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Workplace Bullying

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We are consulting with a solicitor to finalise our new video training pack on Workplace Bullying and Barbara gave some interviews to The Times Educational Supplement and look out for an article in Red magazine later this month.

We intend our work-place bullying video to be ready in June 2003.

Gerald Haigh - The Times Educational Supplement

05/02/1999

Mind and Body

*"Take that and get out my sight, you useless s***!"*

If you've ever been subjected to a tirade of abuse at work, you could be among the one in 10 of us who are victims of bullying. The solution, suggests Gerald Haigh, often lies not with the victims, nor even the bullies...but with the rest of us who stand by and let it happen.

Mention the word "bullying" in the same breath as "school" and most people would assume you are talking about pupils. But grown-ups are bullied, too, and schools are no different from any other workplace in this respect. Indeed, the problem has become so serious that the TUC held a high-profile conference last year called

"No Excuse: Beat Bullying at Work"

This is a major step forward from just five years ago, when complaints of workplace bullying were more likely to be dismissed as mere whingeing. The National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers, who surveyed the subject in the mid-Nineties, quotes one member as saying: "Bullying has become a Nineties buzzword, used quite erroneously to describe any form of pressure put on a teacher by a line manager." This interpretation is the perfect double whammy - it blames the victim and implicitly praises the perpetrator.

So how does bullying differ from robust management? The stories told by victims provide most of the answer. Deputy head Susan (surnames of victims have been withheld to protect their identity) recalls how her head "would have towering rages. One day she came to my room and stood in the doorway screaming."

Malcolm, a teacher-governor, had a head who felt threatened by a teacher who was putting forward staff opinions. "He called me in and just went absolutely berserk."

Bullying, says the TUC, in a definition borrowed from Andrea Adams's definitive book on the subject, *Bullying at Work*, is "offensive behaviour through vindictive, cruel, malicious or humiliating attempts to undermine an individual or group of employees".

Bullied teacher Ray was criticised and pressured until he felt he had to leave the profession. He says: "I'd worked for some hard heads of department before that, but there was a sort of rough justice about them and they didn't damage you."

Significantly, bullied teachers seem mostly to be experienced people with a proven track record. The NASUWT survey found that the biggest group of victims was made up of women teachers in their mid-40s - with primary deputy heads particularly well represented.

The victim is sometimes demoralised to the point of being incapable of working properly. Ray says: "Can you imagine the effect of being told that not only is your work crap but that nobody likes you? You start to doubt yourself, even after years of success."

Jenny, formerly a senior member of staff in a primary school and now a supply teacher, says: "I won't ever be the person I was before. I get nervous attacks; I'm very wary of heads to the point where I won't take on a permanent job in a school."

If this is your story, too, you will want to know how to put things right. The honest answer, though, is that rarely can - or should - the victim solve the problem unaided. Psychologist Barbara Maines, joint author with George Robinson of a forthcoming training pack on workplace bullying, says:

"A lot of the strategies suggested to victims actually make things worse."

To suggest someone deal with bullying by becoming more assertive is, says Barbara Maines, ethically wrong. "It's not the victim's responsibility," she says. Neither is such advice likely to be effective. "If the victim could do that, then they would have done it."

Jenni Watson of Redress, the bullied teacher's support network, agrees. "You've got to be quite an assertive person in the first place just to say that you are going to do something about it."

In any case, there is always the likelihood that the victim will shrink away from confrontation at the last moment, or that the attempt to be assertive will provoke more trouble. Either way, the bullied person ends up feeling much worse. Ray says: "Saying 'pull yourself together' just makes you feel more inadequate."

A bullied teacher ought to be able to use established grievance procedures, but here, too, some experts are cautious. Barbara Maines says: "I'm at the moment supporting someone who has embarked on a grievance procedure. He has been moved out of the workplace pending investigation. So while the employer is sympathetic, by

moving him they have further stigmatised him. He wonders why the management have not been moved, and as a result he feels terrible."

Experts believe it is the bully who should change and not the victim. They know, too, that self-help attempts that fail only make things worse. But recognising the problem can help because it confirms that you are not to blame. So look at the definition of bullying and the victims' stories, and then decide whether this is what is happening to you.

Bullying usually begins at a low level, and escalates gradually. Tim Field, founder of the UK National Workplace Bullying Advice Line, says: "It starts innocuously, with criticisms that might have a grain of truth." Tom Mellish, health and safety policy officer at the TUC, says: "Bullying is often little things that add up, not necessarily grandstand events or shouting across the table."

So who are the bullies? Tim Field was himself a victim, which is why he set up his support organisation. He talks of "the serial bully who has an anti-social personality - un-afraid of doing anything that will bring about the desired result". It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, he believes, for an honest and reasonable person to deal with a manager like that.

Barbara Maines is less sure about this analysis. "The true sociopath, who can't understand the feelings of others, is very rare. I have only met one or two in my whole career - extraordinary people, charming, and unmoved by the suffering of others."

Much more often, she says, "Bullies are ordinary people who have not been taught appropriate management methods".

In school, the bully is sometimes a head who is in a panic about not being able to do the job properly - perhaps with OFSTED looming. When this happens, the head may well lash out at an experienced colleague whose apparent confidence adds to the head's feeling of inadequacy.

Crucial to the process, says Barbara Maines - and all experts and victims agree on this - is the way other people will gather round and support the bully rather than the victim, either because they need the manager's approval, or because they are relieved not to be bullied themselves. And it is this structure of support for the bully which Barbara Maines and George Robinson's approach aims to break down.

How to help yourself:

- Bolster your self-esteem by talking to people who know you are a good teacher. Look back at examples of work you have done in the past.
- Try not to be alone. Bullied teacher Ray talks of "existing in a vacuum". Psychologist Barbara Maines says: "Victims often try to be strong by hiding that they are upset." At the heart of the Maines and Robinson approach is the belief that many bullies and the people who either join in or stand

ineffectually by simply do not realise the effect of their actions. "So often they will say 'we knew we weren't being nice, but we had no idea it was like that'."

- Keep a written record of all incidents to use in any future proceedings taken either against you, or by you, against the bully. Tom Mellish of the TUC says: "A lot of people phone up here with a story but don't have it in a coherent chronological order. You should get it down in diary form. It clarifies the thing, makes it real. It helps if you appear coherent."
- Be sure that you have seen, and understood, the staff grievance procedure, which must exist and be available to you.
- If the experience is making you ill, go to the doctor and take sick leave. Ray says: "You tend to be conscientious and think of the children, but it's the school's job to sort that out. Your health is important. I wish someone had said that to me."
- Talk to your union and/or the workplace bullying support organisations and help lines. Do this early, rather than put it off until you are feeling hopeless. Just finding a friendly ear can be the first step to recovery. Tom Mellish finds that people are often surprised and relieved when they realise that there are many others sharing the experience.

Further Information:

Jenni Watson, Redress: 01405 764432

Bullying at Work by Andrea Adams, Virago, around £8.99

Crying for Help by Barbara Maines and George Robinson, around £10, Lucky Duck Publishing, 34 Wellington Park, Clifton, Bristol BS8 2UW. Tel: 0117 9732881

Workplace Support Groups and Anti-Bullying Intervention, a video and training pack, will be available from Lucky Duck Publishing later this year.