



# Two Sides of the Same Coin



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## Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall . . . , Pt 1

Bullying. Just reading that word makes us cringe. We shrink from suggesting that it's true of others, but we certainly don't want it to be said of ourselves. Companies have policies that prohibit it, and managers loathe its existence; yet it lives in most organizations, and even thrives in some of them. For this and at least the next newsletter, I want us to consider this topic from a number of different perspectives. I want us to think about who does it, how and, to a certain extent, why; and I want us to understand why it's allowed to continue, and what affect it has on others.

In the context of work, there are three avenues through which bullying can occur: managers who bully those who work for them; peers who bully other peers; and the managed who bully their managers. Bullying for whatever reason is reprehensible, unacceptable, and preventable. The more we know about it, the better able we'll be to put a stop to it.

### What is bullying?

So just what is this thing called *bullying*? The term is difficult to define because the motivation behind it is interwoven with the behavior that we see. For many, bullying is just the action of a bully; but to me this is an oversimplification and, as such, makes the phenomenon more difficult to understand. For one thing, bullies don't necessarily exhibit bully-like behavior all the time; and for another, there are those who do behave in this way on only the rarest occasions. We have all seen both, but I'm sure that you would think it unfair to label them equally as bullies.

It seems to me that, in order to have any chance at all of understanding it, we have to start with the activity itself. There are three parts to the action of bullying: the behavior; the reaction of the person who is bullied; and the affect that it has on the onlookers.

### **Bullying behavior**

Bullying can be physical, verbal or emotional. It can be delivered by an individual, group, or “the system” as some refer to any overriding authority, either separately or collectively, deliberately or accidentally. That it has occurred at all is determined by either the victim or the onlookers. You rarely get bullies who describe their behavior as such.

Fundamentally, bullying behavior is a psychological comparison. It’s instigated by the bully for reasons that we’ll look at next month. On the one side, there is the person who is behaving like a bullying; on the other is the person being bullied. The “victim” feels that some form of unpleasantness is being directed towards him or her for reasons that seem to be disproportionate to the incident itself. It may show itself as discrimination, harassment, ostracism, or in some other negative way.

### **The victim’s reaction**

How do most victims react? In other words, how do people behave when they’re confronted by bullying behavior that is directed at them? Few of us enjoy unpleasant situations. Most prefer to get along with or even like their colleagues and their boss. So, when bullying behavior becomes personal, we tend to shy away from it. We opt for giving the person a “wide berth.” I should point out here that while some bullying behavior provokes us to respond forcefully, usually the bullying comes across as either as something we should have expected or more softly in an almost “if you really loved me” manner. People who are experts at bullying know instinctively which one to use while simultaneously avoiding a direct confrontation.

For example, a bully might say, “You have an appointment between 12am and 1pm,” as happened to me on one occasion. She simply made a statement. Implicit in it, however, was the fact that she had made the appointment for me, that it was her right to do so because it was part of her job, and that therefore I should expect to attend it and others at any time. Of course, this was also my scheduled lunch hour; but as far as she was concerned, that wasn’t

important. In such circumstances, most people would back down; mumble something to the effect that it wasn't right, and just accept it. That would be the typical reaction.

### **How does bullying affect onlookers?**

Like anything else, it's important that we understand our terms. *Affect* is to do with action and answers the question, what or how has a thing or person been influenced. In other words, what have they been influenced to do? *Effect* is about result, as in *cause and effect*. In our discussion, onlookers can be affected but not effected. (Even my Microsoft spell checker thinks there's a problem. That means that the people who programmed it didn't realize there was a difference between them. They are not synonymous.)

Managers, their peers, subordinates and others outside of their direct authority who witness bullying will each be influenced differently. There are at least five factors that contribute to the way that they are influenced. This is a complicated topic and, given the space limitations, I will just comment briefly on how they work together. The action taken will depend upon: who does the bullying; to whom it is directed; the relationship between the onlooker and the victim; the reaction of the victim; and the impact that the behavior has on getting the job done.

### **Managers as bullies**

When a manager sees another manager bully a subordinate – certainly the ones I've seen – tend to look the other way. If it doesn't concern them directly, they don't seem to want to know. If the bullying is directed to that person's subordinate, it's even more unlikely that other managers will get involved. It would be like interfering with the way another parent disciplines his or her children. That concern becomes almost nonexistent if the relationship between the onlooker and the victim is no more than an acquaintance. Close friends may step in to clarify the issue; but anything less than that, and victims are on their own. If the victim acquiesces, other managers will often treat it as a common misunderstanding. There are enough of them. As long as the job gets done, it seems it's better to leave things as they are.

### **Subordinates who bully their peers**

When subordinates see another person bullying someone who is more or less on the same organizational footing as they are, the relationship between the onlooker and the victim takes precedence. If the onlooker is a friend of the bully, then the bully will be supported. The

onlooker may even join in. If, however, the onlooker is a friend of the victim, then he or she may step in to help or, more likely, commiserate with the victim later by saying what he or she *would* have done. Onlookers who are anything less than friends with one or the other tend to mind their own business. Managers also tend to ignore these “petty squabbles” unless they interfere with the job or they are forced to deal with them through a formal complaint that materializes later.

### **Subordinates who bully their manager**

There are also subordinates who bully their managers. In a recent study, Dr Sara Branch (Griffith University) noted that staff may engage in bullying behavior either openly or on the quiet. By threatening to or actually filing complaints that allege discrimination, some managers allow themselves to be bullied rather than risk the ordeal of dealing with an investigation into their behavior. Managers, however, who are bullied in this manner and fail to receive support from their organizations as a result tend to be less satisfied with their jobs and more likely to leave if the situation doesn’t improve.

When a fellow subordinate sees a peer bully a manager, the reaction can be mixed. Onlookers within the chain of command tend to “hide” to avoid getting sucked into the fray. Those outside that chain may reflect on the supposed punishment the bully may suffer later as a result.

I’ve only managed to touch on a few things regarding bullying. Next month, we’ll consider the motives behind it; however, it seems to me that we owe it to ourselves, our customers and our organizations to call it what it is when we see it, and to do all within our power to diffuse it or, at the very least, to minimize its affect. Walking away from it or even hiding solves nothing.

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1. The new code for the website has arrived, and I’ll be loading it shortly. It’s an entirely new design that I hope you’ll like. Feel free to pass your comments along to me. As I mentioned last month, there will be some opportunities for subscribers that will not be made available to the general public.
2. The forum has been officially closed. Even with a password, far too many people made inappropriate posts. I haven’t entirely given up on the idea; but until I come up with a method to keep the discussions relevant, it will remain offline.