

Taming the Beast: How American Corporations Unwittingly Conspire to Make Bullying a Rational Choice

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Abstract

Although their approach is widely criticized, it is fair to say that bullies represent a functional part of many organizations. They come in all shapes and sizes, all ages and both genders. Bullying is targeted and abusive behavior. It is personally destructive and should have nothing to do with advancing legitimate organizational goals. Despite its negative connotations, though, anyone who works in an American corporation can easily see that arrogant and abusive leaders are frequently rewarded with promotions, increased pay and bonuses, as well as more power and influence. In a nutshell—bullying pays off. This paper will examine the ways American corporations unwittingly conspire to make workplace bullying a rational choice.

We will explore the dynamics of the problem from three perspectives: (1) *individual*—the unique characteristics of individual bullies, (2) *situational*—the influence of the corporate situational context, and (3) *systemic*—a view which poses larger questions about the nature of the social systems within which we work. Is there some aspect of the “DNA” of organizations—the guiding principles by which they exist—which tends to promote uncivil behavior?

The past has proven that an obsession with profits at any cost encourages leaders to “game the system” and behave badly. When civilized standards of common decency and respect are not required to be observed in our workplaces, leadership by fear and intimidation is validated as a legitimate leadership style. By turning a blind eye to the destruction created by arrogant and abusive leaders—and even rewarding and promoting them—corporations unwittingly enable (and perhaps even encourage) bullying and abuse at work.

Trying to civilize corporations, though, is much like trying to turn tigers into vegetarians. They will always be wild beasts by nature unless we “tame” them by imposing laws (as many other countries have done), or replace them with new forms entirely. Until then, the unfortunate reality is that bullying will continue to be rampant in American organizations. We can—and must—do better.

Introduction

Roughly 35% of the workforce in the United States—an estimated 53.5 million American workers—report having been bullied at work (WBI Workplace Bullying Survey, 2010). Although their abusive approach is widely criticized, it is fair to say that bullies represent a functional part of many corporate structures (Treadway et al., 2013). They come in all shapes and sizes, all ages and both genders. Bullying is targeted and abusive behavior. It is personally destructive and should have nothing to do with advancing legitimate organizational goals.

The prevalence of bullying behavior offers an interesting paradox. Despite its negative connotations, anyone who works in an American corporation can easily see that arrogant and abusive leaders are frequently rewarded with promotions, increased pay and bonuses, as well as more power and influence. Bullies often leverage the fear and intimidation associated with their negative workplace interactions to achieve their personal goals and improve their job performance (Treadway et al., 2013). In a nutshell—bullying pays off. This paper will examine the ways American corporations unwittingly conspire to make workplace bullying a rational choice.

If this is true, it is reasonable to then ask: must leaders employ tactics of abuse in order to be successful in American corporations? Steve Jobs, Michael Eisner, Donald Trump, Larry Ellison, and “Chainsaw Al” Dunlap are just a few of the most well-known individuals who have been publicly labeled as corporate bullies. Their stories suggest that there might be a connection between arrogance, tirades, and overall bad behavior and getting ahead in the corporate world (Peele, 2011).

Researchers have claimed that bullies may simply not understand how their behavior affects others or the extent of their destructive impact (Cranshaw, 2005, 2007; Levinson, 1978; Kaplan, 1991; Ludeman & Erlandson, 2006). This may well be true for some. Equally plausible, though, is that after assessing the risks and rewards, the bully may simply decide that the upside of using abuse as a workplace tactic is high and the possibility of negative consequences is low. The individual’s organizational role and the situation in which she or he works can also influence whether bullying will be viewed as a practical strategy for getting ahead.

While the actual motivations of the corporate bully are unknown and remain the “black hole” in the research on this phenomenon (Rayner & Cooper, 2003), this paper will examine the ways American corporations unwittingly conspire to make bullying a rational choice. We will explore the dynamics of the problem from three perspectives: (1) *individual*—the unique characteristics of individual bullies, (2) *situational*—the influence of the corporate situational context, and (3) *systemic*—a view which poses larger questions about the nature of the social systems within which we work. Is there some aspect of the “DNA” of organizations—the guiding principles by which they exist—which tends to promote uncivil behavior?

As a result of the excessive emphasis on efficiency and productivity, the natural tendency of for-profit corporations is to evolve toward sweatshops and monopolies. Assuming this is true, we believe that a credible argument can be made that trying to civilize corporations is much like trying to turn tigers into vegetarians. They will always be wild beasts by nature unless we “tame” them by imposing laws (as many other countries have done), or replace them with new forms entirely. We will examine some of the historical context for the problem next.

How We Got Here: Some Historical Background

A Relentless Focus on the Maximization of Profits

In a highly influential *New York Times* essay written by Milton Friedman (1970), he contended that “the (only) responsibility of business is to maximize profits”. With limited exceptions, there has been widespread acceptance of his view since that time. Corporations obviously need to achieve results and be profitable, but that is only a part of their responsibility. They also are responsible for maximizing all of their assets, including people. As noted by Kenneth Mason, quoted in Makower (2006):

The moral imperative all of us share in this world is that of getting the best return we can on whatever assets we are privileged to employ. What American business leaders too often forget is that this means all the assets employed—not just the financial assets but also the brains employed, the labor employed, the materials employed, and the land, air, and water employed (p. 31).

Fueled by activist shareholders, private-equity firms, and bonuses based on stock prices, it seems that corporate leaders instead are obsessed with maximizing quarterly profits—and they have been quite successful in doing so. The U.S. Department of Commerce recently reported that corporate profits hit a record high in the third quarter of 2012 (Bureau of Economic Analysis, 2013). The stock market has also hit all-time record highs in recent months (Rooney, 2013). Ironically, though, as profits continue to climb in 2013, wages for workers recently hit an all-time low (Blodget, 2013).

Institutional investors have had great influence on corporate decision-making in recent years. They believe that caring about anything but profits is inappropriate, and even possibly a violation of management’s fiduciary responsibility (Greider, 2003). As a result of this short-term focus, many companies fail to adequately consider the interests of their other key stakeholders: customers, employees, and society. The result is a de-humanizing of the American workplace. It has become a place where people are often treated badly and managers are rewarded for those very behaviors. As noted by Edwards (1996):

The forbidden truth is that we are living by a set of lies which are necessary for short-term profit, at the expense of human physical and psychological life and global environmental integrity. We are living in a system where power ensures that the requirements of profit take priority over the requirements of living things [. . .]. Consequently our freedom extends as far as, and no further than, the satisfaction of these requirements, with all else being declared neurosis, paranoia, communism, extremism, the work of the devil, or Neptunian nonsense (p. 163).

This profit obsession has created significant changes for employees working in American corporations over the last thirty years. It is these changes that will be examined next.

Changes in the American Workplace

In the past, working for a corporation was significantly defined by promises. Corporations committed to provide employees with lifetime job security, fair compensation, health care, and a secure retirement plan; in exchange, employees promised to show up every day and perform

their work, and be loyal to the organization. Together, this unspoken understanding between employers and employees formed the implicit “social contract” of the work relationship (Kochan & Shulman, 2007).

This relationship often caused employees to feel like children—the company was the “parent” (e.g. giving direction as well as an allowance, while also providing security) and the employee was the “dutiful child” (e.g. following orders and not questioning authority in exchange for the protections and benefits offered by the organization). Though employees were often frustrated with the repetition of their jobs and the autocratic nature of their supervisors, these corporate promises were generally enough to justify the trade-offs.

The essential nature of this parent-child relationship remains in place at most organizations even today. While some companies have worked hard to develop cultures where employees are treated very well, others follow a more ruthless and domineering approach. Just like the actual parent-child relationship which exists at home, unless laws are directly and egregiously broken, there are no binding rules of behavior which require leaders to be kind to employees, or even civil.

This relationship developed as a result of the focus by organizations on efficiency. In large-scale operations, it was generally less expensive to purchase labor in bulk than to hire craftsmen by the hour to perform each task. For workers, this meant selling control over their time, energy, and talents to someone else. For corporations, the problem was utilization. Paying for 40 hours of labor if only 30 were needed was wasteful. The common understanding was (and still is) that all *means of production*—both human and technical—should be utilized to their fullest extent. The machines were less complex; they only had to be fueled and maintained. The humans, however, had to be *managed*; someone had to divide and coordinate the work, and to watch over the employees in order to make sure that they were productive and efficient.

Labor unions were created to protect the rights of workers. As jobs were progressively automated, more educated workers were needed to meet the requirements of higher-skilled roles. Largely due to legislation, working conditions improved in terms of safety and health. While the legal definitions and fundamental nature of corporations remained intact and unchanged, the nature of the employment relationship did not (Greider, 2003). The “social contract” and the trust it engendered between employees and their organizations has been irretrievably broken (Time, 2008; Kochan & Shulman, 2007; Greider, 2003).

While the “parent-child” analogy remains true, the current employment relationship can also be described as that of “master-servant” given the imbalance of power and distinct hierarchies that exist in most organizations (Greider, 2003). Employees working for an organization are governed by different rights, privileges and legal protections than the general public. In essence, employees lose their “personhood” when they go to work. As Levering (1988) observed:

We generally accept as a given the contrast between our time at work and the rest of our lives. Once you enter the office or factory, you lose many of the rights you enjoy as a citizen. There’s no process for challenging—or changing—bad decisions made by the authorities. There’s no mechanism to vote for people to represent you in decision-making bodies . . . We take for granted that such rights and protections don’t apply to the workplace, partly because most of us have never seen examples to the contrary (p. 62).

Greider (2003) further confirmed this societal disconnect when he described the reality of work in modern America:

In pursuit of “earning a living” most Americans go to work for someone else and thereby accept the employer’s right to command their behavior in intimate detail. At the factory gate or the front office, people implicitly forfeit claims to self-direction and are typically barred from participating in the important decisions that govern their daily efforts. Most employees lose any voice in how the rewards of the enterprise are distributed, the surplus wealth their own work helped to create. Basic rights the founders said were inalienable—free speech and freedom of assembly, among others—are effectively suspended, consigned to the control of others. In some ways, the employee also surrenders essential elements of self (p. 49).

The general legal status of employees in the United States reinforces the model of unilateral management control. The predominant rule of “at will” employment—the right of an employer to terminate an employee for any reason or for no reason at all—contributes significantly to this uneven power dynamic (Greider, 2003; Summers, 2000). Perversely, a boss who screams at a subordinate is deemed to be exercising “management prerogative”, while the subordinate who responds by yelling back or even asking for an apology can be fired on the spot (Yamada, 2013b). In addition, employees “can be fired for doing what’s right—making a moral choice—and they frequently are” (Greider, 2003, p. 78).

A growing body of researchers strenuously argue that when individuals enter the workplace, they do not (and should not) abdicate their right to be treated fairly and humanely. At a bare minimum, most would agree that employers should be required to observe workplace norms for mutual respect. As Hornstein (1996) noted:

No matter what the circumstances, bosses may not abuse others. They may not lie, restrict, or dictate employees’ behavior outside the workplace, threaten harm, or protect themselves at the expense of those more vulnerable. Positions of greater power in organizations’ hierarchy do not grant license to show favoritism, humiliate or behave as masters or gods (p. 143).

For nearly two decades now, management experts, scholars, practitioners, and authors of popular business books have urged American employers to treat their employees with respect and dignity. Recommendations to-date have placed a heavy emphasis on the need for strong leadership, fair employment policies, comprehensive benefit programs, grievance processes, and frequent communication. In addition, organizations have been urged to emphasize ethics, integrity, and fair dealing in the conduct of their business. *See*, Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Daniel & Metcalf, 2001; Daniel, 2003a, 2003b, 2006, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Deming, 1982, 2000; Drucker, 1992; Goldsmith et al., 2003; Hartling & Sparks, 2002; Hornstein, 1996, 2003; Levering, 1988; Namie & Namie, 2000, 2003, 2009, 2011; Miller, 1986; Peters & Waterman, 1982; Sutton, 2007; and Yamada, 2008, 2013a, 2013b, to name but a few.

Despite these vigorous efforts, progress has been slow. Recent history confirms that workers’ rights have only increased, for the most part, when laws and regulations have been imposed on corporations (Greider, 2003; Yamada, 2008). *See*, Yamada (2008) for a comprehensive discussion about the evolution of American employment law. The rights of workers to bargain

through unions, equal employment laws (including anti-discrimination measures), and laws protecting employees against sexual harassment are recent social attempts to civilize the corporate workplace. Workplace bullying is just the latest example of another form of uncivil behavior occurring at work; however, despite the safeguards that have been put into place by many other countries, there are still no legal protections for employees in the United States (Yamada, 2013a).

Bullying is a Rational Choice

Although some will undoubtedly disagree, it is our contention that American corporations unwittingly create environments where bullying is a rational choice. In most corporate settings, there is a relentless pressure to achieve financial results; however, there are typically no rewards or recognition for being a “nice guy” who treats employees with kindness, compassion, or empathy. The idea that “what gets measured gets done” tends to pervade organizational life—and what gets measured are goals related to efficiency, productivity, and profitability.

Our assertion is *not* that private workplace settings conspire to turn good people into monsters. Many people around the world have long-term friendships which began in the workplace, while others find great personal satisfaction as a result of their work. Still others feel both deeply valued and respected by their colleagues, giving them a sense of validation and purpose. The point is that these are not *necessary conditions* of the workplace.

In this paper, we will explore the dynamics of the problem of workplace bullying from three perspectives: (1) *individual*—the unique characteristics of individual bullies, (2) *situational*—the influence of the corporate situational context, and (3) *systemic*—a view which poses larger questions about the nature of the social systems within which we work. We will first examine the individual characteristics of bullies in an effort to explain why some individuals use abusive tactics at work.

The Individual Perspective

A Focus on Results—Not How They Are Obtained

Bullies are typically intense and highly-driven individuals. Though they are often very effective, they generally cause great distress to employees. Interestingly, they frequently have an “executive sponsor”—a more senior individual who is likely to protect them from being disciplined even if the abusive behaviors are publicly exposed (WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey, 2007).

Organizations with a culture focused on results at any cost create a situation where individuals with certain personalities seem to thrive. Due to their social competence and political skills, bullies are often able to strategically abuse co-workers and yet be evaluated positively by their supervisor (Treadway et al., 2013).

Levinson (1978) uses the term “*abrasive personality*” to describe executives who exhibit competitive, dominating, and controlling tendencies that create friction in interpersonal relationships (p. 86). In his view, such individuals seem to operate as though they were somehow privileged and “. . . as if [they] had the right to be different or even inconsiderate” (p. 88).

Levinson suggests that leaders with abrasive personalities are often unaware of their impact on others, and attributes their irritating and alienating behavior to a need for perfection.

Kaplan (1991) uses the term “*expansive executive*” to describe a similar kind of leader who over-relies on accomplishment (p. 5). Like the manager with an abrasive personality, expansive executives are intense, driven, and unaware of their impact on others. Many are valued contributors who consistently produce outstanding results, but harm the organization in the process. As he notes: “These executives reduce the organization’s talent pool by driving people away and demoralizing those who remain” (p. 111).

Kramer (2006) refers to leaders who rule through intimidation and fear at work as “*great intimidators*”. In his view, these are individuals who “seem to relish the chaos they create because, in their minds, it’s constructive. Time is short, the stakes are high, and the measures required are draconian”. Unlike typical bullies whose primary goal is the humiliation of others, great intimidators are “rough, loud, and in your face”, they have the political intelligence necessary to get the job done, and they are willing to strategically utilize fear and anxiety to do so.

Ludeman and Erlandson (2006) describe leaders who have a propensity for what they refer to as “*alpha risks*”. Included in this category are characteristics of hard-driving competitiveness, interpersonal impatience, and a difficulty controlling anger (p. 17). Although not all alpha managers are male, many are, which is not surprising given that the majority of bullies are also male (WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey, 2010). Like the abrasive personality and the expansive executive, the alpha male suffers from a lack of awareness about his impact on others, but clearly causes them distress. In the foreword of Ludeman and Erlandson’s (2006) book, Marshall Goldsmith wrote:

Many alpha males are designated at a very young age as high-potential leaders. This anointment can quickly degenerate into the “golden boy” syndrome, in which they believe that they are endowed with godlike qualities and have no need to ever change. As they advance through their careers, puffed up by their achievements, they often fail to see the interpersonal de-railers that are obvious to the rest of the world – and that will ultimately lead to their downfall. (p. ix)

Daniel (2009a) found a clear distinction between “tough bosses” and workplace bullies. One of the primary differences was the presence of *malice* in the actions of bullies, defined as “the desire to cause pain, injury, or distress to another” (p. 156). While tough bosses are intensely results-oriented and not necessarily easy to work for, they are perceived by their employees to be fair-minded and professional—their focus is on achieving results for the organization. On the other hand, workplace bullies are more concerned with advancing their own personal agenda, and are perceived as unfair and often out of control.

Why They Do It

This research begs further questions about the individual characteristics of workplace bullies. If their actions go beyond what is actually functional for the organization and there are signs of pain, injury, or distress to another person, why would the bully continue to engage in such negative behavior?

One hypothesis suggests that bullies are narcissistic (self-obsessed), sociopathic (lacking social conscience), or even psychopathic (lacking basic empathy) (Schouten & Silver, 2012; Boddy, 2011; Babiak & Hare, 2006; Hare, 1993). Peck (1998) uses the term “evil personality” to explain why some individuals use their power “to destroy the spiritual growth of others for the purpose of defending and preserving the integrity of their own sick selves” (p. 119).

Similarly, Lubit (2004) point to the personal deficiency of the bully and argue that bullies are, in fact, disturbed individuals who are power-hungry, enjoy hurting innocent people and lack normal inhibitions and empathy. He suggests that their central aim is simply to intimidate and hurt others (p. 117). Hornstein (1996, p. 50) and Horn (2002) both posit that the essential cause of bullying has little to do with general work-related stress, but is a result of bullies abusing their power “knowingly and deliberately.”

Others focus less on individual deficiencies and explain that the behavior is due mostly to lack of awareness. These researchers argue that many people labeled as bullies simply do not see the distress they are causing, and are generally receptive to a different way of managing after they undergo coaching or counseling (Cranshaw, 2005, 2007; Levinson, 1978; Livingston, 2001; Kaplan, 1991; Ludeman & Erlandson, 2006)). Ultimately, though, it is undisputed that something drives aggression in these individuals beyond the point of generally acceptable social norms.

The success of the “results at all costs” strategy was recently confirmed by a study in which researchers determined that aggressive leaders who bully others are more likely to enjoy professional success than even their more competent rivals (Cheng, et al., 2013). Why? Because people are impressed by their dominance. While not universally liked, the most dominant individuals were *feared* which led to an increase in their social standing and resulting organizational success.

This two-part study looked at how “dominance” (defined as the use of force and intimidation to induce fear) and “prestige” (defined in the study as the appearance of skill and competency) can be used to achieve social rank and influence. The researchers found that those rated as more dominant and prestigious were also rated as more influential. While participants preferred leaders with prestige, they were more likely to choose dominant leaders. Interestingly, they also tended to be more forgiving of their bad behavior. These results might help to explain the prevalence and high rate of success among aggressive leaders in business. As noted by Furnham (2009):

The business world often calls for (and rewards) arrogant, self-confident and self-important people.. But, as anyone who works with and for them knows, they can destabilize and destroy working groups by their deeply inconsiderate behavior (p. 212).

Through a relentless focus on results at any cost and no consequences for the use of aggressive and abusive tactics to achieve them, our corporations inadvertently encourage bullying. As Ford (2005) noted:

In the real world, bullies are often the winners. They are the so-called tough bosses who have pushed their way to the top over the heads of their weaker and less aggressive colleagues. They are an archetype. They are the bulldogs, the pit bulls, the take-charge guys. They are the Donald Trump's of our lives.

In the business world, bullies are rewarded. They are lionized. They are imitated and toadied to. Too often, the men and women who report to them adopt the same attitude toward the people they supervise, and so it goes down the line until you have a toxic work environment. Little wonder schools are incapable of routing bullies; the world around them can't and won't (p. 138).

There seems to be a disconnect about what companies claim to want from leaders and the types of behavior they actually reward. What tends to be perceived as simply “strong management” in the office would normally be seen as confrontational and out-of-line outside of the workplace. This type of behavior is rewarded because management turns a blind eye to the process—the *way*—by which the results are actually obtained.

All too often, individuals are rewarded solely for achieving their goals, despite the destruction and demoralization of people along the way. Bullies often successfully navigate the social and political organizational environment and achieve high ratings of performance, suggesting that there is a functional perspective associated with bullying (Treadway et al., 2013).

We Idolize Arrogance and Outliers

While there is general consensus that the behavior of workplace bullies is unacceptable, for some reason they continue to command our interest and attention. There is something about the phenomenon that is either so provocative or so repulsive (or maybe both), that we sometimes inadvertently seem to support it by our failure to intervene (Nunberg, 2012a, 2012b). Some have referred to this fascination with those who operate outside the rules as the “charisma of villainy” (DiSalvo, 2012).

Regardless of the reasons, though, people who work outside of the accepted norms attract and hold our interest—at either extreme. One can be both a genius and a bully (e.g. Steve Jobs) or just a bully. These outliers do not follow the accepted corporate rules and accepted norms; instead, they strategically use them to suit their own personal purposes and usually for their own personal gain (Rogers, 2011).

Psychological research over the past few years is beginning to reveal why this is so. A recent study (Anderson et al., 2012) examined whether there is any adaptive advantage created by overconfidence at work, especially given that the trait so often leads to errors. The short answer is that even if overconfidence produces sub-par results, others still perceive it positively. In other words, overconfident people are perceived as having more social status, and social status in the corporate world is golden.

Another recent study highlights a similar result, but this time with respect to rudeness. Being rude is a categorically negative behavior by most standards; however, research suggests that we also see it as a sign of power. A recent study by Van Kleef, et al. (2011) found that the ruder someone acts, the more convinced observers become that he or she is powerful, and therefore

does not have to respect normal rules. Powerful people smile less, interrupt others, and speak in a louder voice. When people do not respect the basic rules of social behavior, they lead others to believe that they have power, even if the observers would otherwise judge those violations as rude or flatly wrong.

Considering many of the arrogant bullies our society seems to venerate, these findings make a lot of sense. Perhaps it is not the rudeness and corruption we admire, but more that the organization allows them to get away with it that intrigues us. It is this situational perspective—the organizational structure and context that appear to encourage (or at least support) bullying—that will be examined next.

The Situational Perspective

Low Perceived Risk and No Consequences

Bullying often occurs when the perpetrator assesses the costs of engaging in those behaviors as being relatively small. The costs involve the risk of getting a reprimand or being fired, while the benefits can be higher pay, bonuses, promotions, and increasing levels of power and influence. The importance of perceived low costs and low risks can be illustrated by the fact that bullying is more frequent in large (Einarsen et al., 1994; Leymann, 1990) and bureaucratic organizations (Thylefors, 1987). Einarsen and Skogstad (2007) have pointed out that the length and formality of an organization's decision-making processes make the individual less visible, thus reducing the risks for the perpetrator of being reprimanded.

In addition, there seems to be an association between bullying and leadership style. A laissez faire style of leadership or “weak” or “inadequate” leadership at higher organizational levels seems to be conducive to bullying (Einarsen et al., 1994; Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Leymann, 1996). The failings of this type of leadership style have been understood since the social climate studies of Lewin, Lippitt and White (1939); however, those early lessons seem to have been forgotten. It is reasonable to assume that weak leaders will seldom intervene or respond to reports of bullying; similarly, it is reasonable to assume that the risk of discipline or other consequences is also low. As a result, bullying becomes a useful strategy when it can be reasonably expected that leaders will not intervene.

Organizational culture also has an impact on the prevalence of bullying. Brodsky (1976, p. 83) stated that “for harassment to occur, harassment elements must exist within a culture that permits and rewards harassment”. If there is no policy against bullying, no monitoring, and no punishment, a reasonable interpretation is that the organization simply accepts it as a legitimate leadership style. When this is the case, a possible perpetrator will then perceive the costs and dangers of bullying as very low.

A focus on excellence may also contribute to an acceptance of bullying. For example, the abusive behavior of some top chefs can partly be attributed to their relentless pursuit of perfection (Johns & Menzel, 1999). Similarly, some companies and organizational cultures may even celebrate leaders who appear to be “hard-charging, tough guys” (Neuman & Baron, 2011).

Modeling and imitation may also influence the prevalence of bullying (O’Leary-Kelly et al., 1996). When new managers are socialized into a culture that treats bullying as a “normal and

acceptable way of getting things done”, bullying increases (Hearn & Parkin, 2001). Social learning theory suggests that individuals who operate in a work environment where others are rewarded for aggressive behavior are more likely to engage in similar acts themselves (Bandura, 1973).

Bullying can also be an initiation ritual, much like fraternity or sorority hazing. The fact that many victims consider complaining about bullying to be an act of organizational disloyalty further emphasizes the potential strength and impact of the socialization process (Hoel & Salin, 2003). Further, Pearson et al. (2009) argue that with increasing informality and casual behavior in organizations, it may be more difficult for some employees to distinguish what constitutes “proper” and “professional” interpersonal behavior. Perceived hostility and injustice can also start escalating processes and a desire to reciprocate, thereby resulting in spirals of incivility or aggression (Andersson & Pearson, 1999).

Some organizational cultures are characterized by a heavy reliance on jokes and banter. For example, in typically male-dominated manufacturing environments, humiliating jokes and “funny surprises” can be an accepted part of the culture (Collinson, 1988; Einarsen & Raknes, 1997); however, this kind of humor can easily deviate and turn into bullying.

The bottom line of all of these studies: bullies see no reason *not* to use aggressive and abusive tactics because there are generally no consequences for doing so; at the same time, the potential rewards can be quite significant. It is the potential payoffs of bullying as a strategy that will be discussed next.

Competition for Promotions, Influence and Rewards Encourages Bullying

Though perhaps unintended, there are actually a lot of good reasons that a person use bullying as a tactic at work. Zapf and Einarsen (2011) point out that as individuals strive to be promoted, have influence, and acquire resources (p. 185)—what they refer to as *micro-political behavior*—it is not surprising that they would use competitive behaviors to get ahead. In fact, these behaviors might be the most “rational” of all forms of workplace aggression given that seeking to be successful through the achievement of promotions, rewards, and/or influence are generally accepted as “reasonable” workplace motives (Treadway et al., 2013; Salin, 2000).

Similarly, other researchers have also argued that bullying is not an irrational behavior. Kräkel (1997) has suggested that it can sometimes be explained as “rent-seeking behavior”—that is, behavior that is intended to increase an individual’s pay or bonuses. A recent study conducted by Cornell University’s Center for Advanced Human Resource Studies (2012) confirmed this point of view. They found that disagreeable men earn an average of 18% more than their more agreeable colleagues. Interestingly, women did not receive the same pay bump for being less agreeable. Thus, if there is low perceived cost, and the perpetrator feels that he may actually benefit from bullying (e.g. higher pay or bonuses), bullying becomes a rational alternative.

There are several other instances where it might be individually rational or rewarding to bully a colleague or a subordinate. High internal competition and a politicized climate seem to make an organization particularly prone to bullying (Sperry, 2009; O'Moore, 2000; Salin, 2003; Vartia, 1996). In addition, the reward system may contribute to bullying. If an organization promotes an

employee who has succeeded by manipulating or harming a colleague, it is inadvertently providing an incentive for others to do the same (O'Leary-Kelly et al., 1996).

Moreover, when pay or bonuses are based on a relative ranking of employees (Kräkel, 1997), an individual may be more motivated to bully others. By sabotaging the work of a colleague, the perpetrator may improve his or her own standing (Treadway, et al., 2013). In addition, if an employee is evaluated based on the performance of the team to which he belongs, he may want to bully and expel very low performing team members who could negatively impact his pay or bonus. In this respect, teamwork can sometimes lead to oppressive control from peers (Sewell & Wilkinson, 1992).

Similarly, insults (which often play on hidden desires or vulnerabilities) can be used to establish a pecking order and to promote mobility within the organizational social order (Gabriel, 1998). Bullying has also been reported among prison inmates as a means of achieving status (Ireland, 2000).

The reward system may contribute to bullying by encouraging supervisors to try to get rid of very high or low performing subordinates (Kräkel, 1997). This might occur if a supervisor perceives a very talented subordinate as a rival and a threat to his own career. In this situation, he might attempt to expel or sabotage the subordinate's work. Supervisor-subordinate bullying may also occur in the opposite case (Kräkel, 1997). When a superior knows that his own rating is based on the performance of his subordinates, a low performing subordinate might be perceived as a liability for the department. The superior may then hope that bullying or constant harassment will lead the subordinate to either request a transfer or leave the organization. As a result, a reasonable argument can be made that some performance-related pay systems can virtually institutionalize the practice of workplace bullying.

It is also possible to see how bullying may simply be an efficient way to get things done—a productive part of organizational life that helps to progress the strategic mission (Treadway, et al., 2013). Zapf and Warth (1997) have referred to bullying as “personnel work by other means”. What they mean by this is that bullying is sometimes used to drive unwanted employees out of the corporation who might otherwise be difficult to terminate. Similarly, Lee (2000) also noted that bullying can be used strategically as a way to terminate employees and avoid making severance payments.

The Organizational Systems Perspective

The examination of bullying thus far has been at the individual or situational level. A third way to consider bullying is to think about the ways in which it might be completely functional at the organizational level. If it is, it raises these questions: Could bullying result from ordinary people operating in organizational circumstances that selectively elicit bad behavior from their natures? What role does the organizational system play in creating conditions that help to create the conditions ripe for bullying? As a framework, we will rely on the three general concepts of organizations outlined by Scott and Davis (2007): *rational* systems, *natural* systems, and *open* systems.

Rational Systems

Organizations as rational systems are fundamentally mechanistic and do not seem to know or care about the human consequences of their actions. Highly functional organizations work like well-oiled machines. They are built around roles which can be filled by any properly trained individual. Maximum efficiency leads to maximum productivity, aimed at the goal of maximum profitability. Labor is part of the cost of production, and therefore a factor to be minimized. Human issues not directly related to productivity (e.g. sickness, fatigue, personal concerns, family issues, etc.) are additional costs which drain resources. Individuals who cannot fill their roles most efficiently are replaced, just like worn parts.

In the corporate realm, efficiency trumps humanity, and maximizing returns comes before family or personal loyalty. Greider (2003, p. 238) suggested that employees are just severable commodities—just another “market input—while the “efficient” corporation keeps its distance from long-term commitments or two-way relationships. He further noted:

What seems priceless in one realm may be wasted freely or even destroyed by the other. Human experience is sacred to society, a marketable commodity in capitalism . . . A conscientious manager shrugs and does his job, carries out the decision, and finds rationales so he can live with himself. If the company doesn't do well, then everybody loses (p. 35).

Bullying in a rational system is not a *necessary* behavior, but it is entirely *rational*. It would be one of many possible ways of “fixing a part” deemed not to be working as desired. A concern about “hurting someone’s feelings” is extraneous, at best, in relation to getting assigned work accomplished. While the same results could be achieved in caring and sensitive ways, the point is that purely rational organizations would not focus on the process, but only on the results. As stated by Zimbardo (2008):

Both public and private organizations, because they operate within a legal framework, not an ethical framework, can inflict suffering, even death, on people by following the cold rationality for achieving the goals of their ideology, a master plan, a cost-benefit equation, or the bottom line of profit. Under those circumstances, their ends always justify efficient means (p. 381-382).

Only when constrained by laws or regulations, or other external factors which might affect productivity or profitability, would such “soft” factors matter. While the world of business leadership may be populated by decent people, the system currently in place seems to force them to make indecent decisions (Balfour & Fuller, 2010).

Natural Systems

Organizations as natural systems are made up of humans. These humans fill roles, but the roles do not entirely define them. Most importantly, these humans have desires and goals of their own that transcend those of the organization. Humans have needs (e.g. Maslow, 1943), they are motivated by different rewards and punishments, they learn and adapt so that their responses to events change, and they develop over time so that their needs, motivations, and learning continue to evolve.

All of these issues are obvious to most managers in organizations. The difficulty with this framework, though, is that it developed primarily in response to rational systems rather than as the way of understanding organizations and our human relationships to them. It became an overlay of all of those messy, human issues with which organizations have to deal in order to achieve the productivity for which they were designed, but it did not change the fundamental purpose of organizations, or the ways in which they are evaluated. As such, Scott and Davis (2007) suggest the following kinds of criticisms:

Several decades of research have demonstrated no clear relation between worker satisfaction and productivity...no clear relation between supervisory behavior or leadership style and worker productivity...no clear relation between job enlargement and worker satisfaction or productivity...and no clear relation between participation in decision making and satisfaction or productivity (p. 69).

An environment focused on human characteristics might seem to be one of the least likely to encourage bullying. That may differ greatly, though, depending on assumptions about human nature and what is “natural.” Hierarchies and “pecking orders” appear to be prevalent in most animal groupings, from birds to primates. As noted earlier in this paper, the concept of the alpha male and competition for positions of dominance are considered normal and necessary to establish order. Those kinds of behaviors in children and adolescents are often considered to be parts of natural development, extending into sports and later into the workplace.

Francis DeWaal (2009), a primatologist, strongly challenges the well-established notion of the “law of the jungle.” He argues that cooperation is much more prevalent and important in nature—that it accounts much more for survival, in a larger sense, than does competition. As applied to humans and economics, he further explains that the phrase, “survival of the fittest,” was actually coined by the British philosopher Herbert Spencer. In fact:

He said of the poor that “the whole effort of nature is to get rid of such, to clear the world of them, and make room for better”... The United States listened attentively... John D. Rockefeller even married it with religion, concluding that the growth of a large business “is merely the working out of a law of nature and a law of God” (p. 28).

Effectively, then, many such concepts often associated with *natural order* were in fact creations of thinkers focused on humans and organizations, but attributed in reverse. Bullying might well be considered a natural part of natural systems, but only by using ideas which had been misapplied long ago. And critically, the criteria by which human-focused organizational structures are evaluated are no different than they are for rational systems—simple efficiency and productivity.

Open Systems

Foundational theories for open systems can be found primarily in the work of Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) and Andras Angyal (1941). In their simplest form, systems are always and inherently parts of their environments. Systems and their environments co-exist and co-evolve. Humans have long survived as parts of nature. People organized themselves into companies and corporations for many of the same reasons that early humans organized themselves into hunting

parties—it is easier to accomplish more when working together. Cooperation can be useful. Humans learned to harness animals and created tools to do what they could not do with their own hands and backs. There must have been a mental shift, though, when humans began to use other humans as a means of labor like they did animals—that is, as slaves or employees for hire. Rather than cooperating and sharing, people were led and directed.

Having a division of labor, like other forms of cooperation, can be highly functional; however, it requires direction and coordination so that all of these different efforts work together toward a common end. To do this does not necessarily require the bureaucracies and hierarchies which developed (and which still exist). It also does not require oppression or mistreatment of workers in any form.

Farmers coming together for a barn-raising are not inherently less productive than workers in a sweatshop. The Internet, on which much of the world now relies in different ways, still operates through the cooperation of volunteers working for the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF, Online). This is not to argue for disbanding all current forms of work organizations. It is to say that there is no reason that they have to function exactly as they do, in their current forms, in order to achieve the needed outcomes of cooperative human activity.

The Combined Individual, Situational and Organizational Systems Perspective

Putting all of this together, it is easy to see how organizations functioning as purely rational systems might contribute to behaviors such as bullying, even if simply through ignorance or neglect. Focusing strictly on efficiency, productivity, and profitability does not require civility, empathy, or kindness.

An example might be useful. If a young employee is promoted into a supervisory position, she may (or may not) get the training and mentoring that she needs in order to handle her increased authority. If she becomes aggressive or abusive but is still successful in meeting her goals, her subordinates are likely to suffer. Sadly, though, the situation will probably not be addressed unless management also pays attention to *the way* in which her results were obtained.

Similarly, if a good manager finds himself under pressure and begins treating employees badly, it is purely up to the organization to intervene (or not) given that there are no laws requiring that employees be treated with civility in a private workplace. If we were to require nothing more than this of our workplaces, though, it would be like turning parts of our societies over to functional socio-paths— individuals who simply lack the capacity for empathy with other humans. In some ways, we have arrived very close to this dilemma. The functional requirements for our workplaces demand no necessary empathy or civility—only productivity. Historically, we have counted on good people of moral character to run our organizations as parts of the larger, civil society in which we live and work. When that did not happen, we began “taming” them through laws and regulations. In particular, a large body of statutory, administrative, and common law protections granting various employment rights to individuals emerged during the 1960’s and 1970’s (Yamada, 2008).

Bright and ambitious people, though, always find ways around regulations (e.g. Weaver & Mathews, 2013). Some learn early that it is much easier to *play the rules* than to *play by the*

rules. That is not to say that every employee or manager accused of bullying is pathological. Given the work environments which we have fostered, there may simply be a combination of too much pressure and too little guidance or boundaries, creating unintended consequences. Human behavior is always subject to situational forces (Zimbardo, 2008; Lewin, Lippitt & White, 1939).

A familiar example of the impact of situational influence is the Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE). In 1971, Philip Zimbardo, a professor at Stanford at the time, had college students act out the roles of prisoners and guards for a social psychology experiment. The planned two-week study had to be stopped after just six days. The students acting as guards had become sadistic, and student prisoners had become extremely stressed and even depressed.

The SPE results were subsequently replicated—unintentionally—through the behavior of guards and prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (Hersh, 2004). Zimbardo (2008) was called in as a consultant to help explain what had happened. As he describes what he learned:

The primary simple lesson that the Stanford Prison Experiment teaches is that *situations matter* [emphasis added]. Social situations can have more profound effects on the behavior and mental functioning of individuals, groups, and national leaders than we might believe possible. Some situations can exert such powerful influence over us that we can be led to behave in ways we would not, could not, predict was possible in advance (pp. 211-212).

Zimbardo further explains the power of roles which can often be set aside as individuals move between settings. If the roles are strongly internalized, though, they can change the nature of a person's identity. In so doing, they can shape new behavior, including the violation of previously held morals and values. The more strongly the new behaviors are rewarded, the more likely they are to continue. As Zimbardo (2008) summarizes his findings:

The most important lesson to be derived from the SPE is that Situations are created by Systems. Systems provide the institutional support, authority, and resources that allow Situations to operate as they do...System Power involves authoritarian or institutionalized permission to behave in prescribed ways or to forbid or punish actions that are contrary to them. It provides the "higher authority" that gives validation to playing new roles, following new rules, and taking "actions that would ordinarily be constrained by pre-existing laws, norms, morals, and ethics." Such validation usually comes cloaked in the mantle of ideology (p. 226).

It is true that organizational systems have enormous power to resist change. That said, we believe that it is equally true that through awareness, guidance, and new laws, it is possible for at least some people to learn new approaches. Regardless of the reasons for abusive interactions at work, in the end, bullying is simply not acceptable in a civil society.

The Way Forward: A Modest Proposal

Changes to the Legal System

If we are to make any headway in combating the problem of bullying in American corporations, we must take steps to ensure that the risk of punishment for bullying outweighs its potential

rewards (Ford, 2011). Although there are many ways to understand this problem, our position is that it is reasonable to assume that bullies are rational human beings who understand the consequences of their actions—and who will not engage in this type of behavior if the perceived risk of doing so is personally too great.

The law cannot require corporations to care about the health and well-being of their employees or simply order everyone to be “nice” to one another (Yamada, 2008, p. 554). However, the law *can* implement legal incentives for employers to act preventively in terms of the mistreatment of employees by mandating training for employees and managers. Through the mandate of sexual harassment protections, it has been clearly demonstrated that the implementation of legal measures can—and do—positively impact the workplace.

Workplace bullying is widespread, damaging to its targets, and costly to organizations; however, it generally falls through the cracks of existing American employment law (Yamada, 2008). So far, our collective efforts to urge corporations to voluntarily adopt anti-bullying policies and conduct training have been unsuccessful, and there is no reason to believe that any significant improvement is on the horizon. As noted by Greider (2003):

Gentle persuasion is always the preferred approach, but hard-nosed applications of power are necessarily the more reliable agents of change (p. 322).

We believe that it is time for the United States to follow the lead of many countries throughout the world and develop legal safeguards for those who have been seriously mistreated at work. Although legal intervention is not an ideal solution, it is important to remember that modern organizations came into existence through legislation and judicial decisions dating back to the 1880’s (Greider, 2003). That legal framework is important because it forms the template for how things work today, acting like “unforeseen boundary markers between society’s aspirations and corporate capitalism’s prerogatives” (p. 212).

There is a need to provide relief and compensation to targets of severe workplace bullying who can demonstrate tangible harm. Employers must be required to act preventively and responsibly to prevent bullying at work. In our view, implementation of the model anti-bullying legislation that has been proposed in the United States by Professor David Yamada (referred to as the *Healthy Workplace Bill*) would be a brilliant start.

Changes in the law to provide workplace protections for targets of bullying would provide the initial, high-impact leverage point that is likely to create momentum toward larger-scale societal reform. Ironically, the shift to more cooperative and respectful workplaces is also likely to result in organizations being more productive and profitable (Greider, 2009).

Changes to the Employment Relationship

It is also time to re-think the current state of our corporations and the nature of its relationship with employees. Although organizations can no longer provide lifetime employment, they can provide an alternative vision of work that provides security and a mutually satisfying relationship for a specific but limited period of time—what has been referred to in the popular press as a “tour of duty” (Hoffman, et al., 2013).

Under this approach, the employee would have temporary job security (generally for a two to four-year period) along with training to help advance his or her career. At the conclusion of this period, a decision would be made to determine whether the employee remains with the company for “another tour” or takes a position elsewhere. As noted by Hoffman, et al. (2013):

The key is that it gives employer and employee a clear basis for working together. Both sides agree in advance on the purpose of the relationship, the expected benefits for each, and a planned end.

This type of relationship would arguably engender more trusting relationships in that it gives employees an unambiguous understanding of the mutual commitments involved and establishes a clear timeline for when the parties will discuss whether or not the relationship will continue. This approach is a stark contrast to the current situation where the employee is asked to commit to the organization but the corporation essentially has no obligations in return. The current ambiguity surrounding the employment relationship causes both the employee and the employer to lie (or at least pretend that it is different than it really is), creating fundamental distrust and insecurity on both sides.

The “tour of duty” approach would create a new employment relationship in which the employer-employee obligations are mutual, expectations about the relationship are clearly defined, and employees are treated in an adult and respectful manner (as opposed to the parent-child/master-servant relationship that currently exists). Recruitment, retention, and corporate reputation are also likely to positively increase for those companies who elect to embrace this new approach.

Changes to the Organizational System

In addition to legal reforms and changes to the employment relationship, it will be necessary to consider other critical leverage points—places within a complex organizational system where a small shift in one thing can create big changes in everything (Meadows, 2008, 1999). The problem is that organizational systems are highly resistant to change. As explained by Pirsig (1974):

To speak of certain government and establishment institutions as “the system” is to speak correctly . . . They are sustained by structural relationships even when they have lost all other meaning and purpose. People arrive at a factory and perform a totally meaningless task from eight to five without question because the structure demands that it be that way. There’s no villain, no “mean guy” who wants them to live meaningless lives. It just that the structure—the system—demands it and no one is willing to take on the formidable task of changing the structure just because it is meaningless (p. 119-121).

There are several other promising places to intervene, including additional reforms such as:

(1) restructuring the fundamental purpose of corporations so that organizations have both a reason and incentives to consider all of their stakeholders, not just institutional investors and activists; and

(2) incorporating measures of civility, empathy and kindness into our corporate performance evaluation and reward systems so that employees are evaluated and rewarded not only on the results that they achieve, but also on *how* they are achieved.

In support of the need to make fundamental changes to the organizational system itself, Greider (2003, p. 211) vividly describes corporations as follows:

In basic character, the corporation resembles a shrewd and muscular wild animal that sooner or later figures out how to break out of its cage. Instead of building new cages, we should investigate the DNA of these creatures.

Conclusions

The past has proven that an obsession with profits at any cost encourages leaders to “game the system” and behave badly. When civilized standards of common decency and respect are not required to be observed in our workplaces, leadership by fear and intimidation is validated as a legitimate leadership style. By turning a blind eye to the destruction created by arrogant and abusive leaders—and even rewarding and promoting them—corporations unwittingly enable (and perhaps even encourage) bullying and abuse at work. As a result, bullying is currently a rational choice for leaders in American corporations.

Trying to civilize corporations, though, is much like trying to turn tigers into vegetarians. They will always be wild beasts by nature unless we “tame” them by imposing laws (as many other countries have done), or replace them with new forms entirely. Until then, the unfortunate reality is that bullying will continue to be rampant in American organizations. We can—and must—do better.

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