

# WHEN THE BOSS IS A BULLY

## *The Worst Of All Worlds*

Far too many people work in debilitating environments, where performance is extracted through fear and intimidation. Although this possibly might yield some positive short-term results, there is a strong argument to suggest that such conditions do not constitute a healthy and sustainable strategy. What happens, though, when the Boss not only condones offensive and demeaning behaviour, but is actually a *Bully*?

It needs to be acknowledged from the onset that, as a pre-condition, someone can be a *Bully* only when others allow that behaviour to occur. Because power is not distributed equally in organizations, however, the Boss is in a power position in exercising authority.

If the Boss chooses a *bullying* behaviour, then their power and authority may serve to appear to add legitimacy to that situation. For the employees, though, the reality is very different, extremely troubling and quite unhealthy. Just ask yourself if working for a Boss who is a *Bully* constitutes your “*Dream Job*”.

### **The Boss Is A *Bully***

The Boss has become a *Bully* because of any number of reasons. The genesis of this behaviour might be that:

- ◆ It seems to work.
- ◆ It is in the Boss’s fundamental nature to be mean.
- ◆ It brings the Boss a feeling of power and self-worth.
- ◆ The Boss hasn’t reflected on the behaviour and its consequences.
- ◆ The Boss’s preferred and practised leadership style is autocratic and intimidating.
- ◆ The Boss actually is uncertain or scared, and being a *Bully* is a compensatory measure.
- ◆ The Boss may not have the essential management skills to do the job.
- ◆ The senior organizational ranks may condone or at least tolerate the *bullying*.



- ◆ The Boss may be using *bullying* as a tactic to drive out targeted employees from the organization.
- ◆ The Boss finds that this style has served them well in their career. In some organizations, promotions often are based on short-term results, so being a *Bully* becomes rewarded, in effect, with total disregard to the longer-term and residual carnage wrought on the organization.

## The Effect

The effects of the Boss being a *Bully* in the work environment are both immediate and enduring. The initial impact is hurtful and demeaning to the recipient of the *bullying*. The employee will feel abused and will suffer a loss of face. They are likely to become withdrawn. Other employees also will feel threatened, with a growing hesitancy to engage the Boss, lest they, too, be confronted by the *Bully*.

Repeated as an entrenched behaviour pattern, the arena of open, vibrant and healthy communication will become smaller, as a culture of fear becomes magnified. The cumulative result is a demoralized workforce, wherein problem solving, collaboration and innovation will be stifled, if not extinguished altogether. Performance will pursue a depressing, downward spiral.

By virtue of the Boss being a *Bully*, a “*poisoned environment*” effectively has been established. An organization that doesn’t rectify this type of situation is at risk of legal challenges, as well as continually struggling to recruit and retain quality employees in an increasingly competitive and constrained labour market. *Bullying* also has a negative impact on productivity and the quality of work, so there’s also a financial cost attached to this bad behaviour.

## What To Do

So, if one finds themselves in such a situation, what actions might be undertaken and what are the attendant risks?

One might attempt to talk with the Boss about his or her behaviour and the effect it is having on the employees. If the *bullying* behaviour of the Boss is a long-standing pattern, however, it is highly unlikely that this discussion will be met with generous receptivity. In fact, the Boss probably will reject all suggestions outright and will respond with amplified *bullying*.

One might take courage in numbers and mount a collective response. The Boss probably will find this situation to be a challenge to their authority, as well as interpreting it as personally confrontational and threatening. Again, the Boss likely will default to further *bullying* behaviour, in order to reassert control.



One might escalate the situation to a higher authority in the organization. The outcome will be dependent of the strength and quality of leadership at that higher level. Unfortunately, when management problems are exposed in most organizations, the senior leadership tends to close ranks and stonewall. This approach also isn't a viable option, if the Boss, in fact, is the owner of the organization.

One could mount a legal challenge to the organization in detailing and documenting the nature of the "*poisoned environment*". In larger organizations, there may be recourse to the Human Resources department where remedial action might be initiated consistent with established policies. Or the employee could take the situation to the Ministry of Labour and the Human Rights Commission. This often can be a long process that requires significant resources and perseverance. While pursuing this process, the employee may continue to experience the wrath of the Boss.

One could develop any number of coping strategies that range from avoidance to accommodation, from confrontation to hiding, from humour to sarcasm, from authenticity to flattery, from commitment to disobedience. Unfortunately, all of these strategies are imperfect responses that are, at best, only temporary and inadequate defences against *bullying*.

One could seek an assignment elsewhere in the organization or simply resign. This response doesn't change the behaviour of the Boss who continues to be a *Bully*, but it puts the employee in new work circumstances, with a different Boss.

## **The Risks**

Each of these possible options poses certain risks to the employee initiating the action. The most likely consequence is that the employee will draw heightened attention from the Boss in the form of an escalation of *bullying*. At the extreme, they might get fired.

Many employees feel trapped in their jobs. To these people, leaving the organization or taking action that might jeopardize their job seems to be an option that cannot be exercised. They may believe that they wouldn't be successful in securing comparable employment and remuneration, or they may have concluded that preserving their pension is the paramount consideration.

Others may hold out hope that things somehow will improve or that the Boss will be re-assigned. Most employees will be inclined to put up with the Boss's behaviour, rather than take any action which doubtlessly will result in confrontation and conflict. Unfortunately, non-action also has its consequences, including contributing to the status quo, indifference, declining motivation and productivity, personal dissatisfaction, despair, and illness.



## Not A Happy Picture

Having a Boss who is a *Bully* is a horrible situation. It emphasizes the extent to which the Leader's behaviour effects the entire organization, its culture and all the employees, in this instance in a profoundly negative way. It's a predicament that has few viable options or positive outcomes.

Having a Boss who is a *Bully* clearly is the *Worst Of All Worlds*.

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