Workplace bullying

Damian Stoupe discusses the latest developments

This article is a response to a call after the national conference in 2007 and the subsequent article[1] for people to be kept informed of any developments in engaging those accused of workplace bullying. It is derived as a result of many different workshops and discussions that have taken place over the last year.

It is clear that there are a wide range of responses to bullying both at individual and organisational levels. What is not clear is whether people are distinguishing between different stages and types of bullying activity. In this article I will argue that bullying is not a simple dyadic relationship between so-called 'bully' and 'victim/target', but rather a series of very complex multidimensional relationships based upon each individual elements past history, environmental factors and desires. I offer this article not as an answer but rather a starting point to widen the discussions in this area to obtain a greater depth of understanding in to a topic that damages not just the individuals involved but society at large.

It is clear that workplaces have adopted different strategies for dealing with bullying, ranging from requiring an extraordinary burden of proof from recipients of bullying behaviours to requiring an equally onerous burden of proof of innocence from those accused. Others appear to try to avoid the issue completely. There seems to be a real sense of corporate fight and flight as far as bullying is concerned which prevents organisations from developing a real lasting solution to the problem. I would suggest that this is one area in which a specialist workplace counsellor, as proposed by Claringbull[2], with an understanding of both the organisation and different types of bullying, would be able to add value to both the organisation and the individuals they work with.

Organisations, like individuals, have their own personalities and cultures which have been developed over time and in response to different environmental factors. Some cultures are carefully crafted to suit the environment, others are reminiscent of past glories which may or may not still be relevant. This is often the public face of the business. This is the 'ideal' to which the organisation strives but is often subject to a more powerful subculture[3], based upon environmental, historical and narrative factors. In a sense this sub-culture is the real culture of the organisation whether it is desired or not.

This subculture, without its clearly defined rules, behaviours, reward systems and so on, is a major influence in the development and, in some circumstances, nurturing of bullying behaviours. In this subculture we find environmental factors, which will lead to bullying behaviours:
- coercive working environments
- implicit or explicit approval for aggressive behaviours
- influential role models.

In a school, there would be a real concern about any one of these factors being present, but in the workplace they are often turned into positive attributes. Just think about what can be observed in the, admittedly edited, programme 'The Apprentice'.

Cheyne[4], researching school bullying, raises an interesting question about the real target for bullying behaviours. She argues that despite the involvement of the two protagonists, the real target of the 'bully' is the wider audience. I would support this view in respect of the workplace; bullying is, for the most part, for the benefit of the audience as a demonstration of power to peers, rivals, superiors or subordinates, maybe even people outside the workplace.

Understanding the different types of bullying (see figure 1) found in the workplace will allow organisations and counsellors to adapt different strategies for dealing with the issues raised either at an organisational level or with individuals. There is no single policy that will stop bullying in the workplace for the reasons outlined below.

Accidental bullying

From anecdotal evidence, many of the incidents of bullying are carried out in an unconsciously accidental way; often breakdowns in communication or differences in expectations of behaviour. This is accidental bullying. When the impact is pointed out to the individual, behavioural change follows. I believe we all have the ability to be accidental

Damian Stoupe is a workplace counsellor and trainer. He is currently researching the role mimetic desire has in the development of bullying behaviours in the workplace for his MSc at University of Bristol. He can be contacted by phone on 01749 687247 or by email at damian@working withbullies.co.uk
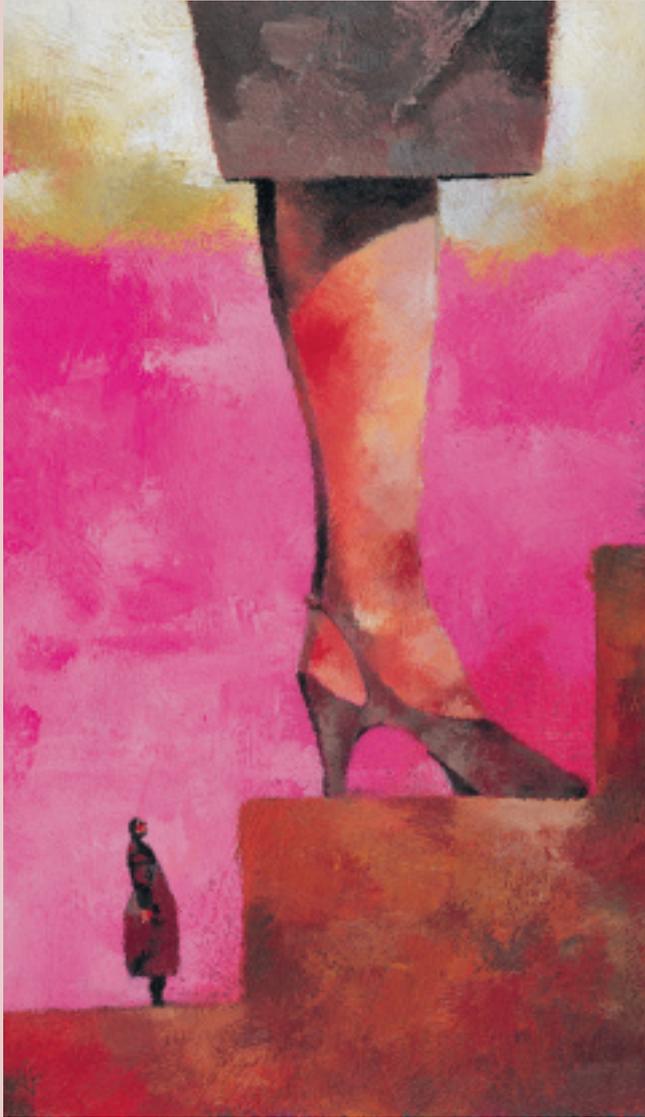
'**Rivalry between individuals will intensify as people rise in the hierarchy and senior roles become more difficult to obtain**'

suddenly finds Jane the most interesting girl on the planet and becomes, much to his own surprise, infatuated with her. If John acts on this impulse then his relationship with David will be put at risk. Girard would suggest that when two people have the same object of desire, rivalry/conflict will occur; the object may be anything from a coat to a lover. How close the object is will define the intensity of the conflict. If I want a bottle of wine the rivalry will be almost non-existent because they are produced in a vast amount; however, if it was the last bottle of wine in the world – watch out!

In respect of the workplace a major object of desire, for many people, is promotion. Rivalry between individuals will intensify as people rise in the hierarchy and senior roles become more difficult to obtain; the potential level of conflict increases and the greater the number of people who will be drawn into the conflict. Girard would describe this as mimetic contagion.

Girard, among others, points out that if the conflict escalates to the point that the two rivals believe they are in danger of mutual destruction

DIGITAL VISION/GETTY

bullies at home, at work or in our leisure pursuits. Just ask your partner (or ex-partners!), your siblings or your children!

Unfortunately the impact of accidental bullying can be as disastrous for the recipients as any deliberate act of bullying as the recipient may not be able to distinguish in their 'bullied state' the level of intention behind the action.

Career bullying

Other individuals will make a conscious or unconscious choice to use bullying behaviours. Why would anyone choose to use bullying behaviours? One answer may be supplied by adapting the work on mimetic desire by Rene Girard[5] to the workplace.

Girard proposes that desire is different from need and humans pick up their desires subconsciously from others. He suggests that we, as humans, desire *according* to the desire of others. As a simple example, John's friend, David, says he fancies Jane. John, who has never looked twice at Jane before,
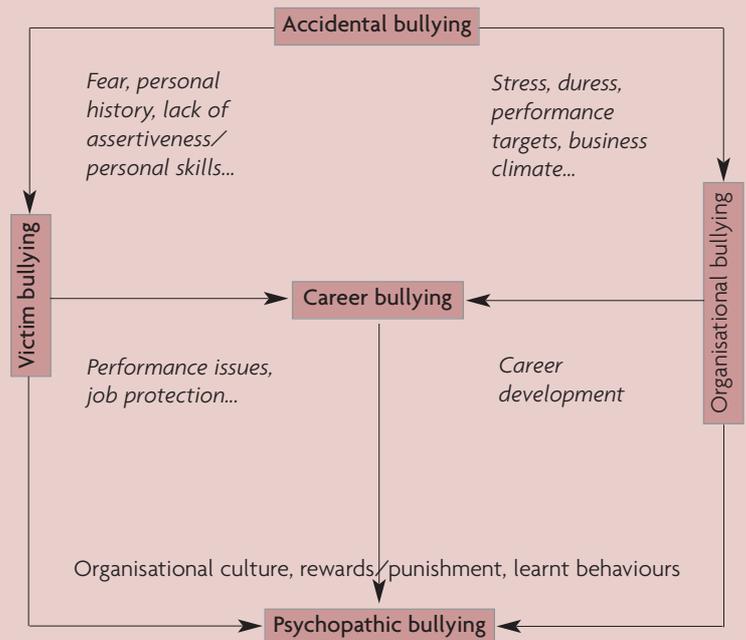

Figure 1. Different forms of bullying

Accidental bullying

Fear, personal history, lack of assertiveness/ personal skills...

Stress, duress, performance targets, business climate...

Victim bullying

Career bullying

Organisational bullying

Performance issues, job protection...

Career development

Organisational culture, rewards/punishment, learnt behaviours

Psychopathic bullying

❛A career bully will continue to develop their skills, often becoming more subtle as they move up the hierarchy❜

they will look for a third party to focus the violence on. The 'targeted' individual will be chosen, subconsciously, either because they are another rival, or at random, because they are different in some way. This may be because of their sexuality, colour or disability[6], or simply because they are left handed. They are identified as the problem and 'destroyed'. In effect, they become a scapegoat[7]. In the case of John and David the girlfriend would probably become the target.

Career bullying occurs when an individual uses aggression, rather than competition, as a tool for satisfying their desires. I would suggest this type of bullying is a skill which is developed, unconsciously, over a period of time. Initially it is applied clumsily and is obvious; however, as the skill develops, it becomes more subtle and more dangerous and difficult to deal with. The impact of this type of bullying in the individual seems to be the development of separate behaviour patterns for home and work summed up in an old adage I heard the other day, 'home angel, work devil'.

This development of bullying behaviours can be reinforced by observable behaviours in their environment, such as imitating the apparently successful behaviours of senior mangers and also where they find the behaviours being rewarded or punished. A career bully will continue to develop their skills[8], often becoming more subtle as they move up the hierarchy.

At some stage the individual is forced to choose between the 'home' and 'work' behaviours as one set of behaviours begins to dominate the other; this internal battle may become visible as a factor in a 'mid-life crisis'.

This may result in a breakthrough of some sorts; either a realisation of being a bully or, a further development into the fourth type of bully, the psychopath in a business suit. This is an individual who seems to enjoy making people's lives hell on a day-to-day basis. The 'skill' is well developed and they will have reasons for behaving in this way, so should not be written off.

Victim bullying
I would suggest there are two different types of recipients of bullying behaviour, the scapegoat and

what Gunsalus[9] refers to as the 'victim bully'. The scapegoat does not know what is happening or why; however, the victim bully uses their 'victim' status to bully others in the organisation. This may be accidental, as they are unaware of what they are doing, in a similar way to the accidental bully. It can also be used as an insidious cover for bullying.

I would further suggest that in the same way bullying can be either accidental, career or psychopath, so with victim bullying – it can take any of the above accidental or intentional forms as both a mechanism for defence or attack.

The organisation
One of the robust discussions that has been taking place is around the organisation itself. What is it? Is it just a collection of individuals or is it an entity in its own right? I would suggest it is both and needs to be 'counselled' as both.

We can see the organisation as a collection of individuals who are capable of change, if they so wish. There is also a cultural dimension in which, as an entity in its own right, the organisation is capable of developing and sustaining a bullying/coercive structure, primarily through the recruitment and reward structures.

It is too easy to label an organisation as the 'bully', as it reflects the people inside it. At the same time, it does seem as if organisations are able to develop and sustain cultures that create bullying behaviours. This becomes evident from the work of Jacoby[10] but there is not space to develop those ideas here.

So what does all this mean?
Far from being a dyadic relationship, bullying is a highly complex series of relationships involving everyone in the workplace and their own personal narratives. It brings into focus the environment in which bullying occurs. It brings into focus the responsibilities of the immediate audience. Why is it that in some organisations people are willing to stand up and say 'No, that behaviour is not tolerated here' and, in others, people are willing to sit and watch, and some may even get some vicarious pleasure from watching the events unfold?

It seems easy to blame the 'organisation' as not doing enough but is that justified? It is the responsibility of the organisation to identify and implement anti-bullying policies, but the current approach of 'bullying the bully' cannot work. It puts the onus of responsibility onto the shoulders of an ethereal body, the organisation. Rather than looking at bullying as something that is someone else's responsibility to sort out, forward-looking

organisations ensure the focus is on individuals understanding that they also have a collective responsibility to provide a duty of care to their colleagues. It needs everyone in the organisation to be aware, not only of their rights, but also their responsibilities and duties to each other, not just in the form of a policy or procedure, but in a way that can be genuinely accepted and acted upon at all levels.

The change is not easy; it is challenging. It may even be a utopian ideal, but without it we will continue to destroy people's relationships, careers and, in some cases, lives. This means more than ensuring people are 'emotionally intelligent'. It requires the organisation to provide a degree of security wherein the confidence, trust and support is developed to such an extent that people feel safe enough to stand up and assert their rights and acknowledge their responsibilities as well as those of others. It requires the development of a true sense of solidarity; something that cannot be gained by an away day in the Lake District on an outward bound course.

This will take a brave step from any organisation, as it means moving away from a victim-centred, coercive culture, to one in which respect for the dignity of each colleague is assured and promoted in word and in deed. It means it needs to look at how it responds to pressures from inside and outside itself.

A specialist workplace counsellor is trained in observing behaviours, identifying and understanding the cultural assumptions, values, beliefs and ethical issues that are being played out and above all being able to challenge them in a sensitive and effective manner. The specialist counsellor can help the organisation ask some questions of itself, such as:
■ What does it mean for 'us' to be working ethically? Who exercises power in the organisation and why?
■ What working culture do we really promote? How far and in what ways do we tacitly support aggression? Are we able to differentiate between healthy competition and aggression?
■ In what ways are we demonstrating that we can promote and respect the dignity both of the individuals and the organisation?
■ Are we promoting the social conditions (individual/organisational responsibilities and duties, not just rights) necessary to enable individuals and the organisation to achieve their true potential?
■ How involved are the employees in those decisions that directly affect them? Are employees really empowered or are they merely expected to accept the decisions of others?

■ How far is each individual in the organisation asked to consider the implications and consequences of their actions, decisions and communications, taking into account the human dignity of each person?

Conclusion

The current mainstream approach to bullying is based upon a simple didactic relational problem which can be resolved by using either a mediation or discipline approach, in a sense absolving the audience of their participatory role in the events.

Understanding what type of bullying is occurring at given stages provides a focus point for considered interventions to occur. Also understanding that bullying is a received behaviour, not something that we are born with, offers both an opportunity and a challenge to change. Attacking people for using bullying behaviours, I believe, is counter-productive, it will drive the behaviours further 'underground' and violence will lead to violence, however it is couched. We need to be able to move outside the drama triangle and away from the negative aspects of mimetic desire and find another way forward.

It is not an easy opt-out for any party involved; all parties are invited to look at how they are contributing to the bullying event and ask themselves what they can do to change what is happening. Counsellors are well placed to facilitate these internal dialogues in a safe manner.

Do we, as counsellors, feel willing, confident and competent to take up this challenge? ■

References
1 Stoupe DA. Bullying. Counselling at Work. Winter 2008.
2 Claringbull N. Tomorrow's workplace counsellor. Counselling at Work. Summer 2008.
3 Curtis B, Hefley W, Miller S. The people capability maturity model. London: Addison-Wesley; 2002.
4 Cheyne JA. Mimesis and semiotics of bullying: a group- and self-defining ritual. 1998. http://watarts.uwaterloo.ca/~acheyne/Misc/MimeticBullying.html
5 Girard R. Things hidden since the foundation of the world. London: Continuum; 2003.
6 Equality and Human Rights Commission, Cardiff University and University of Glamorgan. Work fit for all – disability, health and the experience of negative treatment in the British workplace. 2008.
7 Girard R The scapegoat. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press; 1989.
8 Fox C, Boulton M. Evaluating the effectiveness of social skills training programmes for victims of bullying. Education Research. 2003; 45.
9 Gunuslaus CK. The college administrators survival guide. Harvard University Press; 2006.
10 Jacoby T. Understanding conflict and violence. London: Routledge; 2008.