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Keywords

bullying, harassment, psychodynamics, libraries

Disciplines

Library and Information Science

Notes

This article discusses the behaviors that create an environment conducive to bullying. The structures and hierarchies of libraries are identified as being susceptible to bullying behaviors. Research about defining and identifying bullying is presented, as well as strategies to help eradicate bullying in libraries.

The Psychodynamics of Bullying in Libraries

Steven W. Staninger

Bullying in the workplace has been defined as:

The repeated actions and practices (of a perpetrator) that are directed to one or more workers, which are unwanted by the victim, which may be done deliberately, or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offense, distress, may interfere with job performance, and/or cause an unpleasant working environment.¹

The identification and evaluation of bullying in organizations has been researched extensively and for quite some time. This paper will focus on the psychodynamics - the relationship between conscious and unconscious behaviors that determine motivations - that create an environment conducive to bullying.² This paper will particularly focus on the psychodynamics of bullying as they are manifested in the common structures of library organization and administration.

Notable mentions of the bullying phenomenon have appeared in the library literature. Pantry wrote of the risks and costs of bullying and harassment in libraries in 2007, concluding that "all staff, whatever their level/grade, should be encouraged to report all incidents."³ This mode of action is ideal, but often difficult for a bullied person to do because of fear of retaliation and/or administrative indifference. Crumpton writes of the financial consequences of bullying in libraries, which are often overlooked as the focus tends to be on psychological and morale issues. He notes that "persistent bullying costs libraries indirectly due to decreased productivity of staff, increases in absenteeism, turnover and the associated costs of replacement, poor morale and poor service experiences with patrons"⁴ Direct financial costs as reported by Crumpton include "expenses related to health care, litigation, staff retraining, and lower productivity due to power conflicts."⁵

Libraries – and academia in general - have rather rigid hierarchical structures that are ripe for exploitation by bullies. In their essay on analyzing the nature of bullying in higher education, Keashly and Neuman write that "...the relevance of the actor-target relationship is strongly influenced by organizational structure."⁶ Libraries tend to have clearly defined organizational structures, which creates a situation ripe for top-down bullying relationships. In academic libraries, librarians have hierarchical ranks, and there is usually an adjacent group of library staff with their own ranking structure. This structure lends itself to bullying because it creates a superior-subordinate dynamic wherein everyone knows where they stand in the hierarchy. Superiors may then be encouraged to bully in the name of increasing productivity or and/or meeting goals, and subordinates grow to expect it.

Bullying most often occurs within an organization where negative aspects of that organizations' culture aggregate. In writing about the "ethical dimensions of bullying", Gallant reports that research has shown that "workplace bullying is systemic" and that "it is the system, or the environment, that allows bullying to exist because bullying is not a single negative act but persistent, repeated and continuous behavior."⁷ The challenge for the library administrator is to identify where these accumulations are, and take steps to re-create the culture of that area and change the systems that allow bullying to occur. This is an essential function of an effective administrator. In a library led by bullies, a sclerotic stasis evolves due to a lack of respected leadership and reluctance by subordinates to carry out the directions of the bully. In this way, bullied subordinates who have little to no power over the bully can at least exercise some power over their job.

It is important to remember that bullying is at its core unethical. Reed identifies three parameters that identify an unethical leader, "1. An apparent lack of concern for the well-being of subordinates. 2. A personality or interpersonal technique that negatively affects organizational climate. 3. A conviction by subordinates that the leader is motivated primarily by self interest."⁸ All three of these characteristics describe the nature of a bully. One must look to the motivations that cause them to engage in bullying behaviors in order to understand and address the issues.

There is extensive research on personality types common in bullies. Roberts notes that "In the world of the insecure bully, the best means to solve dilemmas is through aggression. Aggressive actions preserve the dignity and self-image of these bullies."⁹ Indeed, insecurity is at the core of bullying behaviors as the bullies attempt to suppress others to compensate for their insecurities. Pepler and Craig have reported that bullies thrive on secrecy.¹⁰ This makes it difficult for persons in positions of less power to complain without consequences. Without documentation, there is little that those higher in the institutional administration can realistically do. It is important to remember that bullies do not want to fight, that is, to have an open confrontation because that means that there is the possibility that they would lose. Secrecy helps strengthen the bully's position. The strategic advantage of secrecy in bullying behaviors must not be overlooked. A bully wants to intimidate and harass their victims into compliance, and a very effective way to accomplish this is to be certain that the victim or victims are confronted in person or in small groups where each member is a target of the bully. Calling individual or small group meetings with little or no notice and with no agenda distributed in advance creates ambush situations wherein the victims are unprepared and the bully has plausible deniability about what was discussed. In this scenario, it becomes rather easy for the bullying administrator to assign unrealistic workloads only to forget or deny them if challenged, By isolating the victims, the bully can ignore suggestions that don't come from "higher up", and engage in excessive monitoring that leaves employees excluded and isolated. White, commenting on the work of Einarsen¹¹ notes that common bullying behaviors include sudden changes to routines that are "unpredictable and appear illogical" and that "procedures may be adhered to with such vehemence that the rigidity belies basic common sense..."¹²

In her excellent volume on workplace bullying, White defines the psychodynamics of bullying. She notes that there is a complexity to bullying situations, noting that bullies often

show a lack of empathy. Bullies will almost always deny that what they are doing is bullying, particularly when the stated goal – or directive sent down from higher administrators – is to move the organization “forward.” Because of this dynamic of the organizational structure, the potential for bullying increases the higher up in the library hierarchy one goes. It is important that librarians remain conscious of just what bullying is. White describes specific types of bullying, writing that “overt behaviors include verbal abuse such as ridiculing and persistent criticism. Covert bullying behaviors include spreading malicious rumors and undermining performance at work by denying individuals information and materials necessary to work effectively.”¹³ White also observes that as a bullying culture in an organization is established, bullying escalates. She writes, “further bullying is an unsuccessful attempt to release the stuckness of a group, to create new meanings and to engage with reality.”¹⁴ To “unstick” the library from a culture of bullying, administrators must understand how bullies operate so they can deploy strategies to break the cycle.

In a library led by bullies, people are reluctant to act or take needed initiatives because they do not want to become the target of the bullies, either again or for the first time. Victims struggle to keep going and onlookers are distracted from their work. Most everyone has been in a situation such as this, and must seek strategies that work for their particular situation to break the cycle of bullying. It is important that librarians remain conscious of just what bullying is. Bullying includes but is not limited to unreasonable criticism of job performance, attempts to control workplace interactions between peers, and creating unwritten policies. Other bullying behaviors include assigning unrealistic workloads, ignoring and ridiculing suggestions about library operations, and excessive monitoring that leaves employees excluded and isolated, not to mention exhausted.

A first step in breaking the cycle of bullying is to be actively aware and conscious of the behavior. Librarians would do well to honestly reflect and determine if they are participating in bullying behaviors, and/or are watching it happen without attempting to take steps to call it out for what it is. Research has shown that a powerful response to bullies is to “stand up and not acquiesce to the bully’s power plays” and that “bullies feel more empowered when others show weakness.”¹⁵ Victims of bullies need to be encouraged to document and confront the bullying behaviors for both themselves and the good operation of the library. None of this is easy, but necessary to break the cycle of bullying. Institutional administrators may hear stories of bullying behaviors, but are reluctant or unable to respond without actionable documentation. That does not mean that there is nothing to be done to resolve the bullying situation. Research has shown that “prevention of bullying appears to be the most effective way to manage peer victimization in the workplace.”¹⁶ Library administrators should be vigilant about identifying bullying and addressing it before it becomes ingrained in the institutional culture.

Bullying in all of its manifestations effectively portrays targets as not worthy of their positions. Bullies often show lack of empathy as their goals are pursued, as the goals take priority over decorum, collegiality, and compassion. Bullying is frequently ongoing and escalating. Victims feel insulted, demeaned, patronized, humiliated, offended, and aggrieved. Recognizing bullying in yourself and others, and noting places in the library organizational structure where bullying occurs is the beginning of a process to break the toxic cycle of bullying.

As Reed notes, “Toxic leadership, like leadership in general, is more easily described than defined, but terms like self-aggrandizing, petty, abusive, indifferent to unit climate, and interpersonally malicious seem to capture the concept.”¹⁷ Distressingly, a library with a culture of bullying corrupts those who serve it, marginalizing those with initiative and new ideas and rewarding the sycophants. Ultimately, bullying creates a continuous fear of failure, so people work to avoid being bullied instead of attending to their assigned tasks. The result is an ineffective library that falls well short of its intended mission.

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Published: August 2016

¹ Stale Einarsen, “The Nature and Causes of Bullying at Work.” *International Journal of Manpower*, 20 (1999), 16.

² “Psychodynamics” APA Dictionary of Psychology (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2007): 750.

³ Sheila Pantry, “Bullying and Harassment in Libraries: Risks, Costs, and Solutions”, *Managing Information* 14, no. 1 (2007): 20.

⁴ A. Crumpton Michael, “The Costs of Having a Bully in the Library”, *The Bottom Line: Managing library finances*, 27, no. 1 (2014): 18.

⁵ *Ibid*: 19.

⁶ Loreleigh Keashly & Joel H. Neuman, “Bulling in Higher Education: What Current Research, Theorizing, and Practice Tell Us”, In *Workplace Bullying in Higher Education*, J. Lester, editor (New York: Routledge, 2013): 11.

⁷ Tricia Bertram Gallant, “The Ethical Dimensions of Bullying”, In *Workplace Bullying in Higher Education*, J Lester, editor (New York: Routledge): 108.

⁸ George E. Reed, “Toxic Leadership”, *Military Review*, 84, no. 4 (July-August 2004): 67.

⁹ Walter B. Roberts, Jr., *Bullying From Both Sides: Strategic Interventions for Working With Bullies & Victims* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2006): 49.

¹⁰ Debra J. Pepler & Wendy Craig, *Making a Difference in Bullying*, (York University: LaMarsh Centre for Research on Violence and Conflict Resolution, April 2000): 12.

¹¹ Stale Einarsen, "The Nature and Causes of Bullying at Work, *International Journal of Manpower*, 20 (1999): 16-27.

¹² Sheila White, *An Introduction to the Psychodynamics of Workplace Bullying* (London: Karnac Books Ltd., 2013): 4.

¹³ *ibid*: 3.

¹⁴ *ibid*: xiv.

¹⁵ Edward C. Tomlinson, Joyce Thompson Hearnese & William N. Bockanic, "Workplace Bullying: Remedies for Victims" IN *Bullying in the Workplace: Causes, Symptoms, and Remedies*, John Lipinski & Laura M. Crothers, editors (New York: Routledge, 2014): 296.

¹⁶ Daniel S. Wells, Laura M. Crothers, Jered B. Kolbert, Renee M. Tobin, & Ara J. Schmitt, "Strategies for Treating Bullies" IN *Bullying in the Workplace: Causes, Symptoms, and Remedies*, John Lipinski & Laura M. Crothers, editors (New York: Routledge, 2014): 313.

¹⁷ George E. Reed, "Toxic Leadership", *Military Review*, 84, no. 4 (July-August 2004): 71.