

# Workplace Bullying

Bonnie A. Osif

*If what you call sabotage, I call competition,  
What you call conniving deception, I call savvy ambition,  
What you call abuse and harassment, I call shrewd  
gamesmanship.  
What you call record-keeping, I call "Hoover files."  
And, that's the workplace. It's brutal. It ain't for sissies.  
Just play the game.<sup>1</sup>*

*All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good  
men do nothing.<sup>2</sup>*

While doing the research for the earlier column on incivility, there was a very surprising result. A number of books and articles on bullying showed up in the search. Bullying is in the news frequently, but usually in the context of school bullies and the horror this causes for the bullied, so much so that we read of suicides and deadly retaliation by the bullied. But bullying in the workplace? With our colleagues who we work with daily, who share the same strategic goals with us? The answer unfortunately is yes; workplace bullying is a significant problem. Possibly the reader can visualize instances in meetings when a colleague was overly dismissive, humiliated another, sabotaged work or working relationships, or threatened, or otherwise pushed others around for their own gain or pleasure. Some of us may have been the bullied—the one who is on the receiving end of the destructive behavior. Or, we have been the bystanders, watching as the bully degrades the bullied.

Bullying is nothing new. Watch old movies or read early books and you can spot the bully in them. It is no stretch to call Bill Sikes a bully in *Oliver Twist*<sup>3</sup> or the Emir of Daibul in the movie *Sinbad the Sailor*<sup>4</sup> as a despotic bully. Yet, the study of bullies seems to be more recent with interest beginning in Europe in the 1980s and reporting beginning in the 1990s. While we hear more about school bullies, workplace bullying has become an active research front and a difficult reality for a significant number of people. The statistics noted in some of the articles is staggering and the career, health, and personal

problems that follow are serious. Unlike the dénouement of our book and movie examples, many of the workplace bullying situations do not have happy endings unless action is taken. There are a number of resources that can help understand and correct the problem.

**Workplace bullying is behavior that threatens, intimidates, humiliates, or isolates people at work, or undermines their reputation or job performance.**

Teresa Daniel has written an excellent book to begin a study of bullying. From the first page it is clear how important the issue of bullying is: "The physical or emotion health (and sometimes both) of employees working in organizations where these types of actions are taking place are often severely impacted. In addition, the confidence of the targeted employee is frequently so destroyed by the repeated negative actions that they lack even the courage necessary to leave such a toxic environment. Instead, they find themselves trapped in a world of psychological abuse—targets of a phenomenon that had been labeled *workplace bullying*."<sup>5</sup> She goes on to define the term as "repeated mistreatment [against a target individual] manifested as either verbal abuse, or conduct which is threatening, humiliating, intimidating, or sabotage that interferes with work, or a combination of all three."<sup>6</sup>

Chapter two provides an interesting overview of the topic. Noting that popular works use terms like brutal or crazy bosses, snakes, predators, corporate psychopaths, the more scholarly works use workplace harassment, abusive disrespect, or counter-productive-deviant workplace behavior to describe the problem. Some of the professional definitions of the problem include psychiatrist Carroll Brodsky's "repeated and persistent attempts by one person to torment, wear down, frustrate, or get a reaction from another. It is treatment which persistently provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates or otherwise discomforts another person"<sup>7</sup> and the Workplace Bullying Institute's "repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators."<sup>8</sup> In the 2007 U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey 53 percent said they had been verbally bullied, 53 percent



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said they had been experienced behavioral bullying, and 45 percent had interference with their work.<sup>9</sup> She notes the three degrees of bullying: first degree the target resists, escapes bullying early or is able to return to work at the original place of employment or elsewhere. Second degree the target suffers mentally or physically and finds it difficult to return to the workplace. Third degree is so severe the worker cannot return to work.

Particularly interesting is the chapter “The ‘Players’ in a Bullying Situation.” It includes a clear and detailed look at the bully, the bullied, and the bystanders with a number of interesting facts. For example, the three types of bullies are conquerors (power and control), performers (have low self esteem and belittle others), and manipulators (self-interested and vindictive). There are chronic, opportunistic, and accidental bullies.<sup>10</sup> Targets (the bullied) often take no action and reasons stated are fear of reporting the situation and fear of retaliation. Bystanders may be one of the most interesting and possibly overlooked groups. These witnesses “may experience feelings of helplessness, frustration, and a lack of control, as well as anger at the organization for not dealing with the bully’s behavior. They may also spend time worrying about whether they will be the bully’s next target.”<sup>11</sup>

The review of research includes a number of statistics, all of which indicate the seriousness of the problem whether those surveyed are professionals or blue-collar workers or managers. Some of the explanations for bullies include personality of the bully, personality of the targeted individual, performance deficiencies, and the organizational work environment.<sup>12</sup>

Chapter nine reviews a preliminary study by the author that entailed twenty interviews of human resource (HR) managers. They identified misuse of power and authority, self-interest, not organizational goals, and inconsistent and unfair actions as traits of bullies. Actions include intimidation, threats, exploitation, humiliation, lack or poor communication, gossip, ignoring, and obstruction. The chapter contrasts the tough boss with the bully. The difference is a tough boss is fair and lacks malice while the bully is unfair and acts with malice. She notes her text provides a framework to make an initial assessment as to whether or not a conflict-oriented situation is workplace bullying. There are helpful and practical suggestions for human relations managers that include orientation, grievance process, training, and communication. The book concludes with the critical chapter on confronting the bully and creating an environment that will be bully-free. The book includes a number of references and tools for HR and a short call to action: “Bullies poison their working environment by creating low morale, fear, anger, and depression among the targets and their co-workers. Employers pay for this in lost efficiency, absenteeism, medical costs, high turnover, severance packages and lawsuits.”<sup>13</sup> A valuable, practical book that is a must read.

Raynor, Hoel, and Cooper define workplace bullying as “unwanted, offensive, humiliating, undermining behaviour towards and individual or group of employees.” It “affects working conditions, health and safety, domestic life and the right of all to equal opportunity and treatment.”<sup>14</sup> They write that while this has been a longtime problem, it was only specifically identified in the early 1990s and later publicized by a BBC journalist, Andrea Adams. This very well researched book uses studies, mostly European, to document who is bullied, what are the consequences of bullying, and the organizations that bullies work within as well as how the bully, the bullied, and the organization interact. The latter part of the book reviews how individuals and organizations can handle the problem.

The authors provide an important insight in their conclusion: “When thinking about bullying at work, there is a tension between the ‘truth’ on the one hand and the subjective nature of bullying, which in turn is also a ‘social construct,’ on the other hand. In the experience of the authors, practitioners need little encouragement to focus on the tangible and real. However, practitioners need to be aware of how their staff judges behaviours, interactions and messages of bullying at work because these interpretations can affect what they and others perceive as the ‘truth.’”<sup>15</sup> Handling bullying is a complex issue with wide ranging implications and this is made very clear in the book. Very worthwhile reading.

### **Involves deliberate, hurtful and repeated mistreatment of a target.**

*Destructive Organizational Communication* covers a range of topics, several of which have been the subject of previous columns. The chapter that covers bullying begins “Adult bullying at work is shockingly common and enormously destructive.”<sup>16</sup> They also use U.S. statistics for 2007 that state 54 million Americans, 37 percent of the workforce, have been bullied.<sup>17</sup> The chapter provides a brief but very good overview of the subject including a history of early research, a summary of the types of bullying, a discussion of reasons for bullying, the consequences, and prevention and interventions. In fewer than thirty pages, the authors provide a reference review of the subject. They conclude, “The human and institutional losses associated with bullying are inexcusable since it is completely preventable . . . there is no evidence that bullying nets any substantive gains for organizations. Quite the contrary—workplace bullying is counter to the best interests of organizations and their stakeholders. There is considerable evidence that bullying affects millions of U.S. workers. As such, it deserves concerted attention by researchers, practitioners and public policy makers.”<sup>18</sup> Excellent chapter. If you cannot read the other titles in the column give this chapter a look. Also of value is the

previous chapter “Emotional Tyranny at Work.”

Peyton begins *Dignity at Work* with “Bullying in the workplace is now a recognized problem, and a cause for major concern. Victims stand to lose their self-esteem, their health and even their careers. Organisations that do not endeavour to put an end to this behaviour lose productivity, profits and their good reputations.”<sup>19</sup> Pulling no punches, the book is clear as to the seriousness of this problem for the individual and the institution. The goal of the book is to provide “managers, human resource staff and professional counselors with the skills required to be able to recognize when a problem exists and deal with it effectively.”<sup>19</sup>

The book is an excellent textbook for the manager with clear explanations, examples, and bulleted lists to highlight critical points. It is a very thorough study with a section on the expected topics (who bullies and is bullied, counseling, policies), as well as some that aren’t always covered (e-bullying with telecommunications, faux-humor, gossip, and passive/subtle bullying) and a chapter covering self-care for the people dealing with bullying in the workplace. While U.K.-focused this is an excellent resource and deserves careful review by all.

While Coloroso’s *The Bully, the Bullied, and the Bystander* is centered on the school, it is a much-cited book and provides some good definitions of bullying.<sup>20</sup> She makes it clear that bullies are identified by the way they act, not the way they look. It is a “conscious, willful, and deliberate hostile activity intended to harm, induce fear through the threat of further aggression, and create terror.”<sup>21</sup> She describes the actions, the types of bullies, and the reasons behind their behavior and it isn’t too hard to imagine these morphed into the adult. The bullied and the bystander each get their own chapters and descriptions, leading to a better understanding of these groups. Her descriptions of the warning signs for those who are bullied include behaviors that can be related to some in the library workplace as noted in the parenthesis. She cites decreases in grades (work performance); lack of interest; withdrawal from groups; sad, sullen, angry or scared behavior; or different route to school (avoidance of certain locations like the break room).<sup>22</sup> Bystanders are an interesting group. There can be passive supporters, disengaged onlookers, and possible defenders. The one group that is not part of this triad are the defenders of the bullied.

While this is school centered, it provides clear insights into the three groups and at least part of the information can be substituted for the workplace. A must to scan if not read from cover to cover. Reading the newspapers indicates the frequent, and sometimes deadly, problem of bullying in the schools. This can be informative to keep the workplace as bully-free as possible.

## **Repeated actions and practices. . . cause humiliation, offense and distress, and that may interfere with job performance.**

*Winning, Losing, and Moving On* is the third in a series edited by Westhues after *The Envy of Excellence* and *Workplace Mobbing in Academe*.<sup>23</sup> It has nine essays by professors, doctors, and a businessman who have been “under siege.”<sup>24</sup> Westhues writes, “The nine chapters herein hold undeniable appeal as human-interest stories, accounts of trouble in professionals’ working lives and of how they dealt with it. . . Parts of these stories are funny. Other parts are chilling, heartwarming, poignant and tragic. Readers taste the bitterness of defeat, the sweetness of triumph, and in between, steadfast grappling with the ups and downs of vocation and life itself. . . The reason for assembling and publishing these tales of workplace trouble here, however, is not just that they are fascinating and interesting to read. Each bears in some illuminating way on a distinct and terrifying organizational pathology. . . *workplace mobbing*: the ganging up of managers and/or co-workers against a target, subjecting this worker over time to a fury of hostile communications, humiliations, harassments, tricks and punishments, toward the end of running the target out of his or her job.”<sup>25</sup> Each chapter begins with an introduction by the editor, than a first-person account of their story. This provides a different perspective on the subject than many of the other books. Interesting and informative but not necessary reading.

Written by midwives in the United Kingdom, Hadikin and O’Driscoll’s *The Bullying Culture* presents a personal view of the bullying culture within the National Health Service.<sup>26</sup> Noting “when the bullying culture is as deeply entrenched as it is in the NHS it is easy to assume that the situation is beyond repair. This is not the case. Any organisation can change the culture through effective development of staff and management. This does not mean attending a one-off study day and then forgetting all about it. This means a continuing programme of organisational development which included everyone from ancillary staff to the Chief Executive, and consists of performance review, dealing with problem behaviour, coaching, mentoring and support structures.”<sup>27</sup> “Such culture shift is necessary to enable the introduction of ‘jointism’: collaborative employee relations which steer away from the confrontational ‘us and them’ industrial relations.”<sup>28</sup> This is a book focused on a very specific profession and place but the information is insightful and interesting. Libraries may find some striking parallels to scenarios in the book. For example, workplace stressors (pressure, task overload, ambiguous roles, conflicts, bullying, under-used capabilities, poor communication) may be common to some libraries.<sup>29</sup> Some constructive information from the last chapters on changing the workplace environment can be useful. Not necessary to read for all but may be worth a quick review for its practical advice.

Twale and DeLuca write in *Faculty Incivility*, “Our goal here is to uncover the personal, social, cultural, organizational, and structural reasons that faculty incivility may have led to the development of an academic bully culture.”<sup>30</sup> The first of the three sections provides a solid foundation for the subject with a historical review of research on the subject and good definitions, all with a special emphasis on higher education. Part two reviews the changes in academe (increased diversity in gender, race, and in the culture of the academy) and the role of these changes in increasing incivility. Part three considers solutions, which include increased research, education, codes of conduct, and policies and processes to address grievance and provide redress to the list of options. They conclude, “We believe that greater awareness of academic culture, organizational governance structure, corporate influence, and multiple perspectives has implications for exposing workplace aggression, faculty incivility, bullying, and mobbing. These behaviors will force academe to examine itself, its faculty, and its policies and address any formerly tolerated practices.”<sup>31</sup> This is a must read. Under two hundred pages, it is well-written, well-researched, and raises critical points and questions for each manager to consider within the framework of their library’s environment. They conclude “This book has made it clear that the only way to eliminate or at least minimize the impact of, [sic] the bully is to recognize the behavior and the perpetrator and address it. This effort will have value not only to the individual being bullied but will benefit the entire institution, as well as the academic profession. Eliminating bully behavior should redirect valuable time and energy to what should occur in higher education: excellent research and teaching.”<sup>32</sup> The importance of addressing and eliminating bullying could not be stated better.

*Bullies, Tyrants, and Impossible People* could easily substitute for bedtime reading with its easy writing style.<sup>33</sup> The book is a collection of examples illustrating the NICE system (neutralize emotion, identify type, control the encounter, explore options), which “is a systematic approach for successfully dealing with all of life’s most difficult people *without becoming one of them*.”<sup>34</sup> This system is the topic of the earlier book by the authors, *The Power of Nice*. The extent of the problem begins the book: “Bullies, tyrants, and impossible people are everywhere. . . They make life difficult, if not impossible. They even tempt you to become one of them. Fight fire with fire, stubborn with stubborn, anger with anger, temper with temper, ego with ego. But that rarely works. It usually just brings an unpleasant situation to an unsatisfying end.”<sup>35</sup> This easy to read book provides one way to deal with these people and situations. Interesting book that could be beneficial in your library. Not necessary reading but so enjoyable, fast, and practical, it is worth a look.

Tehrani begins *Building a Culture of Respect* with a succinct, bulleted list of why this topic is important: bullying causes health problems, organizational culture

is integral to promoting or undermining dignity, policies will affect this culture, and bullying is more prevalent than commonly believed.<sup>36</sup> The book is a collection of fourteen chapters written by British researchers. They cover the effects of bullying on the bullied, their workplace, and society at large, means to address bullying, organization dysfunction that allows bullying to occur, case studies of several bullied individuals, responses to bullying, and means to promote a culture of respect and support for the individual—“an organisational climate can be created in which employees are treated with dignity and respect through co-operation.”<sup>37</sup>

This is an excellent resource for all managers. The section on legal issues is focused on British law so could easily be skipped but the rest of the book provides insight and references that are critical to a thorough understanding of the subject.

One form of bullying is rankism, defined by the author of *Battles Between Somebodies and Nobodies* as “promotion of oneself and one’s interests while bringing harm to a person and/or community”<sup>38</sup> or “abuse of power that attaches to rank”<sup>39</sup> or the “misuse of position by those in power when they mistreat individuals who are less forceful.”<sup>40</sup> The author notes that somebodies and nobodies are based on feelings. Somebodies feel noticed, appreciated, respected, and elevated while nobodies feel overlooked, depreciated, disrespected, and demeaned.<sup>41</sup>

Wambach includes a Rank Conflict Inventory, a tool that only takes a few minutes to complete. It asks the reader to consider a situation in their life and select answers from a list of sentences based on that situation. An example is, “When my standing is challenged I . . .”<sup>42</sup> followed by ten options to complete that sentence. The selections to the inventory are explained in a later chapter that helps self-identify type.

The chapter titled “Somebody Rankists” describes those who “protect their place at the top by obstructing anyone of lesser power” by descriptive tables of the behaviors, emotions, typical lines, expectations of others and response to target for the different types of rankists.<sup>43</sup> The types include tyrant, seething giant, gangster, sovereign, grandee, extortionist, scapegoater, fabricator, gatekeeper, and snubber. Each is described with an example. It is an interesting chapter that helps in understanding this type of bullying. These are contrasted with the nobodies rankists: dog-lickers, retaliators, flatterer, persuader, activist, avenger, gossip, placater, noble sufferer, and onlooker. Having reviewed the types and taken the inventory, the chapter “Know Thyself,” is an interpretation of the results with the goal of self-understanding. The rest of the book deals with strategies to stop rankism. Good definition of terms in the glossary. Very readable and practical, this book is one that can easily be used to help overcome a potentially disruptive workplace environment.

One of the major names in the field of rankism is Robert W. Fuller. Author of *All Rise*,<sup>44</sup> *Dignity for All*,<sup>45</sup>

and *Somebodies and Nobodies*,<sup>46</sup> he is an articulate speaker and dynamic spokesman for “Treating people with dignity, no matter where they fall on the corporate, social, familial, or political ladder is the key to overcoming rankism in all its manifestations. In rankist environments, creativity is stifled, students can’t learn, workers are disloyal, health is compromised, families suffer dysfunction, and victims want revenge. Dignity is the antidote.”<sup>47</sup> Read any, or even better, all of his books and if there is an opportunity to hear him speak, go. You will learn much and be inspired to be sure that all are treated with dignity in your workplace and beyond.

During the research for the column it became obvious that much of the research on this topic originated in Europe. *Bullying and Emotional Abuse in the Workplace* is a collection of research from the United States, Europe, and Australia that provides a more global look at the topics.<sup>48</sup> The editors write, “The main aim of this book is to present the reader with a comprehensive review of the literature, the empirical findings, the theoretical developments and the experiences of leading international academics and practitioners in the field of bullying at work.”<sup>49</sup> The first part covers the basic concepts of bullying, a review of research; part two looks at empirical evidence; part three focuses on explanations for the problem of bullying, followed by a part on the management of the bullying culture in the workplace. The last part looks at “remedies for the prevention and management of bullying and emotional abuse at work from a theoretical perspective.”<sup>50</sup> This is a very detailed, extensively researched book that may be more than many want to read. However, for those with the interest or the need for this level of research, the book is a treasure trove of information and fascinating reading.

### Systematic mistreatment.

Lind and coauthors review studies that look at personality characteristics to see if they are determinants in bullying behavior.<sup>51</sup> They look at the Big Five personality dimensions (neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, conscientiousness) to see if they differ between targets and nontargets. Their research concludes that only two of the dimensions (high on conscientiousness and low on agreeableness) differed, which “adds to a mixed picture regarding the role of personality in bullying scenarios.”<sup>52</sup> The article serves as a fast, easily readable summary on the research pertaining to personality and bullying. This study was done on health care providers and care must be taken in extrapolating results from one profession to another but the results are interesting and may even suggest research that could be done in the library profession.

Another study that was done in one profession (Australian police officers), the Tuckey article focused on stressors.<sup>53</sup> The results indicated as stressors rise and support decreases, the amount of bullying increases. They note

“A major implication of the study is that in demanding work environments the prevention of bullying requires high levels of job resources, both control and support. In addition to improving individual outcomes, job (re)design may have the potential to minimize negative behaviours that form the basis of bullying. Stressful working conditions (such as the combination of high demands, low job control, and low support) may provide fertile soil for negative interactions. . .”<sup>54</sup> While it would be a stretch to compare the job environment of a police officer to library personnel, those stressors are also evident in the library with increasing patron demands with stretched staffing and finances, with the possibility of similar results. Worth a look and some consideration.

*Consulting Psychology: Journal of Practice and Research* devoted a special issue to the topic of bullying. The entire issue is worthwhile reading and will be summarized. However, of special note is the introductory article by Len Sperry.<sup>55</sup> He notes bullying is increasing and the International Labor Office (ILO) has reported that it has “reached epidemic levels in several countries and that the global cost of such workplace violence is enormous.”<sup>56</sup> He continues “The ILO also reports that professions that were once regarded as sheltered from bullying and mobbing (e.g. teaching, social services, library services and health care) are now experiencing increasing acts of such abusiveness in both developed and developing countries.”<sup>57</sup> So, from this finding the studies on bullying do have real relevance to librarians and library staff and may prove a fruitful area of study.

Fox and Stallworth provide an excellent overview article that touches on subjects such as a clear description of the problem with one of the best collections of definitions of the term, parameters of the abuse (how pervasive must it be to be called bullying?), costs of the problem, conflict management, antibullying training, and a list of references.<sup>58</sup> This should be reviewed for both the basic information and for actions that can be taken.

If bullying is an issue in your library or there is concern that it may become an issue, Ferris’ article is a must read.<sup>59</sup> She provides the point of view of a consultant brought into a workplace with a bullying problem and discusses the role of intervention to both identify and to correct the situation. Well referenced throughout, there is practical advice on policies, training, and how to take a close look at the local situation. Especially interesting are the three organizational responses to bullying (see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil).<sup>60</sup> Very useful article.

If the old adage an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure, then Duffy’s article is definitely worth the time to read.<sup>61</sup> After a review of pertinent research and a compelling case for the development of policies, she provides a case study to illustrate the planning and creation of a policy that walks through the consultative process. She concludes with “The development of antimobbing/antibullying organizational policy that is based on current research and scholarship and that takes into account the complexities

of the phenomenon of workplace mobbing/bullying holds promise as one means of preventing workplace bullying/mobbing and fostering a positive or high care work environment. . . . is also an area in which knowledgeable organization consultants will be called on to provide expertise and skills.”<sup>62</sup> Very important article.

Namie and Namie provide another example of a case study intervention that is worth reading.<sup>63</sup> Their bulleted points of policy features, procedures, and activities outline the process clearly and succinctly. Important reading for both the intervention and the clarity of the article.

One thing that became very clear while reading the literature was the myriad definitions used to describe the problem. Crawshaw sums this up neatly: “This definition proliferation impedes our ability to conceptualize the phenomenon of workplace aggression in clear and consistent terms, and complicates effective collaboration among researchers and practitioners. The absence of a shared descriptive language for the phenomenon is doubly perplexing for employers, legislators, and other member of society who seek to address this source of psychological pain in the workplace.”<sup>64</sup> As librarians with clear, precise terminology as a cornerstone of our profession, this article is a short but clearly important one as clear descriptive language is important, even in a time of online tagging of articles. The range of definitions used as headers in this column illustrates the range of definitions.

**Derogatory remarks, insults or epithets, physical conduct that a reasonable person would find threatening, intimidating or humiliating or the gratuitous sabotage or undermining of an employee’s work performance.**

There are a number of websites devoted to workplace bullying. The Workplace Bullying Institute is one, which describes itself as “the only United States organization dedicated to the eradication of workplace bullying that combines help for individuals, research, public education, consulting for employers, and legislative advocacy.”<sup>65</sup> This is an excellent way to keep up on current legislation, research, and other information on bullying.

It is the fortunate person who does not encounter a bully during their life. Even if one is not the bullied and has the character not to be the bully, there is a very strong possibility that one will have the role of bystander. How one behaves in that role can be very important to the bullied and to the workplace environment. Uncomfortable as the topic may be, it is one that all, whether a manager or not, should give careful thought. It is not just a personnel issue; it is an issue of personal character.

*Editor’s Note: Definitions of “bullying” used as headings are from Fox and Stallworth.*

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