

Bullying at Work: An ethical and leadership dilemma for all Project Managers

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“If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse, and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality.”

— Desmond Tutu

This quote applies to bullies as well as it applies to elephants. Bullying can be as harmful in the workplace as it is in schools and other areas of society, causing the well understood personal emotional impacts plus a long list of challenges for project manager and their organizations where it is taking place. Sadly, the rates of workplace bullying, despite efforts to eliminate it, are increasingly dramatically. The good news is that increased public awareness, recent research, and expanding illegalization of workplace bullying have paved the way for efforts to prevent it. Employers are becoming more acutely aware of the human, legal, ethical, and financial costs associated with workplace bullying. In order to directly and proactively address this issue project managers and their organizations need to take action. Fortunately, there are many sources of information and tools available to assist project managers and senior management.

Workplace Bullying: A Definition

Bullying can be as harmful in the workplace as it is in schools and other areas of society. The Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute defines workplace bullying as "repeated, health-harming mistreatment, verbal abuse, or conduct which is threatening, humiliating, intimidating, or sabotage that interferes with work, or some combination of the three". Projects are subsets of workplaces and since project management is, for the most part, an activity that involves working very closely with others, the impact of a bully in a project is potentially lethal to project success.

To complicate matters, workplace bullies are often hard to identify clearly. They can be highly skilled yet socially manipulative, targeting “weaker” employees while adept at charming those they deem will serve their career path well. Thus, a senior manager or their supervisor may say, “That person seems great to me.”

Workplace Bullying is Increasing

According to a 2013 Harvard Business Review article, over the last few decades, the number of people who've admitted to being the target of workplace bullying has increased drastically. The article notes that in 2011, half of employees in one survey said they were treated rudely at least once a week, an increase of 25% from 1998. Further, the Workplace Bullying Institute notes that many people who have experienced bullying have developed health issues including anxiety and depression. Some have even left their jobs in an attempt to escape the situation, often feeling they have no one to turn to for support in the organization or in fear of

retaliation. These statistics and the harm bullies can cause has direct impact on projects and project managers – if there is a bully operating in a project, the impact on the project team can be toxic, which inevitably has negative impacts for the team members and the project.

Workplace Bullying Challenges

Bullying generates a wide range of challenges that businesses and project managers are increasingly forced to address. First, it poses an ethical and leadership dilemma - it is a given that allowing that allowing or fostering bullying is unethical. It is equally accepted that ethical behavior is part of an essential foundation for trust. Without trust, there can't be effective leadership. Following this logic, without effective leadership, there will be few project successes, which impacts organizations writ large. Project management is, for the most part, an activity undertaken in concert with others. While we may refer to these others as team members, stakeholders, or coworkers, we, as project managers, depend on them for the success of our projects.

This is not only my opinion, or that of the Ethics MAG, but has been underscored by some of the most important thought leaders of our time. *The Leadership Challenge* by Kouzes and Posner, which continues to be a bestseller after four editions and twenty years in print, is the gold standard for research-based leadership and is a premier resource for aspiring leaders. The text informs us that leadership requires trust: “It’s clear that if people anywhere are to willingly follow someone - whether it be into battle or into the boardroom, the front office or the front lines - they first want to assure themselves that the person is worthy of their trust.”

Second, in more and more countries, workplace bullying is also illegal. The trend towards illegalization of workplace bullying is one that all project managers and organizational leaders should take seriously. If bullying is illegal in your jurisdiction, failing to address any bullying that arise could place both you and your organization at risk.

Third, regardless of laws in place, many organizations have clear anti-bullying and/or anti-harassment policies in place. These policies exist because it is well-understood that bullying not only contributes to a negative workplace culture (one that damages trust and leadership effectiveness as noted above), but also often leads to less productive, demoralized employees and, therefore, less successful companies and organizations.

What can project managers and organizations do about bullying?

There are a number of important steps project managers can take to confront project bullying and protect their team members. As a starting point and reminder, PMI members commit to act ethically and professionally when they become and renew their membership (PMI Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct, 2006). They must meet the mandatory elements within the Code to demonstrate responsibility, respect, fairness, and honesty, and are strongly encouraged to adhere to the aspirational sections of that document as well. PMI members also have a five-step Ethical Decision-Making Framework (EDMF) they can use to guide them when confronted with an ethical dilemma involving bullying (PMI Ethical Decision-Making Framework, 2012). The EDMF can help to frame bullying problems, clarify goals, examine assumptions and options, discern hidden values, evaluate evidence, and assess conclusions.

Business-savvy organizations and project managers are taking increasingly proactive steps to confront workplace bullying, reinforcing the value of ethical awareness and policies predicated on building trust, protecting employees and instilling confidence in those who work for the organization and those who do business with them.

Anti-bullying advocates and experts offer tips to companies and project managers. Some of the most practical, proactive tips are the following:

1. Create organizational anti-bullying policies, effective methods to report and investigate alleged bullying, and make training mandatory: All organizations should establish clear and effective bullying policies and procedures for addressing bullying allegations. Training, awareness, and education are critical to the success of such policies. Hire experts to provide initial policy advice and to conduct the mandatory training. It further helps if staff sees members of senior management in training, sending the message of seriousness throughout the organization. The teaching of anti-bullying coping skills to "would-be-targets" and to others has been found to be an effective long term means of reducing bullying incidence rates and a valuable skill-set for individuals. If your organization has no anti-bullying policy, project managers should lobby hard for change.

2. Consider long-term project and organization well-being when addressing bullying: While bullies create many negative, long term problems, they are often highly intelligent, manipulative and laser focused professionals that appear to get the job done where others have failed. Since workplace bullies often get short-term results, employers--particularly senior management level staff--too often tolerate them. Thus, in spite of their negative qualities, bullies often get away with abuse and even receive positive evaluations from their supervisors. Concern for long-term impact is often jettisoned for the current month's project progress or company sales report. Further, being savvy politicians, bullies often make it difficult for organizations to fire them, and may threaten litigation. For that reason, bullies may be ignored or shuffled to other departments. However, it is far better to proactively and directly address the bullying than to permit spreading poison throughout the organization.

3. Lead by example from the top: From the project manager/leader and organization's highest levels, it should be made clear that bullying isn't acceptable. Even the slightest hint that it might be tolerated is often enough for a bully to cause damage. So, from the CEO and project managers all the way down to lower-ranking staff, the message must be one of zero tolerance for bullying.

4. Respond to all types bullying behavior: Bullying often begins with small actions such as eye rolling, sneering, or demeaning a colleague, either in private or publicly. While such behavior may seem insignificant, it is unprofessional and project managers must address it immediately. The effects of bullying arise from these types of indignities and often lead to more serious problems if left unchecked.

5. Take bullying claims seriously but tread carefully: Assuming a bullying allegation is merely a conflict between two work mates who should sort it out between themselves represents a misunderstanding of bullying. It's much more one-way and requires authoritative intervention. Take bullying allegations seriously, but don't assume they're true – that is for the investigation process will determine. Ensure that you take the initiative to respond and

report and let the experts take over.

6. Bullying investigations must be impartial, fair and fulsome: In order for a project team or the organization as a whole to feel safe and have faith that it takes this issue seriously, it is essential that investigations are unbiased, free from political interference and result in appropriate responses if allegations are proven. An impartial investigator should be engaged to conduct this sensitive work and be permitted to speak to anyone who may have witnessed the activity. Fair treatment for all victims, bullies and witnesses is needed to engender trust in the process.

The Takeaway

The good news is that increased public awareness, recent research, and expanding illegalization of workplace bullying have paved the way for efforts to prevent it. Project managers and employers are becoming more acutely aware of the different types of negative impacts and costs associated with workplace bullying. If project managers and senior level executives take initiative in addressing bullying early on, much larger financial, ethical, legal, human resource and project problems will be avoided. Eventually, these initiatives will lead to wider support for zero tolerance for bullying in the workplace regardless of circumstance, societal norm, or jurisdiction.

“You have enemies? Good. That means you’ve stood up for something, sometime in your life.” - **Winston Churchill**

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