Workplace Bullying:
Effective Diagnosis & Response

Many of us who have examined "workplace bullying" have concluded that the way the phenomenon is named, defined and understood may actually be influencing *the nature of the phenomenon itself*. Our current terminology, definition and understanding of workplace bullying may be unproductive.

(i)   The phrase "workplace bullying" can **encourage speculative and inaccurate analysis**. People's initial emotional response to a problematic situation in the workplace typically prompts them to attribute too much significance to (i) *psychological* factors: elements of an individual's personality. Conversely, people tend to underplay the importance of situational factors: (ii) *social* relations, and (iii) *systems* / structure.

(ii)   The language of workplace bullying can **actually contribute to workplace conflict**. The phrase "workplace bullying" frames the way people think and talk about the phenomenon, encouraging judgments about the psychology of others. Those being judged typically perceive a judgment as an attack, and "attack back" as a form of defence. When *symptoms of* int*rapersonal* conflict (e.g. "This doesn't sit well with me") are given voice, they become *causes* of int*erpersonal* conflict (e.g. "Right, so now you're attacking and undermining me!").

(iii)   Much of the literature on bullying lists various strategies or tactics, but **doesn't provide an integrated causal theory** of the phenomenon that can inform practical, testable solutions

When someone bullies by (i) expressing anger &/or contempt, and/or acting unpredictably, others (ii) experience surprise, fear, distress &/or shame. The various tactics collectively described as bullying (i) manipulate individual relationships, (ii) regulate who is in an in-group and who in an out-group, and (iii) raise or lower a person's relative standing in a group. Bullying tactics can thus be understood as destructive answers to the three key questions of social life, including the workplace:

▪ Who are my key relationships?
▪ What group do I belong to?
▪ What's my status in the group?

These questions are most likely to be addressed *destructively* in situations where mutual respect and collaboration among colleagues is not consciously and actively fostered in systems and culture. Yet much of the workplace bullying literature focuses less on systems and more on categorising unconstructive behaviours as disorders of personality.

Some bullying behaviours may indeed result from (i) innate temperamental traits or (ii) habits that have become part of personality. But it is also possible that the behaviours manifest only because they are *enabled*, inadvertently *encouraged*, or *promoted* by aspects of organisational culture and structure such as:

▪ inappropriate levels of management,
▪ distorted systems of remuneration and reward,
▪ behaviour guided primarily through external punishments and rewards,
▪ excessive unilateral decision-making, &
▪ a general lack of skill across all levels of communication:
    coaching, conversation, negotiation, mediation and facilitation.

Many current approaches to workplace bullying are premised on the assumption that the problem is best addressed by answering the retributive questions: (i) "Who has done the wrong thing? & (ii) "What should we do to them?" An alternative "*restorative*" response is guided by the questions (i) "What has happened?" / "What is happening?" & (ii) "How have people been affected?" / "How are people being affected?"

When organisations begin to ask these questions, they are moving beyond simply reacting to the problem, and beyond merely preventing the problem. They are beginning to move to promoting whatever minimises the likelihood of the problem. If organisations are to move beyond (i) simply *reacting* to workplace bullying (with punitive responses), and beyond (ii) seeking merely to *prevent* workplace bullying (with laws threatening damage to the organisation), there needs to be a better understanding of what needs to be *promoted*.

To promote healthy workplaces, in which bullying is minimised, requires a shift of emphasis from (i) detecting the presence of *destructive* behaviours, to (ii) identifying and addressing the *absence* of *constructive* communication and *supportive* systems. At a minimum, an organisation will have:

- The requisite levels of management;
- Alignment between the goals of the organisation, the business unit, teams and individuals;
- Decision-making devolved to the lowest appropriate level in the management hierarchy;
- Effective decision-making for individuals, pairs, and small and large groups;
- A culture of effective feedback, with the right ratio of commentary on work well done and work requiring adjustment.

A practical alternative typology can help frontline managers and H&R determine not "what personality disorder is present?" but:

- What specific *communication skills and habits* are absent?
- What unconstructive *social dynamics* are present?
- What supportive *organisational arrangements* are absent?

Bullying is likely to be minimised in workplaces where constructive communication is actively promoted, in the form of specific **skills** and techniques, used within the requisite **structure**. To achieve and maintain the right skills, habits, social dynamics, systems and structures requires continuous adaptive change. And that requires *communication skills* and agreed *communication techniques* in:

- observation,

- general conversation,

- negotiation, including third-party assisted negotiation ("mediation"), and

- group facilitation.

COMMUNICATION PATTERNS ASSOCIATED WITH CLAIMS OF "BULLYING"

The following unconstructive communication patterns increase the likelihood that staff in the organisation will experience a sense of being bullied. Each pattern can be counter-acted with adaptive change involving appropriate coaching, on-the-job learning, training and planning.

OBSERVATION

Observational feedback fails to focus on the mastery of skills & so to promote intrinsic motivation

An important line of research has distinguished two distinct "**mindsets**". People with a "fixed mindset" believe that intelligence is a fixed trait. They tend to avoid tasks where they may fail and thus appear incompetent, and they tend not to handle setbacks well. In contrast, a "growth mindset" holds that intelligence can be increased. Those who believe this about themselves tend to be more open to learning and challenge.[1]

Research on *"self determination"* distinguishes (i) *intrinsic* motivation - whereby something is done because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable - from (ii) *extrinsic* motivation - whereby something is done because it leads to some particular outcome.[2] People have a superior quality of experience and performance when they are motivated for *intrinsic* rather *extrinsic* reasons.

A key element of intrinsic motivation is mastery of a *process*, whether that process involves developing physical, intellectual or social skills. The difference between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation is determined by (i) *relatedness* - how much one cares for others who are affected by the activity; (ii) *competence* - how good one is at the activity; and (iii) *autonomy* - how freely one chooses to engage in the activity

If one combines the findings from the "self-determination" and "mindsets and mastery" research, it follows that coaching feedback that focuses on the gradual mastery of particular skills should promote intrinsic motivation. And this seems to be the case. Yet much workplace feedback focuses less on skills than on *working relationships*. For example, "That's great; I'm really pleased with you!" is a report about the general feelings of the person offering the feedback. In contrast, "I notice you consistently offered constructive suggestions at useful moments" is an observation of a specific skill.

Focus on the Relationship	Focus on the skill
☞ **Offering general positive comments**	☞ **Describing *specific* concrete actions**
☞ **Mentioning personal responses**	☞ **Non-judgmental**
☞ **Focusing on the wider group**	☞ **Not fostering dependence on the feelings of the speaker**

Feedback which draws attention to a skill, *without* making an overt judgment and *without* reporting on feelings, turns out to be most likely to prompt intrinsic motivation. As a general rule, colleagues should be offering each other more feedback that is purely descriptive and observational – and the more specific, the better. But how often should our feedback draw attention (i) to a skill that has been mastered, and how often (ii) to a skill that is still being acquired?

---

[1] Carol Dweck *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* Random House Publishing Group, 2007
[2] Deci, Edward L & Richard Flaste, *Why We Do What We Do: Understanding Self-Motivation*. Penguin 1996; Deci, Edward L. & Richard M. Ryan (eds), *The Handbook of Self-Determination Research*. University of Rochester Press. 2006

▪ **People make significantly more observations of what annoys them than what pleases them**

The so-called "**positivity/negativity ratio**" (P/N) has been shown to be a critical factor in team dynamics. It is measured by counting instances of <u>positive</u> feedback and negative feedback. Researcher <u>Marcial Losada</u> found that high performance teams have a P/N ratio of 5.6. In other words, team members typically offer nearly six times as many observations of things done well as observations of things that need correcting.

A highly connected and high performing team will maintain a P/N above 2.9 but not higher than 11.6. Medium performance teams have a P/N of 1.9 –nearly *twice* as many observations of things done well as observations of things that need correcting. Low performance teams have more negativity than positivity. High performance teams also tend to maintain a balance between internal and external focus and between inquiry and advocacy. Researcher John Gottman found strikingly similar ratios in marriages that flourish (~5) and those that fail (<1).

CONVERSATION

▪ People engage in circular conversations

Both parties habitually position-bargain with each other:
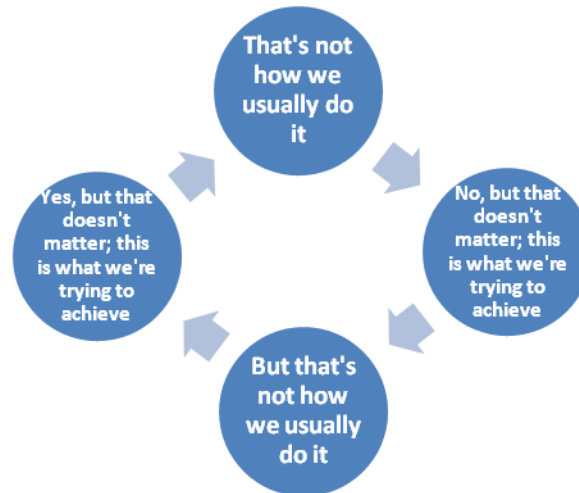
One way to break this circularity is for a manager to exercise positional power and end the conversation. This is often perceived as humiliating for those in the conversation – and can lead to claims of bullying.

▪ People express the four behavioural symptoms of internal conflict:

▫ *Judging* a person   [e.g. "You're useless!"]

▫ *Characterising* their actions   [e.g. "You contribute nothing; lack empathy, etc.]

▫ *Attributing* motives &   [e.g. *"*You're just waiting around to collect your super"]

▫ *Dictating* solutions   ["You need to take a good hard look at yourself!"]

Each of these symptoms of *internal* conflict in turn causes *interpersonal* conflict, contributing to an unfortunate positive feedback loop.

▪ There is a mismatch between *general* instruction & *specific* critique

When people work to vague instructions and are then criticised for some detail in the end result, this raises the risk of so-called "learned helplessness". This is the phenomenon whereby people behave helplessly even when they have (re)gained the opportunity to help themselves. They *could* actually do something to confront familiar unpleasant or harmful circumstances – but have "learned" that they are helpless to do so.

The phenomenon of learned helpless at work may be a symptom of structural problems with the organisation:[3]

---

[3] Sources: Elliott Jacques *The Requisite Organisation* London: Gower, 1997; Kenneth Hopper & William Hopper *The Puritan Gift: Triumph, Collapse and Revival of an American Dream* London: I.B. Tauris 2007

1. *Too many* levels of management:
    Resulting in high cost, slow acting bureaucracy with little leadership or membership;

2. *Too few* levels of management:
    Resulting in an inability to execute high level programs, a dissatisfied manager and anxious team members who are trying hardest but struggle to deliver;

3. *Compression*:
    Whereby the number of managerial levels is right, but the manager is acting at too low a level. Compressing the organisation results in difficulty in keeping good people and a downward spiral of inefficiency and underperformance.

■ **People employ a pessimistic explanatory style**

Negative events are explained as:

- **Permanent** ("This will never change!");
- **Personal** ("It's my fault!"); &
- **Pervasive** ("I can't do anything correctly!" & / or "They're always on my case!")

The capacity to work to address unpleasant situations despite past experiences correlates highly with an **optimistic explanatory style**: "This situation is *not* personal, pervasive, or permanent." [4]

■ **The personality of one or more team members predisposes them to unconstructive interactions**
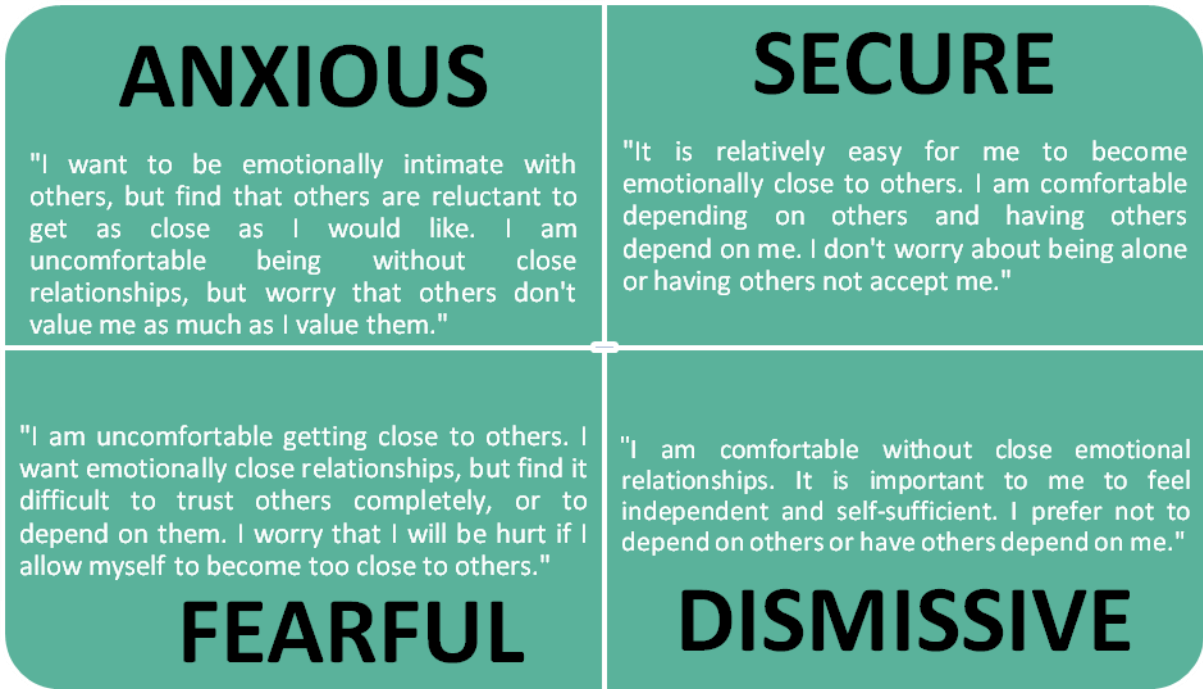
Attachment styles are tendencies learned in the system of the family. Later in life, these may affect team dynamics. At any given stage of life, and in the home, work, or other situations in which we find ourselves, our personality will tend towards one of the following quadrants:
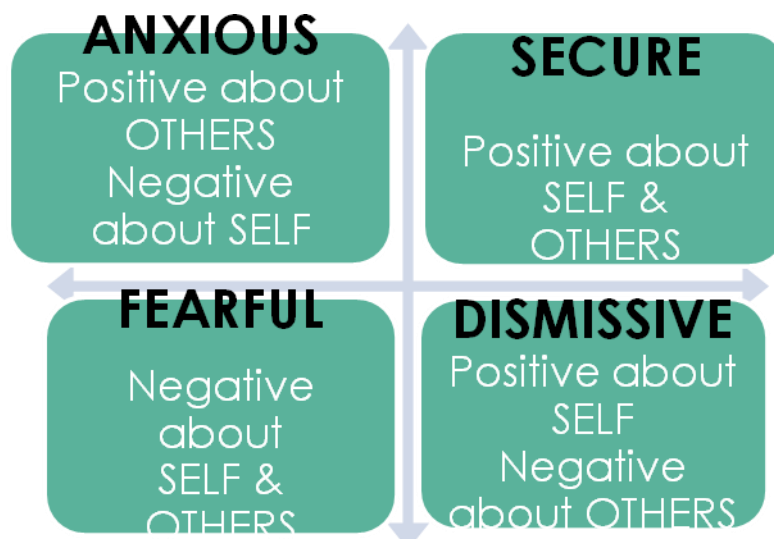
The core "scripts" associated with each of these tendencies are as follows:[5]

---

[4] Sources: Martin Seligman (various)

[5] Bowlby & Ainsworth; Bartholomew, Horowitz, Pietromonaco, & Barrett as summarised in the current Wikipedia entry on *attachment styles*

ANXIOUS

"I want to be emotionally intimate with others, but find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I am uncomfortable being without close relationships, but worry that others don't value me as much as I value them."

SECURE

"It is relatively easy for me to become emotionally close to others. I am comfortable depending on others and having others depend on me. I don't worry about being alone or having others not accept me."

FEARFUL

"I am uncomfortable getting close to others. I want emotionally close relationships, but find it difficult to trust others completely, or to depend on them. I worry that I will be hurt if I allow myself to become too close to others."

DISMISSIVE

"I am comfortable without close emotional relationships. It is important to me to feel independent and self-sufficient. I prefer not to depend on others or have others depend on me."

When just one colleague in a workplace acts overtly *dismissively* towards another's *work*, or towards their very *person*, the person on the receiving end of the dismissive behaviour, *and* other people in that workplace, can experience themselves becoming anxious, and even fearful. Even people who are otherwise fairly secure in their relationships with others may experience fear and / or anxiety.

People become overtly concerned about the three questions that influence personality through life:

- Who are my key relationships
- What group do I belong to?
- What's my status in the group?

Typically, after only a number of weeks, team dynamics will begin to be affected, and after some months, this state of being will begin to affect individual personalities...

NEGOTIATION

▪ People understand "negotiation" as position-bargaining

One or more parties seize on some particular option to achieve whatever it is they are trying to achieve, and argue so vehemently for that option that:

(i)   no other **options** can be considered, and
(ii) one loses sight of the original **goal**.

Interpersonal conflict generated by the frustration of limited options can lead to claims of bullying.

▪ People lack an understanding of strategic or principle-based "negotiation"

The risk of falling into the traps of judging, characterising, attributing motives and dictating is minimised when conversations or meetings are *structured* so that those involved (i) gain a shared understanding of the situation before they (ii) seek to agree on some constructive course of action.

To negotiate a **shared understanding**, invite someone to describe ACTIONS (what they have done, perceived, and/or had reported to them), *then* FEELINGS (how they felt or were affected), *and* THOUGHTS (i.e. "what was going through their head at the time"). We can provide complementary information about our experience, in the same sequence (e.g. "I *observed* this, and I'm *concerned*, because I can see someone being injured.") as a prelude to **joint problem-solving**.

A basic negotiation framework is useful in conversation between two people, in group discussions, and also in a "conversation with oneself", when people try to make sense of a situation and determine the best way to proceed.

▫ Unilateral decision-making triggers a sense of unfairness / injustice:

Two parties run the risk of interacting unsuccessfully if one party is perceived to "dictate solutions" before trying to negotiate a *shared understanding*. "Dictating solutions" is one of four modes of thinking and acting that are both **symptoms** *and* **causes of conflict**[6]:

▫ People fail accurately to analyse various sources of a sense of unfairness / injustice:

A sense of unfairness or injustice is often initially an *intuitive* judgment about (i) the rules of play, (ii) how those rules have been applied, or (iii) the outcomes. A sense of unfairness is often deepest when it concerns the underlying *rules* governing people's interactions. A sense of unfairness about the rules tends to be more difficult to articulate than a sense of unfairness about playing by the rules, or about the outcome. This sense of unfairness may be prompted by:

- *unclear* rules;
- *imposed* rules;
- *changed* rules;
- an apparent clash between two sets of *written* rules; &/or
- an apparent clash between *written* and *unwritten* rules.

Careful analysis of the source of unfairness, and remedial action, may help resolve the concern.

---

[6] Key source: B. Stone, B. Patton & S. Heen *Difficult Conversations: How to discuss what matters most*, New York: Penguin, 1999

The group lacks a process of effective collective review

Communication in meetings is frequently unproductive. People either (i) *avoid* difficult issues, or (ii) address issues with adversarial debate, whereby each person tries (and fails) to convince the others that their *understanding* and preferred *action* are correct. If the debate continues, frustration can turn to anger, and anger can be perceived as *aggression*. This is particularly problematic when colleagues need to review policies and procedures.

Proven processes for creative problem-solving and goal-setting have a common general structure. This structure offers (iii) a third and constructive alternative to meetings characterised by avoidance or aggression.   Participants begin by providing specific examples of the issue they're discussing. They pool their specific examples and interpret them collectively, to identify an agreed set of general issues - problems to solve &/or goals to achieve. They can prioritise these issues, then list various options for solving problems and achieving goals. Finally, they can draft a plan with specific actions, identifying who will do what, by when. This process format is ideal for collectively reviewing policies and procedures.
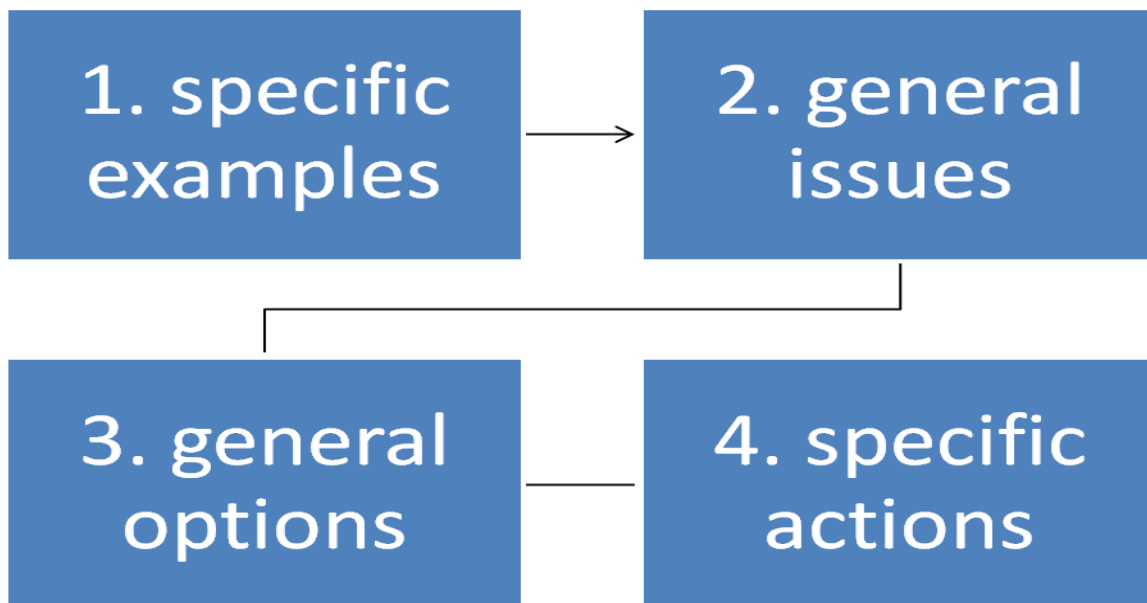
□ **In the absence of adequate analytical tools, people commit the "attribution error", attributing too much explanatory power to *psychological* factors, and not enough to *situational* factors[7]**

Six sets of factors affecting people capacity to do the job are:

	WANT TO (*Motivation*)	ABLE TO (*Capacity*)
Self	Positive& negative emotion **I do/don't want to do the job**	Skills, strengths & weaknesses **I do/don't have skill(s) to do the job**
Social	Praise & pressure **Others say things that support/ undermine me**	Help & hurdles **Others do things that help/ hinder me**
Systems	Carrots & sticks **Systems of reward encourage/ discourage me**	Bridges & Barriers **Systems / Procedures/ equipment make my job easier/harder**

---

[7] Primary sources: Patterson et. al. *Crucial Confrontations* 2005 / *Influencer* 2008