



print edition

PROBLEM SOLVING: DILEMMAS: WORKPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

Expose the bullies at work

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Dear Susan,

I work for a large company that advocates treating people with respect. On numerous occasions, one leader and her team have been blunt and disrespectful to me in meetings. They do this to others as well, so I am not alone.

I spoke to my manager about the situation and her reaction to my concerns was: "Don't take it personally. This is just how they are." I find this attitude a cop-out. I also have a team and go to bat for them all the time.

Although I think the individuals are bullies, it's clear my manager doesn't want to get involved. My response to her was that it is unfortunate no one will address the issue, as this allows the behaviour to continue to affect a lot of people.

Could I have done anything differently?

- *Frustrated*



Dear Frustrated,

You could have objected to the abusive comments at the time. And it's not too late, as the situation is sure to recur.

Start by re-examining what happened. Mentally rewind the tape. Then replay it with different responses so that you can select and rehearse what you will say the next time you feel the interaction has taken a wrong turn.

Rehearsal is critical because reacting immediately but sensibly takes courage and quick reflexes. You want to get your message across - that you perceive that comments have become disrespectful (or sarcastic, exclusionary, injurious, isolating or insulting) and that the implied criticism is unproductive.

You want to get the emotional tone just right, and not appear wounded or angry. You're just naming what's happening, and saying you hope - and expect - it will stop.

By identifying the problem and stating that these types of comments divide the group instead of uniting it, you're applying American Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis's dictum, "sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants." He wrote that in 1914, perhaps before we knew that alcohol (or

bleach) does a much better job, but the analogy still holds. Expose the nastiness to light and air and it will die.

And while you're taking a risk, you're also staving off future incidents. Bullying is more likely to happen when targets are quiet, when they don't defend themselves, and when bystanders - like your manager - say and do nothing. That silence looks an awful lot like an endorsement. If you don't want the hostility to continue, someone has to act - by shining the spotlight on the intimidation.

What happens if you don't? Studies published over the last decade show that workplace bullying unleashes expensive and pernicious costs. In hospital employees, for example, victims of bullying are 50 per cent more likely than other employees to take time off from work, and also had higher rates of chronic disease causing disability, according to a Finnish study published in 2000.

And just in case you think such tactics as cutting or exclusionary remarks only affect the rank and file, a British study of 1,000 doctors and medical residents working in its National Health Service reported that one in three members of this professional cadre had been bullied in the previous year. The effects are not only on the targets, but also bystanders. Among 949 Swedish civil servants, 10 per cent were victims of bullying, while 9 per cent were bystanders. Mistreatment or exclusion predicted significant psychological stress and loss of motivation, whether it was experienced or observed.

How do you protect yourself? Check your workplace mission statement and harassment policies - the ones that advocate treating people with respect. Document what has already taken place and take note if it happens again. And discuss the gap between policy and practice in concrete terms with your manager. Tell her what your plan is, why it's important to respond, and that you hope and expect her to support you.

Of course, people become fearful and less independent during troubled times, hoping and expecting that, if they keep their heads down, they'll eventually emerge from the crisis unscathed. But social psychology - and 20th-century history - tell us that being passive provides no cover at all, and actually escalates within group conflicts.

It's perverse, but when resources are scarce, a tacit consensus about victims and scapegoats does an excellent job of consolidating the tribe, allowing countries, cultures and even business units to separate into "in" groups and "out" groups. Having an "us" and a "them" is an efficient way to limit how many ways a shrinking pie must be divided.

But just because it's effective doesn't mean that it's good, for you, for your colleagues, or for the bottom line.

*Susan Pinker is a psychologist and author of *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted Women and the Real Gender Gap*.*

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