

How to Manage a Bully: Workplace Bullying in Construction

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Abstract

Workplace bullying is industry specific. Organizations need to evaluate what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in their industry and among their workers in order to make organizational policies effective and respected. This paper looks at workplace bullying in the construction industry. The paper considers how employees, specifically site superintendents, working in construction view workplace bullying and view the best ways for dealing with workplace bullying. The data examined in this paper is drawn from an online forum for construction site superintendents. The comments by the site superintendents reveal how workplace bullying is dealt with on construction sites and how workplace bullying policies are viewed.

INTRODUCTION

Anyone can become a target of bullying if the bully chooses however a number of individual and organizational factors contribute to the likelihood of bullying occurring. Bullying has many definitions. For the purpose of this paper it is defined as “a persistent, enduring form of abuse at work” [5]. Bullying develops out of the interpersonal dynamic of individuals and the structural influences of organizations such as hierarchy and organizational culture. Each industry has a unique range of employee behaviours that are tolerated and not tolerated and differing interpretations of what bullying is and is not. While organizations provide their own unique approach there are industry norms that develop. This can be dictated by the level of stress of the work environment, safety issues, the interface between individuals in the industry and the nature of the people within the industry. For example, bullying on a construction site will differ from that found at a factory, in a sports team or in a hospital. A raised voice on a construction site may be an assertion of power, may communicate urgency related to a safety issue or could be due to hearing loss from heavy machinery. Safety issues are of critical importance in construction and easily can lead to misunderstandings around behaviour [13]. A loud voice in a hospital may only be appropriate during an emergency and is likely unacceptable in day to day interactions. Organizations must observe provincial and federal workplace bullying and/or violence legislation but the legislation is worded in such a way that organizations have the opportunity to apply the legislation to their unique work environment. Bullying legislation provides an umbrella set of guidelines that have to be modified to fit the specifics of the organizational environment and work for the nature of the industry and people involved.

Construction superintendents work at the front line interfacing with contractors on construction sites where buildings are renovated or new buildings are erected. They also interact with owners that hire the organization the superintendents work for and governments that set the building guidelines, issue permits and enforce safety. Superintendents face budget constraints, time lines, changing environmental conditions and changing economics. As front line managers they also have to communicate with mid-level and/or senior management in their organization. As a result of these multiple demands and stressors and the range of

individuals they negotiate with they are subject to and have to navigate many relationships. Some of these relationships involve managing inappropriate behaviour and bullying.

Site superintendents use a wide range of means to keep bullying under control. This paper examines the ways superintendents deal with workplace bullying. A public forum accessed by superintendents in the construction industry provides the source of data on the way this community of managers navigates bullying.

This paper begins with a short summary of literature related to workplace bullying and individual responses to such behaviour. The summary applies workplace bullying to the construction industry. Secondly, the methodology is discussed. Thirdly, the data is evaluated and finally a set of recommendations are provided for how organizations in the construction industry should deal with workplace bullying on the construction site. Further research is also identified.

WORKPLACE BULLYING

It is helpful to know the prevalence rate of workplace bullying in an organization however many organizations do not have the expertise or motivation to complete such research. A meta study by Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel and Vartia [15] showed research results in organizations on prevalence ranging from 1 per cent to 69.6 percent of employees being bullied. Measuring the prevalence of workplace bullying can lead to different levels of prevalence depending on how you ask employees about bullying [7]. Having individuals evaluate behavioral experience tends to lead to higher rates of prevalence than self-labeling because many people do not want to be viewed as being bullied as it may be seen as being weak or may disadvantage advancement opportunities. Behaviours may also be tactics bullies use, such as gossip or eye rolling, but some individuals may be oblivious or indifferent to such behaviours. Individuals may ignore inappropriate behaviour in order to complete work or reach a deadline rather than confront it or they may avoid confronting in self-preservation. Studies on bullying prevalence have found that bullying rates vary across an organization. Some employees are subject to more bullying than others. For example, a study by Ortega, Høgh, Pejtersen, & Olsen [10] on Danish psychosocial workers found that unskilled workers were bullied more frequently than supervisors. At the same time work by Namie and Namie, over two time frames, found that the rate of bullying by subordinates is on the rise or is being more often acknowledged by supervisors [8][9].

Individual antecedents of workplace bullying include two perspectives - that of the bully and that of the target. Work by Zapf and Einarsen [14] identified three key causes for raising the ire of a bully. The first is threatened self-esteem which can fit with the construction industry because of the link between work and self-esteem [11]. If a superintendent raises an issue concerning the quality of work of a contractor they have hired the individual's self-esteem may be impacted resulting in a response of self-protection and counter attack which could be in the form of bullying. The bullying could be verbal attacks directed to the superintendents or shared with others covertly in a form of gossip. The second individual antecedent [14] is a lack of social competence. In the construction industry there are many individuals running their own businesses to contract out their skills. In some cases these contractors have selected the construction field for work based on their skill set, training and experience. However, others may be attracted to working in construction due to a lack of skills or other work opportunities. The industry places a high amount of emphasis on experience or physical strength. Interpersonal skills are less often a prerequisite for employment as it is in other professions

like sales, teaching or nursing. Once an individual has obtained employment in the construction industry they can work to be advanced. Again their employment opportunities may be based on completing the task more than on interpersonal skills.

A third individual antecedent, according to Zapf and Einarsen [14], is micropolitical behaviour in organizations. In micropolitics organizations require individuals to participate in decision making and offer and allow them opportunities for influence and decision making. Individuals who engage in micropolitics do not only better the organization but improve their own circumstance. Micropolitics can lead to bullying as employees strive to maintain their territory. They may “only slightly transgress organisational norms and values such as being, dominant, competitive, high-achieving” [14:173]. These transgressions may be tolerated since they are seen as characteristics of employees seeking advancement to management positions or being successful. They also may be tolerated because they are not easily identified or documented for evaluation and assessment.

Organizational antecedents are also a factor in the nature and prevalence of workplace bullying in the construction industry. According to Salin and Hoel [12] there are four key organizational contributors to creating an ideal environment for workplace bullying. These are the changing nature of work, work organization, organizational culture and climate and leadership. Changing nature of work refers to organizations downsizing and restructuring due to changing economics. This can place pressure on employees leaving some with more work or the threat of losing their job. There is also a move in organizations to empower employees removing layers of management and shifting responsibility downward in the organization. This can create time pressure and enormous work stress as the organization shifts responsibility and decision making structures. In addition organizations are increasing the percentage of part time workers to provide more financial flexibility creating increased stress on employees.

The second organizational factor is the way work is organized. The work environment is stressful. It can involve long hours in stressful work environments. Not surprisingly, heavy workloads have been linked to increased workplace bullying [1]. “Faced with what (employees) may consider unreasonable demands and poor working conditions, workers under pressure may protest or voice their concern, possibly resulting in a punitive and retaliatory response from their superior” [12: 208]. Hoel and Stalin also argue the way work is organization can lead to role conflict and role ambiguity which creates tension among employees. Work can be poorly organized with unclear expectations.

Third there is organizational culture that can be overly competitive and encourage elements of bullying by promoting aggressive and harmful behaviours [3]. Harmful organizational culture can be across an organization or be in departments or specific areas of the organization as subcultures. Fourth is issues related to leadership [2]. Leaders may not be trained to manage or they may have too many individuals reporting to them to know what is really going on in their area. Another issue is the managers and leaders are often the source of bullying. They may have poor interpersonal skills or practice a management style that is destructive. They may make decisions on their own without consult individuals that are closer to the facts. On the other hand they may not be present leaving the leadership to those beneath creating conflict and a power vacuum [6].

Nature of Bullying in Construction

In the construction industry the location of work sites being separated from head office and often isolated means inappropriate behaviour can occur without senior oversight. The superintendents who oversee the work on the construction site have to be very skilled in

dealing with a range of behaviours. Because of the range of abilities of the superintendents and the variability of the work condition at a construction site bullying is more likely to appear in pockets or hotspots. Some sites will have the people and conditions that promote good interpersonal relations among workers while others will not. Some superintendents will have strong interpersonal skills while others may be new or ineffective in dealing with interpersonal conflict. The prevalence of bullying at construction sites is higher than most workplaces because of the frequency and nature of human interaction. There are many contractors entering the sites and being required to work under the management of a site supervisor who works for a different company than the contractors. This means the contractors are being required to relinquish their authority and work within the policies of a different company while on the site. Such work conditions can operate smoothly if the expectations of the contractors and the company hiring their services align. However, if the behaviours between the two groups are significantly different conflict can arise. For example, if the site superintendent's company has a high safety standard and the contractor is not as observant about safety disagreements can arise. There can also be issues around the way work is completed and the quality of the work.

Bullying of superintendents by contractors or owners or vice versa can take many forms. For reasons such as a heavy workload, limited time and tight budgets superintendents might challenge a contractor's work which results in a backlash by a contractor. Simple acts by contractors such as voicing disapproval of a superintendent's decisions, challenging the superintendent's knowledge or talking to other contractors on site about the superintendent can disrupt the work environment and convey disrespect. In addition, work sites are owned by an individual or company that is often different from the company the superintendent works for so at any time an owner or manager for the site might enter the site and pose questions about the quality or nature of the work being completed or the speed by which the work is being completed. This can be done in such a way that the superintendent feels threatened or demeaned.

Superintendents may also engage in inappropriate behaviour. They might repeatedly single out a contractor or undermine a contractor by pointing out weaknesses in their work in front of others. The power difference between the superintendent and contractor may be enforced in an overt or covert way. It is not uncommon for superintendents to raise their voices or kick contractors off their site in order to reassert their position of authority. In some situations this is done instead of discussing problems or resolving issues on site. The power differential makes it hard for contractors to report such behaviour. Contractors are looking for work and so they may tolerate one superintendent's behaviour in order to keep working for the larger construction company that the superintendent works for.

Superintendents may find working with owners challenging especially if owners openly criticize their work and the work of the contractors they hire. Superintendents may be dealing with owners who believe their needs should be given immediate attention and treated with the utmost importance. With cost escalation and a competitive work environment owners may be stressed about deadlines and turning their site into its ultimate purpose such as a store or mall or storage unit. Superintendents also face the challenge of working in an environment in which owners frequently have greater authority than they do but are not as knowledgeable about the nature of the work being completed.

WHO IS BULLIED

Some superintendents are more vulnerable to bullying than others. The vulnerable typically include new and inexperienced employees. They may lack confidence and competence due to the newness of the work. Alternatively, new superintendents may have extensive work experience that threatens their peers and contractors. They may have as much or more work experience in the areas the contractors are working in such as foundations, plumbing, electrical or framing. This knowledge may lead to conflict between the superintendent and a contractor on how work is completed. In addition, a new superintendent may be required to build up their experience to prove their worth meaning they may be given less favourable jobs that include more challenging owners or work sites.

A second group that is targeted is older employees who may be viewed as out of date or too expensive to keep due to their high salaries based on years of work. A third target is individuals with personal problems, such as a sick family member, abuse in their personal life or mental health issues. Such stressful situations can impact their performance, leading to more emotional displays or inappropriate workplace behaviour. Such individuals may also face resentful coworkers if they take time off to manage their personal situation.

A fourth group are those with differences. Organizations that complete construction work accept individuals with many different skills and backgrounds. These individuals may have difficulty fitting in or gaining acceptance. Differences include those of culture, race, language, gender, sexual persuasion, physical abilities, belief systems and individuals who may be neuroatypical or with character styles different from the norm.

Finally, contractors may become targets of bullying when they accept superintendent work and therefore are no longer completing the work but rather are involved in managing the work. As a result they are viewed as being managers only and not personally experienced in a specific trade.

IMPACT OF BULLYING ON THE ORGANIZATION

If bullying is ignored, it impacts more people resulting in widespread incivility. In the worst case scenario unchecked bullying results in a pervasive toxic work environment that is difficult to reverse. Rampant bullying can create an organizational culture or subculture where normally unacceptable behaviours, such as racism, sexism and ageism, are tolerated. Employees will reduce their hours at work and may reduce the quantity or quality of work they complete as they feel increasingly detached from their job. Innovation and creativity are curtailed as employees avoid risk in an effort to protect their job. Ongoing bullying results in lower employee engagement and higher job turnover rates [4].

METHODOLOGY

The research data source in this paper was a North American forum for construction site superintendents. The subject matter for the forum was workplace bullying. Those construction superintendents commenting on the workplace bullying did so voluntarily. The forum was not associated with an organization. Those participating in the discussion did so relatively freely as measured by the comments but the members of the forum all included their names and in most cases pictures of themselves that were part of the forum design. The sample of comments from the forum were taken in October 2015 over a two week timeframe. A total of 128 comments were examined as data posted by 70 superintendents. Most individuals commented once. Twelve commented twice adding a bit of back and forth dialogue. There were no apparent limits to the number of comments a member could make. Two individuals had a total of 12 and 15 comments.

One question raised a range of responses and is the focus of this research article. The question posed by a member of the forum was "How do you deal with the bully?" The answers were gleaned from the responses. The data was also reviewed for common themes that emerged. See Appendix 1 for the summary of how the participants believed you should deal with a bully. Each idea was listed and the number of individuals that mentioned the idea are noted by the number of Xs beside the idea. All names and identifying details have been removed from the data for purposes of confidentiality. Most comments in the forum focused on the subject and sharing participant views on the subject but some comments were reactions to ideas raised. A third column in Appendix 1 notes where participants in the forum specifically argued against an action or way of dealing with bullying.

FINDINGS

What is evident through the responses is that human resources protocol is a common theme with responses like talking to the individual who is the perceived bully, educating, documenting and applying the policy. However, in many of the responses there was an effort to assert the hierarchy. For example, fire them immediately, stand up to them, get tough or put them in their place. There also were comments that suggested that the organizations these superintendents work for create bullying opportunities. In four instances participants provided examples where raising a bullying issue upward was ineffective and harmed the superintendent's career leading to the superintendent being fired.

Many participants argue that superintendents should bully the bully. This has an element of ego or self-esteem by the superintendent in their responding. For example, threaten the bully, attack or hit the bully or work it out elsewhere like "off site." It may be that the participants feel the need to sound tough among their peers on a forum or perhaps this is how they deal with the issue of bullying but what is evident is that such responses could put a company at risk of lawsuits. At the same time what is evident from the responses is how demanding their jobs are and how common threats, toughness and bravado are used as a management tool or by contractors and owners on a construction work site.

There were other interesting themes that arose that shed light on the work environment in construction and the nature of workplace bullying in the construction industry. There were many comments made around the issue of being tough. One respondent asked if workplace bullying was really a problem in construction. This resonated with many of the participants who felt that it was easy to deal with workplace bullying by being tough and if you were tough you would not have a problem. Several participants questioned the value of being politically correct and aligned being politically correct with worrying about bullying. One participant noted that a bully is a weak link in an organization and needs to be removed to solve the problem. The participants went back and forth around the tough guy approach versus showing leadership, being a team player and resolving problems through policy. Some argued for being tough and applying policy. At times those who argued for leadership, team player, dialogue and policy were identified as being soft. One participant even questioned if the whole discussion indicated the superintendents were getting too touchy-feely. Another argued that bullies refuse to acknowledge that bullying is wrong. Given some of the actions of the superintendents on their sites it could be that they feel justified in their tough behaviours and are not acknowledging that they could be viewed by some as being bullies.

Another theme that arose was dialogue around causes of bullying. Several participants linked bullying to being overworked and stressed. The time pressure on sites was noted and linked to

tolerance of bullying. Participants pointed out that in the interest of completing the work inappropriate behaviour was ignored or tolerated. Others argued that with the current time pressures on sites bullying could not be tolerated as it would impede work. Several participants also argued that the bullies do not realize what they are doing or saying suggesting that workplace bullying policies are not taught or reinforced.

Appendix 1: How Do You Deal With the Bully?

Method of Managing Bullying	Number of Forum Participants who Supported the Method	Number of Forum Participants who do not Support the Method
work hard and smart/focus on goal	XX	
control those things in your power, let the rest go	X	
put a stop to it	XXX	
became the bigger bully	XX	XX
educate the bully	XXX	
talk to your (project) manager	XX	X
document/report	XXXXXX	X
explain/apply policy	XXXXX	
common respect for each other	X	
maintain an open door policy	X	
handle it	XXXXXXXX	
talk like you know what your doing – no name calling	X	
act decisively and quickly	X	
fire them immediately	XXXXXXXXXXXX	XX
Fire them when appropriate	XX	
put them in their place	XXXXX	
screen before you hire	XX	
address the issue	XX	
solve without conflict	X	X
work it out elsewhere “off site”	XXX	XXX
give them time out	X	
team approach	XXXX	
threaten the bully	X	XX
attack or hit the bully	XX	
look for another job	XXX	
private conversation with person	XXXX	
give them one warning/second chance	XXXXX	
set rules and follow them	XX	
try to motivate behaviour	X	
stand up to them	XXXXX	
diffuse the situation	X	
get tough	XX	
manage the situation	XX	
confront	X	
pass on to HR	XX	
don’t talk to your manager they will not support you	XXXX	

What Companies Can Do

Based on the comments gleaned from the forum a number of conclusions can be drawn. First, construction companies need to educate superintendents about the organizational policy and

relevant laws related to behaviour and bullying. Organizations need to go beyond lecturing and checking for understanding (as with electronic training). Scenario training and retraining run in small groups can be used to inform participants how to apply the organizational policy and relevant laws. Complaints should also be monitored. It is too easy to go through the learning and then deem the process too onerous to apply and hope that everyone behaves or that bullying targets will just “suck it up.” Ignoring the issue can be an additional form of bullying. However, it seems that training the superintendents about what bullying is and how to apply the policy would require some stronger protocol around acceptable and unacceptable behaviours by contractors and owners and the consequences of ignoring such policies on the construction site.

Secondly, construction companies should use educational avenues to reinforce awareness and encourage self-monitoring. Training should focus on defining and creating a civil workplace. Workers should learn about the continuum of inappropriate behaviour (incivility leading to workplace bullying, possibly resulting in violence) and the importance of reporting and documenting incivility, bullying and behaviours that could be labeled as violence. A code of conduct should be publicly posted and enforced. Construction companies must set clearer standards around what is a healthy and constructive discussion around work and what is unacceptable behaviour or bullying.

Thirdly, upper management and supervisors should also be prepared to support targets of bullying. Organizational support and genuine empathy is vital for targets to manage and survive the experience. At the same time the participant comments indicate that teaching management and leadership skills would be equally as important as educating superintendents about workplace bullying policies.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Construction companies need to deal with bullying as a macro (organizational wide) not just a micro issue (interactions between several individuals on one construction site). The solution involves attention to organizational culture and structure as much as interpersonal relations. In addition, as demonstrated through the comments by the forum participants, a construction company should consider how to adapt managing workplace bullying to the construction industry. While a physical approach would be unacceptable the means to manage workplace bullying in this industry will need adaptation to encourage uptake and acceptance by the employees. Bullying has to be viewed as destructive to the objectives of the organization and the superintendents rather than an exercise in political correctness and being touchy-feely.

Further research needs to be completed examining the issue of workplace bullying in the construction industry. Surveying site superintendents about their interpersonal interactions over six months or a year could provide more industry specific information. Prevalence, behaviours, responses and organizational actions would provide additional insights into how organizations can better manage bullying in this industry. The forum has indicated that the participants are conflicted about how best to keep a site safe and functional. Power issues appear to be an overarching issue for site superintendents. A workplace bullying policy must be tailored to fit the nature of work on the construction site. Further research could examine how best to fit a policy to this work environment.

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