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Commentary

Unacceptable *but* Tolerated behavior

Anne L. Jefferson

The literature discusses bullying in terms of the misuse of a power situation over another individual repeatedly.¹ Single, isolated incidences do not qualify as an act of bullying. Rather, bullying is the repetition of these acts combined with the desire on the part of the individual with the greater power base to cause physical, emotional, or social distress in another individual. Bullying is not acceptable in a civilized society, and, increasingly, it is recognized as a punishable act. However, the seriousness of bullying is often addressed differently across types of educational organizations.

Within school systems and universities, great pain is taken to develop and enforce policy, guidelines, and procedures on the prevention of the mistreatment of students by other students or staff. If we turn briefly to school systems, we find many schools and school systems with a policy including guidelines and procedures to follow should a student be the subject of bullying. For example, in 2001, the Michigan School Board Association passed an updated policy on bullying and hazing. This policy was later given further clarification by Robert Ebersole, the Assistant Director of Bylaw and Policy Services.² Bullying and hazing were to be considered forms of harassment. In 2004, the Cambridge (Massachusetts) School Committee produced its finalized version of administrative procedures and guidelines on prevention of bullying.³ In 2005, the Victoria (Australia) State Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, reviewed and updated anti-bullying policies and practices in its government schools.⁴ At the university level, the Open University (United Kingdom) has an extensive web site informing students about university policy on bullying and harassment along with procedures to follow and forms to file if they are the subject of such treatment.⁵ Similar policies against student bullying have been adopted by institutes of higher learning across North America, Australia, New Zealand, and a number of the Scandinavian and European countries.

What appears to be less frequently addressed, especially by institutes of higher learning in North America, is administrative bullying, oftentimes referred to as workplace bullying. According to Gary Namie, Co-founder of the Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute (WBTI), workplace bullying is “deliberate, repeated, health-impairing mistreatment of an employee.”⁶ Although there seems to be a common understanding of the harm caused by student bullying across school (K-12) systems and higher education institutions and the need for institutional protections and actions, there is a noticeable absence of similar policies and procedures when the alleged bully is a higher education administrator. In contrast, one will find policies and procedures related to sexual harassment well-ingrained in higher education, to the extent that a specific office or department is designated as a place to

deal with these offenses. On the other hand, harassment in the form of administrative bullying tends to be very generally attended to. At best, it might be alluded to in a general way in university policy with a statement to the effect that the administration has responsibility to provide a safe and healthy working environment. Missing from such generic statements is an acknowledgement that administrative bullying exists and hence the administration has a responsibility to address it. Through this denial, no further action by the administration is needed, for example, to define workplace bullying, clarify institutional responsibility for addressing complaints, or to provide employees with guidelines and procedures for reporting workplace bullying. In other words, the administration feels no responsibility to provide the same standard of protection for its employees as it does for students. The implication and, too often, reality is the tolerance of unacceptable behavior by one of their own. This unwillingness to self-police opens the door for administrative bullying.

Absent such policies and protections, the administration’s typical response to an employee’s claim of workplace bullying is to suggest that a “personality clash” exists and the party with the lower power base should look within herself or himself for a solution. Oftentimes, if the bullying or “personality clash” continues, the solution strongly encouraged, directly or indirectly, by the administration and the individual’s peers is departure from the working environment, regardless of the potential professional harm and personal disruption this might cause. On the other hand, the bullying administrator rarely suffers any negative consequences and usually remains in a position of authority. Noveck speaks directly to this scenario in her discussion of the “nasty boss phenomenon,” with a quote from Jeffrey Pfeffer, professor at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business, that is very revealing: “Certainly, the behavior of nasty bosses is way more public than it used to be But does it have consequences? I just don’t see it.”⁷

The lack of negative consequence for administrators who abuse their power through bullying employees is detrimental not only to the person(s) being bullied but also to the organization that tolerates it. For example, Finkelstein identified staff departures and high turnover as potential consequences of administrators who “ruthlessly eliminate” underlings who do not give them total and unquestioning support,⁸ a common type of administrator bullying. While Finkelstein was referring to CEO’s bullying of employees in the private sector, academia is similarly fertile ground for administrator bullying of faculty members, particularly, but not exclusively, newly hired academics or assistant professors. Given their long probationary period,⁹ assistant professors may be at greater risk of being bullied. This academic tradition essentially enables the bullying administrator to more easily identify potential targets.

The administrator’s ability to get away with bullying rests upon inequalities in power, the lack of institutional safeguards for those who might become targets of the bully, and the lack of sanctions which serve as punishment and deterrent for bullying. In the absence of institutional safeguards and sanctions, a faculty member who makes a claim of bullying against an administrator risks becoming the subject of administrative scrutiny, rather than vice versa. As part of the institution’s administration, the bully may well be given a shield of protection and even provided with free legal advice and assistance from university counsel as though he or she were the target rather than the perpetrator. At the same time, it is unlikely that the faculty member, although an employee of the institution just like the administrator, will enjoy these benefits. Retaliatory sanctions against the faculty

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member, such as being reprimanded by the administration for initiating a “false accusation” and being warned (threatened) that another such “false accusation” might result in more severe administrative sanctions, are not uncommon. In such cases, the faculty member, not the administrator, is called “on the carpet” for daring to voice objections to being bullied.

These actions by the administration serve to silence the faculty member and embolden the bullying administrator. In institutions where faculty are unionized, one could legitimately ask, where is the faculty union under such circumstances? Unfortunately, many an academic union views itself as powerless to act against administrator bullying. In cases where there is no institutional infrastructure to address administrative bullying, the unions’ only instrument in dealing with it is through the collective agreement. If the collective agreement is silent on this issue, the faculty member can expect little union support. The administrator is now free to escalate bullying behavior and act with impunity, ignoring normal protections faculty take for granted. If the faculty member protests, the bullying administrator may now label her or him a “troublemaker” who is interfering with the work of the Faculty.

A potential consequence or byproduct of administrative bullying, e.g., where the bully refers to the faculty member as a “troublemaker” in the presence of other faculty and by doing so encourages group bullying, is “mobbing.”¹⁰ Leymann describes mobbing as a “nonviolent, polite, sophisticated” approach to bullying by a group of coworkers in “ostensibly rational workplaces” and noted: “Universities are an archetype.”¹¹ In universities, mobbing behavior may, in the initial stages, take the form of “wear(ing) the target down emotionally by shunning, gossip, ridicule, bureaucratic hassles, and withholding of deserved rewards.”¹² Mobbing behavior may escalate to “formal outbursts of aggression” whereby “some real or imagined behavior” is asserted as “proof of the target’s unworthiness to continue in the normal give-and-take of academic life.”¹³ At the initial stages, the administrative bully may simply stand on the sidelines and encourage mobbing, but as it escalates the bully may use it as an opportunity to invoke or threaten to invoke disciplinary measures against the faculty member without establishment of the facts. The administrative bully may even make formal charges of “misconduct” where false charges against the faculty member are aired at higher levels of university administration or in front of a campus tribunal. Westhues refers to these events as “degradation rituals” which leave the faculty member with two stark and unpleasant options: quit or fight for their professional rights and life.¹⁴

As mentioned previously, administrative bullying of faculty is not limited to assistant professors. Uscilka described the case of Bill Lepowsky, a professor with 37 years experience at a college, who was falsely accused by an administrator of “violating procedures related to textbook adoption, textbook printing, and textbook sales to students. ... accused of saying and doing things ..., threatened with termination, and denied a sabbatical.”¹⁵ Although the college never undertook a full investigation, Lepowsky was eventually able to clear his name with the assistance of colleagues and the faculty union, and ultimately he received an apology from the college chancellor. Even so, the bullying continued for another year, and only after a change in the administration did the abuse finally stop.

Elash stated, “Even if they are well intentioned, leaders can abuse their power. ... Some are just bullies who mistreat others simply because they are in a position to do so.”¹⁶ The administrator’s claim is I am just tough and demanding, and look how much more profitable the

organization is. The bottom line becomes the justification, but the bottom line has a number of interpretations. In the world of academia, the bottom line is the creation and advancement of knowledge through highly educated and skilled faculty. The traditional division of authority between labor and management in the private sector is often less clear between faculty and administration in higher education institutions. The insecurities and weaknesses of an administrator, especially one who is trying unsuccessfully to bridge academic and managerial expectations, are perhaps more open for display, discussion, and even challenge by faculty. These types of administrators may be more likely to engage in bullying and harassment in an attempt, for example, to deflect attention from their own shortcomings or to spite those who are more successful. Without consequences, unacceptable behavior becomes part of the norm. The norm is what has been agreed to, not formally but by practice, as tolerable behavior.

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, *Literature Review: Selected References* (Toronto, Ontario: Ontario Public School Boards’ Association) http://www.opsba.org/Policy_Program/Interesting_Programs/Bullying/literature_review.html.

² Robert Ebersole, *Bullying and Hazing Policies Offered* (Lansing, MI: Michigan Association of School Boards) www.masb.org/pdf/bullyhazpolicy.pdf.

³ Cambridge Public Schools, *Cambridge Public Schools Administrative Procedures and Guidelines on Prevention of Bullying* (Cambridge, MA) www.cpsd.us/Web/PubInfo/Anti-bullying_procedures.pdf.

⁴ State of Victoria, *Safe Schools Are Effective Schools* (Victoria, Australia: Department of Education and Early Childhood Development) <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/wellbeing/safeschools/bullying>.

⁵ The Open University, *Bullying and Harassment: Student Code for Dealing with Bullying and Harassment*, <http://www3.open.ac.uk/our-student-policies/pdf/bullying.pdf>.

⁶ Gary Namie as quoted in “Laney (College) Hosts ‘Workplace Bullying’: Trustee Handy encourages employees to speak out,” by Mary Uscilka, *The Laney Tower*, May 11, 2006, <http://www.bullyinginstitute.org/press/laney051106.html>.

⁷ Jocelyn Noveck, “The Nasty Boss Phenomenon,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, July 6, 2006, D3.

⁸ Sidney Finkelstein, cited in “Seven deadly habits of CEO’s,” by Ray Williams, *National Post*, June 14, 2006, FP8.

⁹ The normal probation period for an assistant professor is six years. Although this probationary period varies and can be shorter, most academics would not receive consideration for tenure earlier than two years.

¹⁰ Ken Westhues, “The Unkindly Art of Mobbing,” *Academic Matters: The Journal of Higher Education* (Fall 2006): 18-19.

¹¹ Leymann cited in Westhues, 18

¹² Westhues, 18.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵ Uscilka, “Laney (College) Hosts ‘Workplace Bullying.’”

¹⁶ Daniel Elash, *When the Boss Is a Bully*,
<http://www.leader-values.com/content/detail.asp?ContentDetailID=338>.