

From bullied to bully

Studies show that many who have been victims of bullying end up as perpetrators. **RACHEL SETTI** provides some advice for those who suspect they might be crossing the line.

We live in fortunate times where wellbeing is more openly discussed than ever before – and the legal profession has turned its attention to bullying as a serious issue. However, information about the perpetrators of bullying is scant and requires a closer look if we are to effectively tackle the issue.

Interestingly, some data points to psychological similarities between bullies and victims – the most significant being underlying low self-esteem. Furthermore, a study out of the University of Bergen in Norway found a significant predictor of whether someone will bully others is that they have been bullied themselves – a case of victim-turned-perpetrator. Also,

depression and suicidal ideation is more common amongst individuals who have experienced both sides of the victim-perpetrator coin.

In his research, Manfred Kets De Vries, Professor of Leadership and Organisational Change, makes a number of observations about perpetrators – namely, that they thrive under conditions which enable them to partake in “political sabotage, power play and turf wars”, they take a ruthless approach towards their competitors, and they are focussed on winning at any cost. If these behaviours sound familiar, it’s because many firms inadvertently reward such conduct, thus allowing perpetrators to not only exist, but to prosper. A blind eye is turned

to their somewhat unsavoury style with justifications such as “ignore his moods, he means well and his billable hours are the best we have” or “her team isn’t happy with her, but her clients absolutely love her, she’s phenomenal”.

Accommodating toxic behaviour can be tempting when financial targets are being met. However, it can come at a major long-term cost. A 2015 Harvard Business School study of more than 50,000 employees found the savings made in avoiding a “toxic hire” (or letting one go quickly) equates to more than double the amount that a “superstar” employee generates in income.

Though psychometric tools can help, identifying a bully at the recruitment

stage is often difficult because perpetrators are typically adept at presenting a charming demeanour, and a robust social and moral conscience. Instead, the solution may lie in developing a culture in which the bully is not rewarded and therefore cannot thrive. Such cultures typically welcome diversity, team orientation, receptive senior managers, regular feedback and transparent communication. Bullies don’t operate well under these conditions.

Identifying perpetrators can be difficult, as they are often adept at ‘managing up’ and covering their tracks, whilst creating havoc for people not considered worthy. It is often the subtle though observable impacts that are the real tale-tell signs, such as:

- The individual’s junior staff and peers report poor behaviour that the partner or senior manager is not exposed to.
- High turnover or movement in their team.
- Inflated absenteeism or extended leave

within their area.

- Elevated client and employee complaints in their area, even if not substantiated.

An important question is whether perpetrators can change for the better. The answer lies in their level of self-awareness and intention.

Some perpetrators know their behaviour is inappropriate and have no intrinsic reason to adjust. These individuals are unlikely to be driven to make any significant changes.

Other bullies may be motivated to improve, but their behaviours and emotional triggers are so ingrained that they do not know where to start. Further still, some don’t even realise the impact of their actions. These two categories of bullies are more likely to successfully modify their behaviours. If you suspect you might be exhibiting bullying behaviour and wish to do something about it, consider these actions:

- Look out for telling signs in your be-

haviour. For example, do you lose your temper, openly criticise others (particularly those junior to you), deliberately sabotage others’ success, spread rumours, blame others, belittle or socially exclude?

- If you are not sure, ask for feedback on your behaviour. An anonymous 360-degree feedback process often works well as people are generally reticent to provide identifiable negative feedback.
- Own your inappropriate behaviours. Make a commitment to engage more appropriately with others. Set yourself realistic goals and seek ongoing feedback.
- Apologise to your victim/s and be prepared for your apology to be rejected at first. It takes time to build trust.
- Reach out to an executive coach or counsellor for a confidential discussion. They will support you to increase self-awareness, as well as track and self-assess your progress. **LSJ**

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Miller’s Australian competition and consumer law annotated. 41st edition. Thomson Reuters. 2019.

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The law of politics: Elections, parties and money in Australia. 2nd edition. The Federation Press. 2019.

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