

The Costs of Having a Bully in the Library

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Abstract:

Purpose – The purpose of the this article is to address the issue of bullying within an organizational environment related to workplace conflict, which has not been typically noted within library organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – The article provides the context to determine whether a problem exists and several resources to utilize if needed.

Findings – It is speculated that bullying can exist in library organizations as with other professional organizations, but has not been raised as an issue with regard to potential costs involved.

Originality/value – This topic is being addressed as part of the financial considerations present within library operations that bear attention in today's environment.

Keywords: Aggression | Bullying | Organizational culture | Workplace conflict | Management | Library and information science

Article:

Personality differences have always created workplace pressures related to conflict management claims of harassment and general team dysfunctional outcomes, for many years. Businesses have started monitoring and tracking different assessment measures to identify the cost of bad behaviors to the organization. Sometimes these bad behaviors escalate to becoming labeled as bullying, which is not always an obvious trait to follow, but can be costing an organization dollars that they do not have. This can be especially true in libraries that cannot afford to spend money investigating and mediating bully behaviors.

The trend of workplace bullying has been identified and focused on employees who experience a persistent feeling of mistreatment or discomfort in the workplace from one or more individuals within common working relationships. Bullying is different from harassment due to the subtle and often invisible nature of the aggression. Invisible because much of bullying activity takes place within the organization's established policies and procedures or general rules governing behaviors or organizational culture.

Bullying is also repetitious and in many cases is driven by someone in authority over the person being bullied. This also differs from harassment, as harassment can be a single instance of behavior that is offensive or inappropriate, and addressing these behaviors have legal support such as anti-discrimination legislation. Because the nature of bullying is more situational and the conditions and characteristics of bullying are least likely to cross a legal line, many organizations have been unsuccessful in addressing and correcting these behaviors.

Bullying can cost an organization in many indirect ways such as through decreased productivity of staff, increases in absenteeism, turnover and the associated costs of replacement, poor morale and poor service experiences with patrons or customers. At Griffith University, a Workplace Bullying Project Team has estimated the cost of bullying to business organizations to be between \$6 and \$13 billion per year (Barr, 2013). This could be happening in libraries as well without being identified or tagged as such. Bullying is generally considered to be more prevalent in academia or community service type of environments due to the decentralized and less structured nature of these work environments.

Treadway *et al.* (2013) address bullying from the social point of view, in terms of victims lacking social abilities to thwart bullying behaviors and from bullies themselves, who have developed the political skills necessary to bully others, to achieve their personal goals. This implies that the role of self-esteem can play an important part in either driving a bully's aggressive behavior or allowing a victim to be taken advantage of or manipulated to satisfy the bully's goals. This point of view has been studied in childhood bullying studies in which social information processing (SIP) is considered for identifying characteristics leading to being a bully or becoming a victim.

One attribute of social information processing is political skill, which is the ability to use knowledge of other's working relationships to create an influence which can enhance one's personal or organizational goals and objectives (Treadway *et al.*, 2013). This attribute would be most likely to occur within a library environment due to less structure within the organizational protocols, as mentioned earlier. This can create a situation in which aggressive behavior that drives achievement and accomplishment is perceived in a positive consideration and even rewarded, despite the consequences of others involved. This is where the cost impact is not addressed on victims who are now reeling from the bully's successful accomplishments.

In addressing the impact to an organization and specifically a library type environment that is not typically focused on this phenomenon, we should consider environmental factors or conditions that can create such activities to occur. Buttigieg *et al.* (2011) consider the workplace in particular and look at examples of factors that can contribute to opportunities for bullying to occur. They discuss and cite from other sources issues such as environments undergoing change as susceptible to unstable internal political issues or organizations that involve crisis management or resolution which create occupational ranks that clearly define how responsibility is distributed but can create frustrations over roles.

Other factors include conditions in the workplace that can encourage deviant or bullying type of behaviors. These can include organizational cultures that are toxic in nature or prone to silos or non-collaborative work environments. Poor role models from organizational leadership, non-ethical practices, excessive workloads or higher institutional pressures can also play a role in forming conditions favorable for providing a tolerance to bullying behaviors.

Financial impacts

It is well documented that individuals who feel bullied suffer from a variety of related symptoms that impact personal health and performance issues. But research is now looking at the financial impacts of bullying on an organizational level. At an Association of College and University Housing Officers – International in 2013 a presentation on bullying estimated the costs associated with workplace bullying at a minimum of \$250 million for expenses related to healthcare, litigation, staff retraining and lower productivity due to power conflicts. This is only an estimate based on the numbers of cases actually reported as discussed in the conference session, “The Bully Has Grown Up and Is in the Workplace”.

The Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM) also recognizes that a business case exists for addressing workplace conflict issues that can cost an organization monies related to absenteeism, turnover, unionization and litigation issues (Managing Workplace Conflict, 2012). Beyond employee stress issues, larger economic concerns can develop such as legal issues around discrimination and harassment complaints, along with a decline in the organization’s reputation or credibility to clients, customers, vendors, etc.

Thus, bullying, which is not always visible or recognized, can cost an organization financially, as well as politically or emotionally through the individuals affected. There are not many documented examples of library staffs who are victim to bullying or of actions (or inactions) rising from workplace conflict that caused a negative financial impact on the organization. This could be due to not classifying turnover or health mediation efforts as such, or simply not paying attention to the possibility that certain issues are a result of a bully in the library that has created the impetus for these issues to manifest into undesired consequences. Library organizations should not consider themselves exempt from the financial consequences caused by bullying in the workplace.

Solutions and suggestions

Judith E. Glaser of Benchmark Communications (Glaser, 2005) offers individuals advice on dealing with bullying. She recognizes that sometimes the bully is the boss and recommends strategies such as:

- Ignore – by engaging the bully, this person has achieved their goal of “getting to you”;
- Confront – there is a chance that the bully may actually not know they are being a bully;
- Prove yourself – show your organizational commitment and go above and beyond what is in your job description. A bully boss could see a different side of you and eliminate his/her behaviors;
- Document – keep documentation as to behaviors that are inappropriate or become uncomfortable beyond the norm expectations for the position;
- Report – alert senior managers or human resources officials if bad behavior continues and be prepared to show documentation of your experiences; and
- Stay positive – don’t doubt yourself, your character or your work ethic. Don’t blame yourself if you are a target, but seek help.

For organizations, the solutions become different in terms of identifying and addressing solutions to potential problems. These solutions must be addressed on a cultural level and should be proactive in the sense of training supervisors and administrators, how to behave themselves, but also what to look for in others.

Sloan *et al.* (2010) recognize that conflict within the workplace is essential for organizational growth, but they also document possible organizational costs related to unhealthy conflict interactions. They recommend that administrative responses to bullying behavior must include ways to shift the environment away from factors that support the bad behaviors and toward behaviors that create a culture of respect and empathy for others. They attach value to social behaviors that either support bullying or not, and the organizational leadership must work to influence the positive outcome. They also note that inaction to possible problems can produce worst effects due to including in the environment an element of silent approval for bad behaviors.

The American Psychological Association’s Center for Organizational Excellence has just launched its new web page of resources for employers and individuals who want to learn more about preventing and responding to workplace bullying:

www.apaexcellence.org/resources/special-topics/workplace-bullying. This includes overviews, studies and resources for both employers and targets, publications, professional associations and more.

Conclusions

This article only touches the surface of conflict issues that could have significant financial impacts on any organization. With library organizations undergoing the burden and stress of continued budget woes, changes to the profession and changes to some of the core elements of providing our services, the opportunity exists for bullies to emerge to satisfy their own agendas outside of what is best for the organization. And sometimes in the process of doing their jobs this can lead to displaying inappropriate behaviors that have a net negative impact on the organization. This can be a tough call, as the benefits achieved by the bully must be recognized as well.

This can put organizational leaders in the difficult position of balancing the achievements of those displaying the aggression, with behaviors that influence others within the organization negatively. But the overall health of the organization is linked to its ability to resolve conflict amiably and provide safe conditions in which everyone can function appropriately. Brees *et al.* (2013) outline an aggression model of attributes, which includes cognitive processes, leading to workplace aggression. They conclude that managers must recognize these attributes and direct personal relationships accordingly to reduce workplace confrontations. They label this as attribution retraining and recommend taking this deeper approach for long-term benefits.

This first step is recognizing if there is a problem with workplace conflicts and if so, is there a bully in the library? Because of the recent attention to this topic, many resources now exist to pursue possible solutions further to maintain a healthy organization.

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Further reading

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