for a caring organisation, in a role that will enable you to live out your purpose, make a difference, make some money and allow you to leverage your strengths in order to help people and/or help the organisation to achieve greater success.

Performing a role with passion, dedication, energy and a bit of sparkle is paramount. Passionate people just can't do things in half measures. We set ourselves high standards and always give 100% to everything we do. In other words:



It is an ethos that I live by.

On the face of it, you would think that individuals with such passion and high standards are the type of employees that every organisation wants and that every manager would love to have on their team. However, counterintuitively, this is not necessarily always the case. In some organisations and teams it actually doesn't pay to be fully engaged, enthusiastic and passionate. Individuals who give 100% and stand out in some way are often met with suspicion, envy and disquiet, triggering behaviours such as undermining, bullying and even sabotage, sometimes by peers and sometimes by leaders themselves.

But how can we make sense of that?

Research has been undertaken which demonstrates that being a high performer can actually come with heavy social costs and that it can make the individual's colleagues resent them and even actively undermine or sabotage their work. Gino (2017) says that:

"Decades of research on social comparisons show that when we size ourselves up relative to people who are better than we are (or as good as we are) on a particular dimension, we are likely to experience discomfort, envy, or fear. These emotions, in turn, affect our decisions and our interactions with others." [1]

I've recently been taking a 'Science of Wellbeing' online course with Yale University and the idea of drawing social comparisons is something that is discussed by the instructor, Laurie Santos. She asserts that our minds will automatically make judgements about others, using things that we deem to be important as reference points, for example performance levels or salary. The comparisons that we draw can make us feel that another individual is more successful than we are in some way and that might lead us to treat someone unfairly/unkindly simply due to our own perceptions or our fragile ego. [2]

The Tall Poppy



A term that I've only recently come across is 'Tall Poppy Syndrome' [3] and, even though the term is new to me, I have definitely seen the scenario played out within organisations during my 30 year career. Essentially, 'Tall Poppy Syndrome' asserts that someone who stands out from the crowd, or is deemed to be above average in some way in the workplace (perhaps having higher qualifications, more experience, higher performance levels, or perceived by others as having experienced more success) may be targeted and intentionally 'cut down to size' - the analogy being that the tall poppy needs to be brought down to the same height as the other poppies in the field.

The high achiever (tall poppy) invariably doesn't personally feel, or behave in a way to suggest, that they are better than anyone else and just carries out their role to the best of their ability. Envy that is displayed by others towards this type of individual is based purely on judgements, comparisons, perceptions and insecurities, it has nothing at all to do with the actions of the person that is being targeted and everything to do with the way that the envious individual, or group, feels about themselves.

Exacerbating the situation, tall poppies may be given opportunities to take part in high profile activities outside of their immediate role, simply because they are so passionate – something that only adds fuel to the fire, or in this case, vigour to the cutting!

Individuals may feel threatened by what they perceive as ‘success’ and so may feel the need to cut the ‘tall poppy’ down to size so that they feel better about themselves, or so that they are closer to the same level, becoming what’s known as a ‘poppy cutter’. A way that this ‘cutting down’ may be put into action might be by subtly beginning to undermine the good work that the high achiever is doing, making comments to others with malicious intentions, saying one thing to the individual and then a completely different thing to others and creating doubt amongst others, intentionally sabotaging work and character.

It sounds pretty unbelievable, that someone’s jealousy can lead them to behave in such a seemingly calculated way, doesn’t it? However, I’m sure that many of you have either seen this in action, or experienced this type of behaviour with you as the target – it is a very real problem that can poison teams and, if not addressed quickly, can have a knock on impact on entire workplaces.

Sowing the Seeds (Isn’t it supposed to be seeds of love?)



At a very simplistic level, if one person were to sow the seed of “He thinks he’s better than everyone else.”, or “ He said X, Y and Z”, this might then grow to become a strongly held perception within the group, even if there is absolutely no truth to the assertion or the rumour. The ease in which others might accept the information that has been introduced can be somewhat explained by the concepts of ‘Groupthink’ [4] and ‘Conformity Bias’ [5]. Both concepts rationalise how individuals may prioritise a sense of belonging within the group over anything else and, as a result, team members may go along with what other people have said just so that they can fit in and not become excluded themselves. Much like the situation in the school playground where children might join the side of the bully so that they aren’t so likely to be in danger of becoming a victim themselves.

Both ‘Groupthink’ and ‘Conformity Bias’ can be hugely problematic in this type of workplace scenario because judgements are invariably not actually based on fact and may be driven purely by the initial roots of envy of one person, or group of people, wanting to cut an individual down to size. What may begin as initial pangs of envy can go on to really damage an individual’s reputation, relationships and their wellbeing.

If leaders are the initiator, or also part of the wider group, the workplace situation can become impossible and it can lead to unfair judgements being made in a variety of areas, for example: at

appraisals or reviews; when distributing workloads; when choosing to give or withhold support; when choosing to give or withhold praise; being overly critical of the individual's work; giving negative feedback that is subjective or not based on fact; excluding the individual from decision-making in day-to-day matters that impact them; allocating heavy workloads and setting the individual up to fail. There are of course so many more ways that both leaders and other employees can create an impossibly toxic environment for individuals if they are that way inclined, the net result of such behaviour being that it can leave the individual feeling isolated, unsupported, stressed and at risk of becoming severely burnt out.



Impact: The Ripple Effect



The types of negative behaviours that I've identified can have an impact on so many areas within an organisation. What might start as a tiny drop can go on to have a ripple effect that can spread quickly and even become normalised to an extent within teams and within the organisation as a whole. This can go on to have so many negative potential impacts, for example: higher sickness levels; lower performance and productivity; creation of a toxic organisational culture; and ultimately, can make your employees walk right out the door, taking their experience and tacit knowledge with them.

Short to medium term implications:

If an employee does choose to leave the organisation, this will, in the short to medium term, impact operations, may adversely affect your organisation's turnover, potentially have an impact on your customers and an impact on your overall organisational performance.

Longer term implications:

In the longer term, there could be a lasting impact on the way the organisation is perceived by current employees, potential future employees, customers, potential customers, stakeholders and wider society. There is also, of course, the potential for more widespread negative impacts from the employee who has left the organisation, for example, negative word of mouth, social media posts, negative reviews on sites such as Glassdoor and at the most extreme end of the scale, employment tribunals.

There is never a win in these circumstances, in every case the organisation will have lost. They will have lost one of their employees, which has a big impact whether the individual was a high achiever or not, and if the issues surrounding the behaviours aren't addressed, the organisation will also continue to lose because the pattern will likely just continue repeating itself in the future, leading to further culture damage and more resignations.



Narratives are, of course, often changed by the people who remain in the organisation, with further 'groupthink' taking place and the employee who chose to resign often being portrayed as the villain, both internally and externally. This may allow the organisation to save face temporarily, however, it does nothing to address the issues within the organisation, which may continue to have negative and far-reaching impacts.

To an extent, many of us may have been conditioned to accept that this type of scenario is an inevitable part of, not only working life, but life in general. You might merely put poor behaviours down to 'human nature', 'survival of the fittest', or 'a competitive environment'. When negative workplace situations such as this continue without being addressed, beliefs and behaviours can

become more entrenched – if behaviours are targeted towards a particular individual and it drives them to take the decision to leave an organisation, such behaviours really need to be called out for exactly what they are: bullying.

Work-Related Bullying

Bullying can have a widespread impact within the workplace - it can spoil relationships, ruin careers, have a negative impact on an individual's wellbeing and, quite simply, it isn't kind and is bad for business, both morally and financially.



Words matter.

Not only the words that we say to ourselves and to others, but also the terminologies surrounding the topic of work-related bullying.

We tend to make an assumption that 'bullying' and 'bullies' are terms that relate solely to inherently unkind people and unkind organisations and that the 'bullied' are weak. We might also assume that those unkind people or unkind organisations intentionally attempt to cause harm in some way, but this is something that I don't think is always the case. In my experience, people who display unkind and bullying behaviours in workplaces are often nice enough people generally, but due to their own egos, lack of awareness, naivety, 'groupthink', 'conformity bias', insecurity, jealousy or lack of thought, they can sometimes make poor choices, either individually or as part of a group. This is something which is echoed by Gilligan White (2019), who asserts that: *"good people can act poorly when influenced by those in power and by their need to survive and belong"*. [6]

Work-related bullying is a topic that is so important yet is very often a taboo subject in organisations, as though if we just don't talk about it, it isn't there. Because of this approach, issues that arise within workplaces may just be ignored, or as CIPD term it in their 2020 research report: *"Swept under the carpet"*. [7]

Organisations are legally required to have policies and processes in place to safeguard individuals, but how often do you actually hear anyone talking openly about the topic and making sure that they signpost their employees as to what can be done if they are to experience or observe any such issues?

This lack of exposure can perhaps be explained by the fact that the terminology surrounding the topic has such negative connotations. No organisation wants to admit that bullying might be taking place amongst their employees and, similarly, individuals may perhaps also be reluctant to admit that, as an adult, they have become a victim.

Mitigating Risk

It all sounds a bit doom and gloom, doesn't it? But there is some positive action that organisations can take now to mitigate the risk and ensure that individuals are not targeted.

In my opinion, it absolutely must start at the top. Mission and value statements invariably assert buzzwords such as, 'Transparency', 'Honesty', 'Integrity', 'Fairness' etc. Unfortunately, all too often these are just aspirational as opposed to being embedded throughout the organisation. If you are a senior leader, I would encourage you to ask yourself the following questions:

- Am I actually role-modelling the core values to my team?
- What am I doing to ensure that the rest of the leadership team is living and breathing the values every day?
- How are we ensuring that our values are disseminated and embedded throughout the organisation at all levels?
- What does data from exit interviews, employee surveys and reviews tell us? Are there any themes emerging?
- How are we ensuring that individuals are behaving ethically and that they are held accountable?
- How are we ensuring that the workplace is psychologically safe for all employees?

I wholeheartedly believe that if you are a leader in an organisation, issues of bullying, harassment and sabotage lie squarely with you. It is your responsibility to set the tone that becomes the organisational culture, ensuring that there is a zero-tolerance approach and that all other leaders and employees are held accountable for their actions, regardless of their job role or level. The time for action is now.



Things that I would urge leaders to do right now:

- **Sign up to join the BulliesOut ‘Speak Out’ campaign** – commit your organisation to working towards promoting an anti-bullying and respectful ethos and show your employees that you are serious about ensuring they have a safe and fair environment in which to work.

You can find out more and sign up for the campaign FREE of charge at the following link:
<https://bulliesout.com/get-involved/speak-out-campaign/>

- **Review your policies and processes** – make sure that your organisation has a zero tolerance policy, clearly signposted support and reporting procedures.
- **Communicate** – engage employees in development sessions around the topic of what constitutes bullying and what they should do if they encounter it, whether as a victim or a bystander.
- **Behavioural change** – consider ways in which you might drive the behavioural changes that are needed in the organisation, for example, making 360 feedback part of goals and objectives for leaders, giving every employee the confidence that the organisation’s culture is one of honesty and transparency without fear of retribution.
- **Accountability** - giving clear accountability and asking leaders to demonstrate how they have addressed any issues that have been raised and if no issues have been raised, how they have reiterated the importance of the core values and the zero-tolerance culture.
- **Leadership development** - look at your leadership development plans and ensure that leaders at all levels are developed in order to be able to support their own teams effectively, giving them the skills to get the best out of their team members and ensure that the team works as one as opposed to working as individuals who are in competition with each other.

My advice to everyone who has taken the time to read this post:

Look at yourself first. It starts with you. It starts with me. It starts with all of us.



I don't think that any one of us could say, absolutely hand on heart, that we have never played a part in unkind behaviours at some time in our working lives, even if it is something like taking part in gossip, or being a bystander who watches others' poor behaviour without intervening in some way. We must look at, and be honest with, ourselves first. Ask yourself:

- Is my jealousy making me behave in a way which is unkind?
- Am I role-modelling kindness and fairness at work?
- Do I take action if I see something that is unkind or unethical?

Creating better workplaces takes commitment from every single one of us and the time to make that commitment is now. There has never been a better time.

Don't just pay lip service to the hashtag of #BeKind, take some positive action to ensure that you are making a difference every day and that you are standing up and speaking out against bullying behaviours.

My advice to the people who feel envy towards high achievers/tall poppies/others' success:

I would urge you to remember that everyone plays an important part in a team, understand that and let your strengths combine with the strengths of others, don't think in terms of competition and comparison, let your focus be on collaboration and celebration – this will lead to the continuous collective win for the team and for the organisation.

Please also remember that being a high achiever comes with hard work, focus and dedication – it is not something that comes without a price. The people that you may be envious of also have disappointments, challenges in life and feelings – rise above your envy and, above all else, be a kind human being.

My advice to anyone who has been, or is currently being, affected by work-based bullying:

There is help out there, you are not alone.

Please get some advice or speak to someone, you do not have to put up with people treating you unfairly or unkindly at work.

You can find expert guidance at the following links:

<https://bulliesout.com/need-support/employees/>

<https://www.acas.org.uk/if-youre-treated-unfairly-at-work/being-bullied>

<https://www.gov.uk/workplace-bullying-and-harassment>

<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/emp-law/harassment/factsheet#15763>

<https://www.supportline.org.uk/problems/bullying-in-the-workplace/>

<https://www.nationalbullyinghelpline.co.uk/employees.html>

My advice to the high performers/tall poppies who are reading this:

I appreciate you. Please don't ever feel that you have to drop your standards.

Keep being authentic, kind, passionate, a high achiever and true to yourself.

I hope that you are already working in an organisation that celebrates you and allows you to be yourself. If you're not, I hope that you find the place that will do so, where people will support you, appreciate your passion, celebrate your achievements and also set themselves high standards, prioritising team wins over individual performance and competition. When you find that place and you are surrounded by those people, you will be able to grow, flourish and reach your full potential, exceeding targets and helping the team and the organisation achieve amazing results. There are so many organisations that will welcome and appreciate you.

Keep your face turned to the sun and remain a 'tall poppy', don't ever let others bully you into becoming less than you are.

One of my favourite inspirational talks, from the fabulous Lisa Nichols, applies to you. Let your light shine brightly and don't ever dim your light to please someone else – you are special, you are unique and you deserve to be celebrated for the amazing person that you are, in all your dazzling glory.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CWpiCOmbVuY>



[1] Gino, F., 2017. *The Problem with Being a Top Performer*. Scientific American, [online] Available at: <<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-problem-with-being-a-top-performer/>> [Accessed 09 May 2020].

[2] Santos, L., 2020. *The Science of Wellbeing*. Yale University, [online] Available at: <<https://www.coursera.org/learn/the-science-of-well-being/>> [Accessed 07 May 2020].

[3] Delgado, J., n.d. *Tall Poppy Syndrome: When They Try To Sink You Because You Stand Out*. [online] Psychology Spot. Available at: <<https://psychology-spot.com/tall-poppy-syndrome/>> [Accessed 7 May 2020].

[4] Gotter, A., 2019. *Groupthink: What It Is And Why It Happens*. [online] Healthline. Available at: <<https://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/groupthink>> [Accessed 7 May 2020].

[5] Ross, M. (2020) *Unconscious Bias in Business*. [Webinar]. Available at: <<https://vigorevents.com/unconscious-bias-in-business/>> [Accessed: 28 April 2020].

[6] Gilligan White, J. (2019) *Not Ready to Forgive? Go From Bitter to Better Anyway*. [Online] The Empowered Employee. Available at: <<https://theempoweredemployee.com/2019/01/12/forgive/>> [Accessed: 9th May 2020].

[7] Suff, R. (2020) *Managing Conflict in the Modern Workplace*. [Online] CIPD. Available at: <<https://www.cipd.co.uk/knowledge/fundamentals/relations/disputes/managing-workplace-conflict-report>> [Accessed: 7th May 2020].

Please note: This article is not based on any particular workplace and is based generally on the topic of work-based bullying. I have written from a place of experience of workplaces over the past 30 years, others' research/stories and first-hand stories I've been told.