

## **MANAGEMENT OR BULLYING: WHAT'S IN A NAME?**

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## MANAGEMENT OR BULLYING: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

### ABSTRACT

The term bullying is often used to denote an individual acting aggressively, harmfully or disrespectfully towards another, often repeatedly. This paper explores the concept of bullying from the subjective views of employees, gathered in interviews and stories collected in agencies of the Australian Public Service. We did not define bullying, rather our interest was in how employees perceived it. We found bullying is perceived to go beyond the common image in many ways: it may be indirect, unintentional or practiced by a group, and may be a single act. Standard management activities may be perceived as bullying, and it may emanate from standard business concerns rather than anti-social individuals. It may involve a lack of action, communication or care rather than specific actions. We conclude that separating bullying from legitimate management is a complex issue, and that simplistic interventions such as policies, rules and training may have only limited impact in ameliorating it. Public discussions of bullying may be improved by acknowledging the intricacies arising from standard views of management power in workplaces.

Keywords: power and influence, change management, leadership, interpersonal behaviour

A recent flurry of media interest in bullying in schools and workplaces highlights growing awareness of the misuse of power in public places. Yet how, exactly, do we place a line between its proper and improper uses? How do we distinguish legitimate management from bullying?

Workplace bullying may involve purely personal power, where for example an employee's physical attributes or personality negatively influence others. In this paper we are more interested in examples involving position power, as well as or in addition to personal attributes.

Previous studies have noted the prevalence of bullying by line managers or supervisors (Quine 2003), the use of legitimate managerial processes to bully individuals (Hutchinson et al 2005), and the presence of poor management styles (Agervold & Gemzoe 2004) or dysfunctional organisational cultures (Heames & Harvey 2006) in workplaces with high levels of bullying. If management consists of planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating and controlling, in the classic analysis of Henri Fayol (1916/1987), when do such activities become bullying?

While there are legal, philosophical, ethical, political and even religious perspectives on this, the perceptions of the people involved may also form an important contribution.

This paper reports findings from part of a wide-ranging study of bullying in the Australian Public Sector (APS), focussing here on employees' views on what constitutes bullying. Unlike many

previous studies, our interviews and questionnaires did not define bullying, but rather sought examples of it.

The APS' wide range of organisations, geographical sites and government functions results in a strong emphasis on bureaucratic management processes. Some researchers consider that such environments promote bullying (see Omari 2007), and it is likely that specific features of the APS affect the extent and nature of staff reports of bullying. However, our primary interest here - distinguishing bullying from legitimate management - is pertinent to all organisations.

The APS agencies studied were clearly interested in reducing the incidence of bullying, and had so far primarily seen the APS' Code of Conduct and standard grievance procedures as the means for this. We consider here how effective these might be.

### **Defining Bullying**

While consensus on the definition of bullying is lacking in the research literature, it clearly involves unwanted behaviours or activities that contravene individuals' sense of self-respect, and that may therefore produce negative emotions. More specific definitions often refer to repeated acts (eg Einarsen 1999), perhaps having a certain intensity (eg above four on a ten-point scale, Heames & Harvey 2006), and perhaps involving the intention to influence others (eg Keashley & Jagatic 2003).

Most bullying research focuses on the acts of a single person. These are described in terms such as "aggressive and intimidating" (Quine 2003), "negative and aggressive" (Agervold & Mikkelsen 2004), "actions and practices that ... clearly cause humiliation, offence, distress" (Heames & Harvey 2006), or "acts [done] with the intention to harm others" (Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson & Wilkes 2005).

Such images depict the bully as an anti-social person, someone not following the norms of corporate behaviour (or at least the norms espoused in relation to employees: such behaviours may be more acceptable in behaviours directed at external entities such as competitors, regulators or unions). They paint bullying as a problem of certain individuals, unable or unwilling to act in socially-sanctioned ways. Such persons are depicted as others: them, not us.

In contrast a few researchers have reported bullying through legitimate organisational processes. For example, Hutchinson et al (2005) report employees' perceptions of bullying in increased work pressures and reduced individual consideration in times of significant change.

This study sought to better understand employees' perceptions of the boundary between bullying and legitimate management.

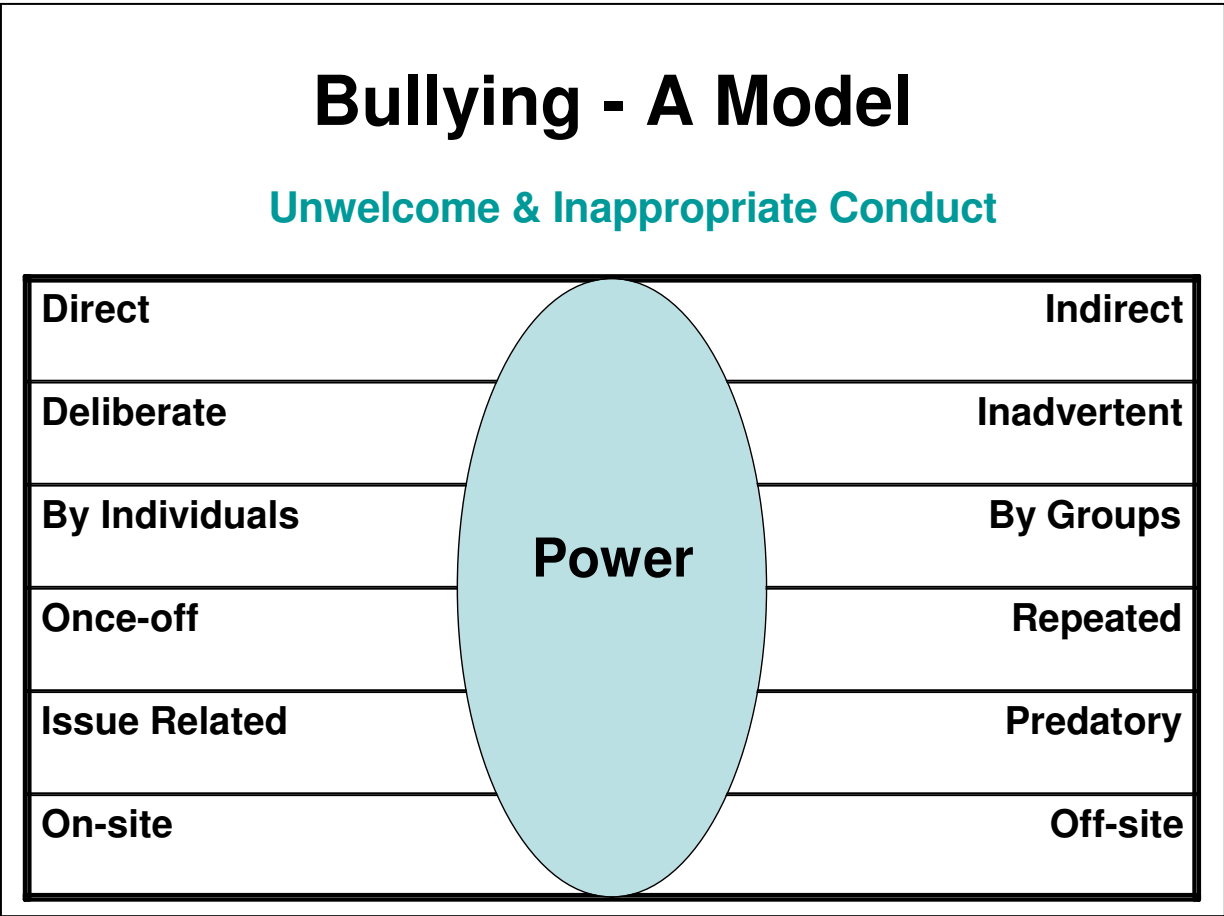
## **RESEARCH METHOD**

The study involved eleven APS agencies in Western Australia. Four agencies volunteered to participate in all stages of the study, and a number of individuals volunteered for different stages from other agencies. A triangulated research design was used to improve the reliability and validity of the data, with four research methods. First, three focus groups with twenty eight participants from four agencies provided information on the nature of behaviour considered as bullying, and on its causes and consequences. Attendance at these sessions was voluntary. These focus groups provided a contextual frame for the study. Second, a survey examined the agencies' climate and culture, and the rates and nature of bullying. The response rate of around 37% provided 219 usable forms from the eleven agencies. The last few pages of the survey were left blank and respondents were asked to recount stories of bullying (either as victim, by-stander or alleged perpetrator): fifty-four volunteered stories, some more than one. Some stories were brief and others extremely detailed spanning many pages. Third, semi-structured interviews with three HR managers and two policy makers in these organisations provided insight into the APS culture. Fourth, individuals who had been verbally or formally accused of bullying were invited to provide their perspective in unstructured interviews; ten alleged perpetrators volunteered. It should be noted that 'alleged perpetrators' were not targeted or approached directly. The survey form invited those accused of bullying to contact the researchers to provide their side of the story, word was also spread through informal networks within the public sector. An unstructured interview format was used for the alleged perpetrators due to the sensitivity of the topic. The interviewees were simply asked to recount their story.

The findings below are primarily from the focus group, interviews and survey. In these, participants were asked to recount incidents of bullying. No definition was supplied, and therefore the findings provide a completely subjective view of bullying.

## **FINDINGS: RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF BULLYING**

Respondents' incidents were content analysed into themes in an iterative process of coding and clustering of comments. Six themes reflecting the nature of bullying emerged (Figure 1): direct vs indirect; deliberate vs inadvertent; by individuals vs by groups; single vs repeated; issue-related vs predatory and on-site vs offsite. A seventh theme, underlying all these, highlighted the role of power.



**Figure 1. Key themes defining bullying.**

**Power**

A theme running through all stories was the perception of inappropriate use of power. This could involve personal or position power (Samson & Daft 2005), but more generally individuals sought to increase their power through a wide variety of strategies, as shown in these quotes:

- “trying to exert control, appear powerful to others, gain self confidence”;*
- “seeking to gain favour with senior management by dobbing in someone else and by putting that person down”;*
- “very controlling and enjoys exercising his power by playing mind games. His managerial strategy is to divide and rule. He manipulates every situation to satisfy his ego”.*

The most common tactic involved managers dividing employees into favoured and unfavoured, an in-group and an out-group. Other bullies were perceived to use their influence to manipulate individuals above them (and presumably peers as well). The distinction between inappropriate use of power with subordinates, and undue influence or manipulation of one’s managers and peers, has importance to the

extent that 'receivers' perceive psychological harm. In a number of instances managers were stressed by subordinates' bullying, and we suspect bullying by a manager's peers existed as well.

There is room for further research here, on when managers perceived as aggressive, having an intention to harm, intimidate or humiliate other managers are labelled by the latter as bullies. Do corporate cultures sometimes tolerate such acts between managers, labelling them as acceptable forms of influence, networking or competition? Are perceptions of personal 'robustness' conflated with position power?

The APS appears an interesting case of organisational response to bullying; while cultural values favouring bureaucratic accountability and limited individual discretion may be supposed to reduce bullying, in practice competition is also very much part of the culture, and individuals can increase their power through gaining influence in ways that could be labelled aggressive, offensive, harming or humiliating in other social settings.

Taking a subjective view of bullying invites a reminder that some individuals may not choose to play management according to the rules of 'robust' discussion, competitive 'networking' or manipulative 'influencing'.

We now examine six themes by which incidents of bullying can be classified from a subjective view. Many show bullying is not straightforwardly distinguished from management.

### **Direct vs Indirect**

*Direct bullying* involved a wide range of spoken acts: threats, ridicule, put-downs and obscenities, made in the victims' presence or passed on by others. Two broad forms were found. *Active aggression* involved what some called psychological warfare; threats of dismissal, ridicule or humiliation, derogatory or obscene language, backstabbing and vindictiveness, malicious gossip, fabrication of explanations, malicious speculation, shouting, hostile questioning, slamming chairs, and the like.

*Passive aggression* was seen in tactics such as exclusion and undermining. *Exclusion*, the most prevalent form of bullying found here, is a serious problem, Einarsen and Mikkelsen (2003, p.139) note "as a social and tribal primate, the survival of human beings depends on their being integrated in a well-functioning social group. Accordingly, from an existential point of view, social exclusion may be life-threatening".

Yet exclusion can be justified through a wide variety of legitimate management processes; limitations on budgets, time or staff mean some staff may get chances that others don't.

*Undermining* was seen in behaviours such as spreading of lies, giving incorrect instructions, going around or above a manager, inappropriate facial expressions such as rolling ones eyes in a meeting, and gossip. In mild forms, many of these behaviours can be considered acceptable, if unfortunate, consequences of the division of labour into groups and the need for networking and influence to increase one's group's successes.

*Indirect bullying* more visibly reflected acceptable management practices performed in unacceptable ways. Managers were seen to ignore individuals' human concerns in acts of *commission* - excessive time pressure, unrealistic performance standards, an overbearing manner, intolerance of dissent - or *omission*: lack of support, allowing workers to feel vulnerable, failing to consider the effects of directives, not listening to individuals, not showing care or respect.

As well as these personal acts, organisational systems and rules were seen as tools for bullying: the APS Code of Values was used to punish, selection procedures were biased, and line management protocols were enacted when other means of influence were more appropriate.

Here, the broad sweep of bullying becomes visible. Designing policies to reduce bullying necessarily involves very general statements of abstract concepts such as "respect and dignity" which deal ineffectively with the complexities observed here.

### **Deliberate vs Inadvertent**

Whilst it is often assumed bullies *intend* to influence their victims, some evidence suggests otherwise even in traditional accounts of bullying as the 'bad behaviour' of individuals (see Agervold & Mikkelsen 2004).

Further, as Pryor and Fitzgerald (2003, p. 80) write of sexual harassment in the US: "Whether the perpetrator intended the behaviour to be offensive or not is not the point of legal deliberations. That the behaviour occurred and was unwelcome are the main considerations. What are considered to be unwelcome ... behaviour[s] obviously varies from person to person and across circumstances".

Therefore, a subjective model of bullying, ignoring intent, seems fitting, even if it makes it harder for managers to distinguish bullying from acceptable workplace (and management) practices.

Again, the difficulty in relying on policy and regulation for prevention is obvious. Remedies for inadvertent bullying are likely to better focussed on education to raise awareness and sensitivity, and on culture change. Even so, these eventually rely on individuals' varying standards for respectful and

dignified treatment. Managers must be cautioned against simplistic acceptance of codes of conduct, “commonsense”, accepted ways of doing things, and standards generally reliant on past practices.

Does this mean bullying is totally subjective; that for example a mentally ill person who accuses a colleague of bullying out of deluded beliefs must be said to have a case? Of course not, but our central point is that modern management practices have far too little recognition of the diversity of workers’ perspectives on fair treatment.

### **Individuals vs Groups**

While bullying is generally seen as an individual activity, in Scandinavia the term mobbing is widely used to refer to a more collective form.

In our study collective actions were seen when two or three individuals formed an alliance to take sides against another, or when a ‘old boys club’ or other in-group were seen to have undue influence. Group actions could, like individual ones, be direct or indirect, acts of omission or commission, personal or organisational, deliberate or inadvertent.

Extending this perspective, policies, plans and management decisions generally can be seen as bullying; indeed any communication from a management group (or other group, unions and governments included). Again, while this complicates standard views of management ‘prerogative’, it may be more dangerous to ignore it.

### **Single vs Repeated Acts**

Many research definitions of bullying require it to be repeated (eg Agervold & Mikkelsen 2004; Einarsen 1999).

However, just as “sexual harassment does not have to be repeated or continuous to be against the law” (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2004, p. 16), so our respondents perceived single acts to constitute bullying.

Some described serious outcomes from a single incident: “*I took my feelings home and worried, stressed and thought about it all weekend*”, or “*What I heard was that I had said something inappropriate.. my reputation and standing with the CEO .. and my boss has suffered*”. Other comments showed that victims re-live single incidents, in effect making them repeated events, as noted elsewhere (Hoel & Cooper, 2001; Ireland & Snowden, 2002).

At the same time, frequency is an important contributor; as Zapf et al (2003, p. 113) suggest:



“bullying becomes more and more serious the longer it lasts”.

Here again, a subjective view complicates the issue of bullying and, given that management actions are often once-off, blurs the line between it and management.

### **Issue-Related vs Predatory**

This distinction has parallels with the personal vs organisational *means* of bullying noted above in relation to indirect bullying, but here refers to the perceived *goals* of perpetrators. Respondents ascribe *predatory* bullying to the perpetrator’s personality, aggressive tendencies, or lack of personal boundaries, for example, while *issue-related* bullying is perceived as a response to organisational problems such as a need to improve poor performance or restructure.

As with other dimensions, in both these categories most of the categories listed under previous dimensions can be found.

It is clear that issue-related bullying can be partly addressed by organisational solutions, including policy but also education, whereas extreme forms of predatory bullying are beyond the reach of such interventions and may require direct management intervention such as regular meetings, counselling, sanctions or dismissal.

Issue-related bullying is not as widely recognised as predatory bullying, but may be equally as serious. It seems important for organisations to address it, due to its visible relationship to legitimate organisational goals, even if, for the same reasons, its resolution may be complex.

### **Technologically-Mediated vs Face to Face**

A common image of bullying involves the physical proximity of an office setting, but our respondents reported workplace bullying elsewhere; in the coffee shop, at home, or while travelling. Email especially, but also the telephone, extends the reach of bullies to such locations, and brings new, more subtle, and sometimes more powerful forms of bullying into the office. For example, the ability to ‘cc:’ emails offers a new form of intimidation.

As managers increasingly use email to communicate, and expect to be able to communicate with employees beyond work settings, organisations might consider the subtle consequences of message length, formality, tone, opportunity for response and questioning, dispersion and so on, in both printed and spoken communications, in relation to the range of ways individuals expect to be spoken to in and out of workplaces.

## DISCUSSION

The dimensions of bullying identified by interview and survey respondents indicate that bullying is perceived in a very wide range of circumstances. Some of these go beyond the common image of bullying as the repeated acts of one aggressive, harmful, abusive or offensive individual deliberately targeting another.

Bullying may be indirect, involving exclusion or undermining through actions or inaction. It may involve policy – even policy designed to prevent bullying – or other formal management processes as much as personal ‘attacks’. It may be inadvertent. It may arise from the actions or inactions of a group, and may involve just a single incident. It may arise from work issues rather than personality or other personal characteristics of an individual. It may be technologically-mediated rather than face-to-face, and may happen off-site.

Each of these expansions of the concept bring bullying closer to ‘normal’ or legitimate management practices. Formal activities such as meetings, decisions, performance reviews and official communications, as well as informal ones such as influencing, networking or just gossip, can be construed as bullying. Failure to consult with staff or act in their best interests can be seen as bullying. And such actions or inactions performed by a team or executive group can also be counted.

The broad range of experiences respondents perceived as bullying highlights a need to avoid simplistic definitions and to emphasise the underlying psychological issues of ‘unwelcomeness’ in terms of individuals’ preferences for how they should be treated with dignity and respect. The real indicators of bullying are found in an individual’s emotional reactions, including anxiety, stress or distress, anger, humiliation, shame, hurt, offence, isolation, confusion, or diminishment, amongst other possibilities. Such reactions will be very individual.

Our findings show these responses can be triggered by ‘normal’ management processes involved in planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating and controlling.

Managers might therefore be alarmed that, as well as more obvious behaviours, the following may count as bullying: gossip, failing to explain or justify management actions or policies, over-monitoring, heavy-handed performance management, ignoring employee opinions, imposing excessive workloads, withholding information, giving people trivial or unpleasant tasks, or taking away responsibilities or tasks that offer dignity and respect.

Some might consider our subjective approach as ‘going too far’. We do not say, of course, that such management actions or inactions are always bullying; it depends very much on *how* they are done.

The distinction between management and leadership has great relevance here, although there is not room to explore it. Leaders, especially those acting from modern paradigms of servant leadership (Greenleaf 2002), transformational leadership (Bass 1998) or authentic leadership (Gardner, Avolio & Walumbwa 2005), or from an ‘emotionally intelligent’ approach to influence (Goleman, Boyatzis & McKee 2002), may be less likely to act in ways perceived as bullying, or to foster it in others, at least as long as they act in the employee’s best interest, as they (employees) see it.

Perhaps education and informed dialog on the boundary between management and bullying, and the relation between both and leadership, would do more to reduce bullying than the common interventions of policy, training, and similar management activities. However, such discussions must themselves be respectful of employees’ varying views of bullying: if conducted in a top-down, rule-based or normative way, such discussions might merely shift bullying into some of the more subtle forms observed here. Much management writing in the humanistic and clinical paradigms, and on the leadership paradigms noted above, offers guidelines for effective collaborative approaches to ‘messy’ problems like bullying.

On the other hand, the lack of a clear distinction between bullying and management, and the fundamental nature of competition and interpersonal influence in a market-based, politically-regulated economy invite consideration of when bullying might be a good business decision. The use of unwelcome and emotionally harmful ‘influence’ can be observed at times in international politics, in law enforcement, in medicine, and even in good parenting according to some. A manager or group facing a crisis and lacking alternatives. for example, may feel the safety of employees requires ignoring their concerns for personal dignity.

In our study, conducted in a context of considerable ‘change’ in the APS, respondents felt management justified much bullying by the perceived need to respond to crises, albeit crises of a more political or economic nature. The ethical issues created by conventional use of the words ‘management’ and ‘bullying’ in such contexts deserve greater public discussion.

Finally, the difficulty of drawing a line between bullying and acceptable management invites humility on the part of managers, employees and management teachers and researchers. The subjective approach of this paper suggests it is highly likely someone has perceived *our* actions as bullying, or will. Did we know, did we care; did we defend ourselves or inquire into the subjective worlds of the hurt?

As Hugh Mackay observed in a recent news commentary, “perhaps we should conduct regular ‘bully checks’ on our own behaviour. We might be shocked.”

Perhaps there is a useful intervention for managers.

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