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Bullies and Bullying

Work is, by its very nature, about violence to the spirit as well as the body. It is, above all (or beneath all), about daily humiliations. To survive the day is triumph enough for the walking wounded among the great many of us.

—Studs Terkel

What's in a Label?

You obviously picked up this book for a reason, and it's likely that one or more jerks, weasels, or snakes works for or with you. It would almost be laughable—that is, if the consequences of their negativity were not so destructive to those they hurt.

What shall we call these perpetrators of organizational chaos? Here are some synonyms for *bullies: aggressors*, *mobbers*, *offenders*, *backstabbers*, *saboteurs*, *harassers*, *nitpickers*, *control freaks*, *obsessive critics*, *terrorists*, *tyrants*, *perpetrators*, and *abusers*.

Regardless of the names by which we refer to them, these individuals exhibit conduct far beyond acceptable workplace behavior. They act in non-normative, readily identifiable manners that stand out in extremely negative ways.

The reason you've identified a problem is because you've been able to put a label on the jerk where you work. When you say *weasel*, there is consensus about who fits the description. To call someone a *snake* speaks to the person's deviousness and backstabbing maneuvers.

Throughout this book, we will rely on the simplest of all labels—the bully. It is one we have all lived with since childhood. We shall call all perpetrators, across a wide spectrum of potential negative deeds, bullies. To us, it is no more negative to call someone a bully than it is to brand them using any of the synonyms already suggested. We use the term *bully* as shorthand, not to demonize. To nearly everyone, *bullying* means that something wrong or unacceptable was done—and that we can identify the one who did it.

Nearly all nations recognize the term *bully* or have some cultural variation of it. And believe it or not, the United States is the last among all Western industrialized nations to

acknowledge workplace bullying. We're finally joining the rest of the world when we identify the acts of perpetrators of anti-corporate, antiorganizational, and antiworker aggressive actions as bullying.

The power of the term *bully* in the workplace is illustrated by people's reaction when it is used to label them. They usually respond strongly, with instant outrage and denial. They take the label as an insult. Yet it is the bullies themselves—and their deliberate misconduct and nefarious undermining—who insult ethical coworkers who care more about work than workplace politics.

It's Not Just about Bullies

Let's state at the outset that your task is not to identify offenders within your workforce and immediately brand them as bullies. We're not interested in leading you on this kind of witch hunt. Instead, what you will do—if you follow our suggestions in the blueprint—is create a way to identify whoever dares to violate a new, clear set of standards. That person, once detected and confirmed as a wrongdoer, is referred to as a "policy violator." This is much less pejorative than the label *bully* and a better fit in your (now) bullying-free organization.

There's quite a difference between focusing on bullies and focusing on bully*ing*. Trying to change bullies is a fool's errand. However, if you concentrate on stopping the practice of bullying, your leadership quotient will skyrocket, thanks to the gratitude of so many (currently silent) employees. The first task—to change a bully—falls into the domain of spouses, life partners, and psychiatry. It's not your job to do this for an employee or colleague. Yet it is up to authentic leaders to engineer organizational solutions, and bullying presents ample opportunities to do so.

The Context for Workplace Bullying among other Negative Conduct

Figure 1.1 represents the range of negative behaviors that occur in the workplace—and what can happen as a result of these actions—and places bullying into that continuum. We start on the left, with the least offensive and injurious types of negative behavior, and end on the right, with homicide. Although people who act inappropriately may think they're funny, they frequently say and do stupid things, thus revealing their own lack of knowledge about how to act in public.

Uncivil people violate social norms. They are typically aware of what constitutes "proper" conduct but choose to ignore the limits of acceptability when in the presence of others. They act as though unspoken rules apply to others, but not to them, and they may not feel normative pressure from the group like others do. Working with an uncivil coworker brings rudeness and boorishness—not necessarily aimed at anyone in particular—into your workplace. It's difficult to be a target of incivility because it

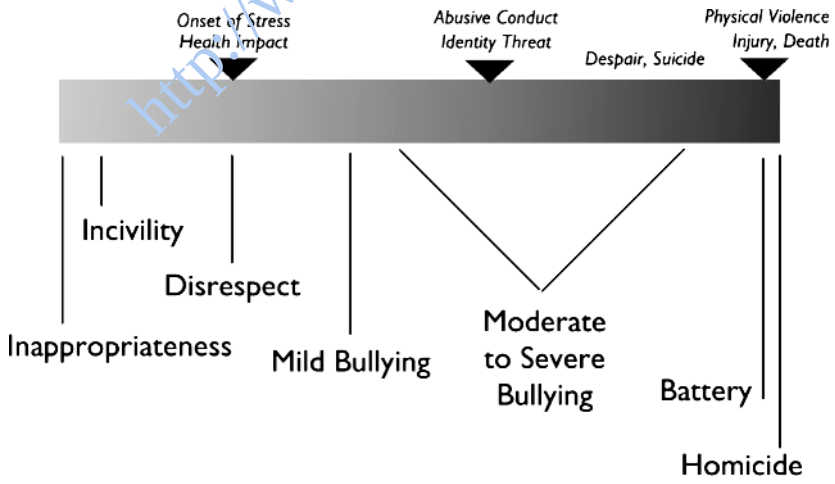

FIGURE 1.1 The Continuum of Negative Interpersonal Behavior

is not personalized. Research by Christine Pearson, the academic most closely identified with the study of incivility, found that only 12 percent of workers subjected to an uncivil workplace *contemplated* leaving. Incivility is only mildly bothersome, hence its location on the continuum.

Disrespect is more hostile and is pointedly aimed directly at another person. It can trigger distress as well as a host of anxiety-related health complications. The perpetrator—the person who's "dissing" another—acts in a manner that shows complete disregard for the target's humanity. It is as if the recipient has not earned the right to be treated well from the perpetrator.

Our experience has found that U.S. employers will tolerate the labels *incivility* or *disrespect* when referring to bullying, whereas Canadian employers are less likely to make euphemistic references to these situations. In other words, Canadian employers are not afraid to refer to bullying as *bullying*.

On the interpersonal behavior scale, mild bullying falls to the right, on the more harsh impact side of disrespect. Mild instances can be covert and infrequent. Bullying becomes moderate to severe when bouts of mistreatment increase in frequency and personalization. Bullies tend to "zone in" on the targeted few, causing their misery to grow exponentially. Compared with incivility, bullying is a laser-focused, systematic campaign of interpersonal destruction—one of warlike dimensions. Methods escalate in abusiveness, and escape routes for targets are blocked. Bullies even recruit coworkers to further spread the misery. And as hatred progresses, the targeted individual grows sicker from multiple stress-related health complications.

Workplace bullying is not merely hostile; it's abusive. And abuse is potentially traumatizing. The result is frequently destabilization—in the form of threats to one's self-identity—when abusers attempt to redefine the target's personality in ways to suit them. It is an extremely invasive tactic. If the target cannot find a way to alleviate the strain, he or she can quickly

slide into despair. If hopelessness follows, the person might consider the option of violence.

The National Institutes for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) deemed workplace bullying to be a form of workplace violence. Bullying stops short of physical violence; it is both sublethal and nonphysical. And once in a while, a target turns violent. Violence turned inward is suicide.

Bullying Can Kill Your Organization

Beware how you take away hope from any human being
—Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Consider the case of Kevin Morrissey.

In 2010, Morrissey, the managing editor for the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, a literary magazine housed on the campus of the University of Virginia, committed suicide. He left behind the tale of three years of torment at the hands of senior editor Ted Genoways. The university president's office and human resources had known of Morrissey's multiple complaints but had failed to either investigate or suppress Genoways. After his suicide, it was Morrissey's sister who affixed the label of bullying to the case, which caused quite a stir within the academic community across the country.

The provocative nature of the story of Mr. Morrissey's suicide prompted academic writers to recognize bullying in their host institutions.[1] According to the employer's own internal investigation report, the complaints about Genoways were merely "conflicts between a creative, innovative manager and persons who did not share" his views. The employer's report exonerated Genoways. But the campus faced a public relations nightmare for months. The incident undermined the integrity of the *VQR* as well as the university.

When violence is directed outward, it can lead to a workplace homicide, as it did in the following scenario:

On April 16, 2007, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech) student Seung-Hui Cho, age 23, murdered 32 professors and students and wounded an additional 25. The rational search for an underlying explanation was overshadowed by the round-the-clock media coverage that characterized Cho as a psychopath and walking time bomb. The media revisited the story four months later when the Report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel[2] was delivered to then-governor Kaine. It told of how, during the fall 2005 semester, the introverted Cho was humiliated in front of classmates by distinguished English professor Nikki Giovanni. She had made repeated demands that his sunglasses be removed and that he participate as the other students did. When Cho didn't respond, Giovanni demanded that Cho leave the class. He didn't do anything, just sat mute; he was terrified to speak, and thus, he was perceived as lazy or rebellious. He was a good writer but feared speaking.

Giovanni, in turn, hysterically threatened to resign unless Cho was removed. Other professors (Robert Hicok and Carl Bean) then had subsequent conflicts with Cho for "being quiet" and graded him accordingly in their classes, giving him a D+. Cho had similar experiences at his housing complex. His scribbling of Romeo's words to Juliet on a door whiteboard to a girl he liked led to misunderstandings, an angry father, and police questioning. The texts of suicidal thoughts that he sent to a suitemate led him to be involuntarily committed to a psychiatric hospital. After discharge, Cho never received promised psychiatric help. The massive bureaucracy that is Virginia Tech simply lost track of him despite a "Care Team" having the responsibility not to let him disappear.

All of these events preceded the murderous attacks by 15 months. Through official officers—a department chair and

several faculty, police, and campus mental health professionals—the university demonized the shy Cho. He remained isolated and untreated up to the time he violently exacted revenge and then killed himself. Ironically, Nikki Giovanni—his original predatory professor—writes fiction that Cho surely must have read as a class assignment. Her poetry contains an excessive amount of violence (Can you kill; Can you piss on a blond head; Can you cut it off; Can you kill; A ni**er can die; We ain't got to prove we can die. We got to prove we can kill.) In a 2006 course for another professor, Cho wrote a story about a character who decides to "kill every god damn person in this damn school" in response to feeling angry and estranged from other students. Was this tragedy preventable?

In the Morrissey and Cho cases, both organizations had ample opportunities to correct the injustice perceived by a person making a complaint and asking for relief from bullying. Both institutions failed to act appropriately and adequately. Two high-publicity negative events rocked those organizations. Thirty-four people died who should not have.