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When the Boss Is a Bully

By Hara Estroff Marano,



They verbally abuse you, humiliate you in front of others. Maybe it's because power hovers in the air, but offices tend to bring out the bully in people. We offer strategies for handling such bad bosses.

If the schoolyard is the stomping ground of bully boys and bully girls, then the office is the playground of adult bullies. Perhaps because power is the chief perk in most companies, especially those with tight hierarchies, offices can bring out the bully in people.

Everyone has a war story. There's the boss who calls at 2 A.M. from Paris--just because he's there. The boss who asks for your evaluation of a problem and then proceeds to denigrate you and your opinion in front of the whole staff as you seethe with hopefully hidden [rage](#). "It's a demonstration of power. It's demeaning," contends Harry Levinson, Ph.D., the dean of organizational psychologists and head of the Levinson Institute in Waltham, Massachusetts.

Two Kinds of Bullies:

There are two kinds of bullies, observes organizational psychologist Laurence Stybel, Ed.D. a principal of Boston's Stybel Peabody Lincolnshire & Associates: "Successful ones and unsuccessful ones. The latter don't last long in organizations. The successful bullies create problems, but they are competent. And the organization depends on them."

Often they are very bright workers. And therein lies the problem, says Stybel.

They are especially rampant in high-tech companies, engineering firms, and financial organizations. "The typical successful bully thinks, 'They won't do anything to me--I'm the best they've got,'" Stybel says.

Stybel also says, sooner or later, it's too costly to tolerate their behavior.

It's getting too costly much sooner in most companies. Stybel cites the example of a large New England hospital where the bully is a brilliant physician who has been the director of radiology for 11 years. The bullying was an issue over the years--in the exit interviews of departing technical staff.

Why did the hospital decide to do something only now? The administrator told Stybel: "We can't tolerate the high turnover anymore. We can no longer pass of the additional costs of high turnover. In a world of accountable care, we have to "eat" the costs we once passed on to the insurance companies."

Occasionally, bullies do get to the very top. Levinson points to Harold Geneen, the legendary head of ITT, and coach Vince Lombardi. And then there's the issue of Fortune magazine devoted every couple of years to America's "toughest" bosses. Take the female CEO who reportedly yelled at the executives of a division she felt was underperforming: "You're eunuchs! How can your wives stand you? You've got nothing between your legs!"

At least in large corporations, bullying is not as blatant as it once was. "The John Wayne image of a leader doesn't go over so well in the '90s" notes Pat Alexander of the Center for Creative [Leadership](#) in Greensboro, North Carolina. "It affects the efficiency of the entire organization." Intimidation tends to be more polished.

When Leaders Expect to Move On:

While it's no longer cool to throw around your authority, counterforces are leading to greater tolerance of negative behavior. Stybel points to a growing 'What can you do for me now?' stance. "There's a new generation of CEOs who expect to be in place four years and move on. This fosters emotional distancing from employees, an excessive focus on transactions; it does not foster a positive relationship mode. Companies are growing increasingly performance-oriented; do they care how anyone feels about an executive's behavior?"

"Where I have been retained, it's not because they don't like bullies" notes Stybel. "Only the underlying economics make it a dysfunctional behavior."

Stybel warns workers not to focus on where bullying comes from. "When observers see a boss behave as a bully, they attribute it to [trait](#) characteristics. That may not be the case. It's almost always a product of individual history and make-up--and the company atmosphere. But who cares? The most important thing is the behavior."

Bullies do a lot of damage in organizations. They make subordinates run scared. They put people in a protective mode, which interferes with the company's ability to generate [innovation](#). They don't build in perpetuation of the organization, says Levinson. "It keeps you in a state of psychological emergency. And add to it the rage you feel towards the bully and a sense of self-

rage for putting up with such behavior." These are hardly prime conditions for doing your best work--any work.

As with kids, bully bosses have blind spots. They don't see themselves accurately. They see themselves as better than others--which only acts to justify their bullying behavior--a feeling reinforced by promotion. Another big blind spot: sensitivity to others' feelings. Often, says Levinson, this arises in competitive settings, where "you learn to focus on your own behavior. It breeds a kind of psychological ignorance."

Stybel has developed a psychological karate chop to "unfreeze" executives's attitudes--a customized letter of probation. It essentially tells an executive that, due to changes in market conditions, or some other external factor, his weaknesses now outweigh the strengths he has long displayed. "It spells out desired [behavioral changes](#) in a positive way--not 'people are complaining that you are a bully' but 'if you make these changes you'll have a reputation as someone who is considerate.'" It gives honchos 90 days to shape up--or else.

It's never easy to make headway with an office bully, observers agree. The first step is to recognize when it's happening. Repetitive verbal abuse. Micromanagement. Exploitation. Any activity that repeatedly demeans you or is discourteous. "Whenever you're dissed, you're dealing with a bully," says Levinson. "Sometimes it's inadvertent. We all get caught up in that--once. You apologize and it's over. But bullies don't recognize their impoliteness and they don't apologize."

Tactics from the Pros:

Here are tactics from seasoned organizational consultants:

- o Confront the bully: "I'm sorry you feel you have to do that, but I will not put up with that kind of behavior. It has no place here." It can be startlingly effective. "Bullies lack boundaries on their own behavior. Some external controls may force them to back off" says Levinson. "A bully can't bully if you don't let yourself be bullied."
- o Conduct the confrontation in private--behind closed doors in the bully's office, at lunch outside the office. The bully won't back down in front of an audience.
- o Specify the behavior that's unworkable: "You can't just fire from the hip and demean me in front of my staff or others."
- o Don't play armchair psychologist. Restrict the discussion to specific behaviors, not theories of [motivation](#).

o Make your boss aware by showing him or her the consequences of his behavior on others. "I've been noticing how Jim seems so demoralized lately. I think one of the contributing factors may be last week's meeting when you ridiculed him for producing an inadequate sales report." Many executives have no information on how their leadership style impacts others, says Alexander. "Peers don't tell them they are in [competition](#). Why feed information that may make your competitor more effective?"

o Awareness is not enough; help your boss figure out what to do. Specify the behavioral change you want. "Your boss is likely to brush off criticism with, 'That's just my style,'" observes Marquand. "Furnish your boss with an example of desirable behavior-from his or her own repertoire of actions. Jump in with 'But I can recall a month ago when you were . . . lavish in your praise of that new assistant,' or whatever."

o Point out how the boss's behavior is seen by others. "You embarrass me when you publicly humiliate me in a meeting, but you also embarrass yourself. You're demonstrating your weakness." Comparing self-perceptions and the perceptions of others is often a "grabber," finds Alexander. "The fact of difference gets people's attention."

o Try [humor](#). If you point out to your boss that she's acting like a caricature, that may be enough to make her aware.

o Recruit an ally or allies. Standing up for yourself can stop a bully by earning his/her respect. But it could also cost your job. The higher your boss is in the organization, says Lewis, the more you need allies. "It pays to check out with other workers whether the behavior you are experiencing is generalized or idiosyncratic," says Levinson. "If it's generalized, it's easier for two or three people to confront a boss than one alone."

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