CHAPTER NINE

What About Bullies?

Susan

Susan had been chair of the Theater and Media Arts Department for four years. She was concerned about Norman, who had joined the department three years earlier and seemed to be depressed. This morning she had met him in the hallway and noticed that he resisted looking her in the eye. As she thought about this, Susan became increasingly aware of how she had neglected Norman. He had been hired against some fierce opposition from three of the senior faculty who had lobbied strongly for an alternative applicant. The three had essentially hijacked a faculty meeting in a literal filibuster, refusing to allow a conclusion until the department voted in favor of their preferred candidate. Susan had called for a second vote; Norman was approved.

The three men had since pitched their combined influence against Norman—continually treating him either as a joke or as if he were invisible. Susan learned that they called his student-directed animated-film project amateurish and silly, laughing rudely as it was shown. It haunted her that she hadn't confronted
them about that. Norman's productivity and teaching were strong; she expected his record would see him successfully through to tenure and promotion. She now realized that the three "mobsters" were apparently hoping to make his life so miserable that he'd leave before it was time to apply.

Bullies are a challenging slice of behavior. They can be individuals or, as in this example, several people working together. They often operate behind closed doors or cloaked in the confidentiality of a group (for example, on a promotion and tenure committee). Also, most bullies work from a position of seniority or hierarchy and have learned that their prominence, rank, or connections (cronyism and schmoozing) serve as effective cover for their maneuvers.

~ Applying the Six Steps to Bullying ~

Bullies offer such a special challenge and risk that it is important to reevaluate each of the six steps with regard to bullying.

Step 1: Clarify Values and Expectations
If Susan's department had not established any behavioral expectations, as Anna's department had (see Chapter One), she would essentially be on her own. But even a document like Anna's might have actually worked against her. Here's why. Many among us are optimists and believe that if we clarify how we all value collegiality, respect, and concern for others and that if we revisit this declaration at least annually, that will be sufficient to ensure good "citizenship" among us. Unfortunately, this very expectation of trust provides just the sort of cover under which a clever bully can thrive. This is because those who are most effectively targeted by bullies are those who prefer to avoid conflict and, when faced with discord or even intense competition, prefer to let the other guy win or simply to withdraw. Targeting a person who does his or her part to uphold a collegiality document and who trusts in the goodness of others is almost irresistible for a bully if that trusting person is doing something that threatens the bully's position or preferences.

Step 2: Follow Policy
Odds are that Susan's university did not have a policy specifically against bullying; very few American universities do. Standard university policy to counter abusive behavior includes rules against sexual harassment and against discrimination based on gender, age, disability, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and other considerations. Note that these policies protect people against "discrimination." This means that to file a claim based on these policies, a person must be able to document that he or she was treated differently than others based on gender, age, religion, or one of the other factors. If the bully is the same age or older than the victim or of the same gender and ethnicity, the victim of bullying has no legal basis for a claim. In other words, bullying is not an illegal activity.

It's typical for victims of bullying to pretend and even believe that they should be able to deal with or rise above the bullying and to deny how devastating it is to be repeatedly belittled and humiliated. But the negative effects, including high blood pressure, depression, resentment, and low self-esteem, are significant and often find their way into other areas of life and work where displaced anger or emotional absence takes a toll on fellow workers, spouses, and children. Bullying can be so damaging to the health and overall welfare of its targets that an antibullying policy is warranted. And it is possible to create and enforce policy specifically against bullying.
A sample no-bullying policy is provided in Appendix B. Note that it distinctly defines bullying and includes examples with a specificity that reaches beyond conduct that is noncollegial. It also states, similar to sexual harassment, that it is up to the person who feels that he or she is being bullied to determine the impact of the abuse, regardless of the stated intent of the perpetrator. The policy specifies consequences up to and including loss of employment. With such a policy, Susan would be in a very strong position to confront Norman’s oppressors. The development of policy should be a collaborative process, based on the input and acceptance of representatives from all components of the campus, notable among them being human resources, the legal office, and students.

Note that one of the bullying-specific challenges is identifying someone at the college as the contact person (see Appendix B) for the case. Although the contact person could be someone in HR, that person will be effective only if he or she has a thorough understanding of the phenomenon of bullying, especially knowing what to look for (the occurrence of stress-related health problems, for example, and the characteristic personalities of both targets and perpetrators), and appreciates that traditional approaches to dealing with conflict can actually end up exacerbating a bullying situation rather than helping. More is said about this in following paragraphs.

**Step 3: Build Trust with Colleagues**

When it comes to bullying, trust can take a treacherous twist. A chair may not be able to trust the same colleagues, at least not in the same way that he or she otherwise could, when dealing with other types of problem faculty. John Campbell says that when confronted with bullying, authority figures often “see through naughty schemes but look the other way.” Representatives within unions and senates may inadvertently or intentionally protect bullies by how they choose to interpret “freedom of speech” or “contracts.” Twale and De Luca note that although it is often easier for administrators to look the other way when they have other pressing matters, doing so is unacceptable. “Perhaps,” they write “leaders have no idea what to do about such problems when they encounter them because no repertoire of proven solutions exists.” Namie and Namie note that even the people in human resources are characteristically ineffective at handling cases of bullying, one reason being that “their primary function is management support (and 72 percent of bullies are bosses).” They note that even if HR people do reach out to victims of bullying, they are likely to rely on traditional approaches to dealing with conflict and thereby actually intensify the problem. Mediation, for example, is a standard HR solution. It is designed to meet the needs of both parties, but given that bullying is a form of violence, it would be ridiculous to bring the bully together with the victim to see how the needs of each could be met. Imagine the retaliation that a dedicated and skilled bully could impose on a victim who had been asked to “work things out together.” And as we have discussed, trusting that it won’t happen is actually something on which bullies feed.

Although the chair is in an excellent position to observe things, these observations will be limited. Much goes on in the privacy of labs, offices, and committees where only the ground troops can witness bullying. A chair should not deny that bullying could happen in his or her department or dismiss whatever intelligence reports are received. One of the most helpful and trusting things a chair can do is to receive and openly listen to any member of the faculty or staff (or any student) who comes forward with the report of having been bullied. It takes courage for people to come forward with such information, even if they are only bystanders; thus bullying reports stand a
fair chance of being valid. Of course, everything that is brought forward must be kept as confidential as possible.

Step 4: Evaluate Yourself and Your Perceptions
A sobering observation for chairs is that bullies, in their quest to be in control and to exercise power, often seek leadership positions. Although they may not appreciate it, chairs are in a position of power. They are likely to be among the more senior members of the faculty or at least enjoy the support of senior members; otherwise they wouldn’t have been selected. If the bully is among those with whom a chair hobnobs, it will be very difficult for that chair to be trusted by people outside the hobnob group, which could actually encourage bullying to thrive within that group. Unfortunately, if you tend toward bullying, you may be blind to it. Either way, you might benefit from considering how to minimize any tendency to drift that way, especially if you’ve recently been appointed head of a large and prominent department. Do any of the following tendencies characterize your style? If so, consider what you might do to be less intimidating and more approachable.

- You often feel that people “just don’t get it” or don’t appreciate your personality type.
- You prefer to interact with other administrators and leave management and operational details to others.
- Your proposals and recommendations usually go unchallenged.
- You wish other people would work as hard as you do and perform up to your high standards.
- You take full responsibility for making departmental decisions.
- You find it frustrating to work through issues or decisions with colleagues.
- You reprimand colleagues in front of others.

Step 5: Listen
When dealing with a person who asserts that he or she has been bullied, chairs should be especially careful about listening effectively. There are few cases where it’s more important to listen empathically (seeking to understand the other’s emotional place) and to suppress the temptation to talk. Being understood and having his or her feelings affirmed can actually help alleviate a victim’s distress. The chair should not pressure the victim to file a complaint. It is up to the victim to make that call, and if the person decides to file a formal complaint, he or she should be advised that retaliation is a virtual certainty. In spite of all that a chair might do to run interference, dedicated and practiced bullies will not fail to counter a challenge to their actions, reputation, or status.

How much should a chair listen to a bully? Depending on the severity of an incident or a history of behavior, a chair might choose to immediately enforce policy or, if there is no clear policy, to stand up to the bullying and demand that it stop. Of course, the chair would need to be careful, as noted in Chapter Four, of the natural tendency to label the other person a jerk and then go about finding yet more evidence to prove it. Just because bullying is heinous, the chair is not justified in gathering only evidence against the person accused of it. It’s possible that the perceived bully is actually unaware of the impact that his or her intensity, fervor, or striving for excellence has on others. These “unconscious bullies” may be open to feedback that they are perceived as self-absorbed and insensitive and that they appear to be using others as rungs on their ladder.

When chairs attempt to offer such feedback, they should pay careful attention to the responses they encounter. If the colleague reacts with cold indifference or rude denial, even criticizing the victim in the process, the chair might want to make a written note of this as further evidence of culpability. If, on the other
hand, the colleague receives the feedback openly and expresses concern and appreciation for having the matter brought to his or her attention, it could suggest that the person was truly unaware that their actions were having a negative impact on others, which would give the chair realistic hope for improvement.

**Step 6: Take Effective Action**

We noted earlier that a lack of response actually serves as encouragement to those who misbehave. In the case of bullying, there’s a double indemnity from failure to take action. If individuals who have been emotionally distressed reach out for help only to see that nothing is done, they have not only failed to secure relief from their suffering but are also further demeaned and dehumanized.

Unfortunately, taking effective action against bullying can be a daunting task. Where to start?

If Susan’s institution did not have an antibullying policy, there would be little that Susan could use as a standard for exposing a behavioral gap if she decided to confront the threesome that were bullying Norman. Perhaps she could start now to develop antibullying policy. That would be worthwhile but would take time and strategic thinking. She would need to determine if she had support to do this, from within her department and from the dean (and on this note she probably doesn’t know whether members of the three-man mob go golfing with the dean). She would want to determine whether there were any people on campus who were savvy about bullying. She might talk with other chairs and find out who the right people might be in the university senate or the faculty union. She might go online and see which institutions already have an antibullying policy and get in touch with their contact person. As in all instances of unacceptable behavior, building a case would be essential if she hoped to take action. This is where human resources could be helpful; HR might have notes in its files from previous complaints.

The authors of *Influencer* share a powerful story about bullying. In a community in South Africa, there was one citizen who upset all his neighbors by repeatedly physically abusing his wife. The people in the village felt unable to intervene, believing that a direct confrontation would be unacceptable and dangerous. They struck upon a plan. Whenever they heard the man abusing his wife, the neighbors gathered outside his front door and banged on pots and pans. What happened next was totally unexpected. Word of what the village had done spread across South African townships. Whenever spousal abuse was heard, people went and stood in front of the home where it was occurring and banged pots and pans.

The *Influencer* authors then noted, “If bad behavior is reinforced by a web of players, all the players have to be engaged in influencing change. In this particular case the neighbors had to help lead the change for good because neighbors who stood by and allowed obvious abuse to continue were a big part of the problem.”

Who will bang pots and pans with Susan? It’s very difficult to effect cultural change in an organization where bullying has never been challenged or even discussed. If Susan were the only one to bang a pot, she could be labeled a troublemaker herself, and things could end up worse than if she had done nothing. In an ideal situation, an antibullying initiative would start at the top. Policy would be written, and discussion sessions would be held. Essential information from experienced sources would be communicated through brochures, letters, and public declarations by upper administration, then repeated by deans and chairs at regular events. Bullying awareness sessions would be made available if not mandatory. Of course, even if all essential steps and procedures were implemented, the problem of bullying...
(just like sexual harassment) would never disappear completely, but it could be minimized.

~ A Proactive Approach ~

There is one other proactive approach that Susan might consider. She might actually confront Norman's mob directly if she were to deploy a tactic I call "laying out extremes." To do this, she would invite the three mobsters to her office and say, "Thanks for coming to meet with me this afternoon. I called you all here because I need your help. We have a great reputation in this department, and the last thing I want is for things to fall apart on my watch. We owe our strong position in large part to the work the three of you have done over the years. I've been concerned lately about our legacy. The three of you won't be around forever. I want to make sure we're doing all we can to see that our newer generation will sustain the reputation we enjoy because of the work of stalwarts like you.

"I called you all in today to discuss what to do about Norman. We all know that the three of you were opposed to his hire. I'm not challenging that. But I'm worried. I can see at least two ways that I could screw up as chair. One way would be for me to collude with you, join you in your opposition, stack the deck against Norman, be unfair and bully him—the four of us actually becoming a mob dedicated to seeing that he fails or gets so discouraged that he leaves. That, of course, would be wrong.

"Another way I could screw up would be to oppose the three of you and your wisdom and begin defending any weaknesses Norman might have that should be corrected, enabling him and buffering him at the department's expense. That would also be a mistake.

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"I want to strike the right balance. I don't want us to reject a member of our faculty that has promise and potential, and I don't want to harbor someone who is not a good fit. Either extreme would hurt our reputation for excellence and would hurt Norman."

I envision Susan standing before the group of three with a whiteboard behind her on which she has drawn a line with a midpoint. At one end she has written "mob" and at the other end she has written "enabler." Note that she has asked for help, made no accusations, clarified the potential for a mistake, and by stating extremes has made it desirable to strike a balance. If anyone from the group asks why she wrote "mob," she can define mobbing as a form of group harassment and state "That's an extreme, and we don't want to go there." Remember that she has included herself as a potential member of the mob that "we" want to avoid. If the threesome begins to dump on Norman, she can tap the line somewhere on the mobbing side of the line and say, "I'm concerned that we're off balance here." Again, she has included herself. She should ask for their suggestions and then listen, saying things like "Help me understand where you're coming from" and "What could that accomplish?"

An important point is that the issue of mobbing is out in the open and being discussed. The mob realizes that Susan is aware of what's going on and that she might well approach the dean or campus experts for further help. After visiting with these experts to ascertain their understanding of bullying, she might decide to invite them to a follow-up meeting with the mob to share their perspective. It will be an uphill battle, but at least she will have made a start.

If Susan's plight seems discouraging, that's because it is. The difficulty in dealing with bullying is a large part of what makes it so insidious. She should not overlook listening to
Norman and finding out how he would most like to proceed. Perhaps he would choose to not talk about the harassment he was receiving. That Susan is his chair and a woman might make it difficult for him to talk about whether he was experiencing any physical or emotional symptoms or whether his family was being affected. Depending on what Norman might share with her, an option that Susan should keep in mind is helping him find another job. That would constitute accepting defeat but might be much better than allowing Norman's long-term success, health, happiness, and family to be irreparably harmed.

~ What If the Bully Is a Student? ~

The problem of university students bullying faculty is apparently widespread. Audrey June reports that "most professors can recount a moment when students have been excessively rude, threatened them, or even made them fear physical violence." She tells the story of one female associate professor who counts on at least one student each semester to "push the limits of classroom civility and the professor-student relationship."

June reports that women faculty members are affected disproportionately, with one-third of them experiencing a very serious confrontation that caused them to fear for their physical well-being; one-fifth of male professors had similar experiences. The article was followed by a collection of comments identifying actions that those in higher education have found most helpful for dealing with student bullies. A frequent first step was to "set the right tone at the start. "I have taken the bull by the horns,

reported one professor, "... by placing material on my syllabus that addresses this kind of behavior. So far it has helped. Let me encourage all to deal with this issue on the first day of class. Some people will wonder why you’re doing so, but you can tell them, this kind of behavior really does happen, but it’s not going to happen in your class.”

Other helpful comments included the following:

- "Confront student bullying immediately." If this is not done, the bully wins while the professor loses the respect of the rest of the students, and incivility and rudeness usually remain a problem throughout the semester. Many professors regretted being lenient and not having the student removed from the class permanently.
- "Be respectful." This not only consisted of being considerate of students but also included being mindful of the power differential between professors and students and the propensity of some professors to be bullies themselves. Confronting bad behavior with an invitation to meet after class and then listening to discover the student’s frustrations was recommended.
- "Quickly involve the right people" to ensure that policy is followed and that the student is provided due process.

Although it’s usually an automatic response to inform the department chair or dean of such behavior, most professors found this to be unhelpful or even a mistake. Many reported that their chair and dean not only didn’t know what to do but tended to think less of the professor because he or she was having problems in class. Contacting the dean of students was the most frequently recommended step. The dean of students and his or her office are experienced in dealing with student issues, and in the majority of cases, faculty who worked with them were appreciative of the actions taken and the help they received.
Rather than defaulting to the dean of students to deal with classroom bullying, it seems that we as chairs ought to make sure that any professor who approaches us with concerns about belligerent in-class behavior isn't automatically judged to be a problem teacher.

～ What If the Bully Is Your Boss? ～

This scary scenario summons up comments from three experts with different backgrounds and perspectives. C. K. Gunsalus is an attorney and professor who served as associate provost at the University of Illinois; she teaches leadership and ethics. Robert Sutton is a professor in the Department of Management Science and Engineering at Stanford University; he researches evidence-based management. Joseph Grenny is coauthor of four New York Times best sellers; he is co founder of VitalSmarts, a corporate training group. Quotes from the publications of these three follow.

Gunsalus’s recommendation for dealing with a bullying boss may seem pessimistic; she would likely say it constitutes reality and a strategy for self-preservation:

If what you perceive as inappropriate or unprofessional bullying is directed primarily or solely at you, and it’s severe, not something you can grin and bear, your best bet is probably to cut your losses and leave. If you’re isolated in that kind of situation, unless the bully is very near the end of his or her career, the costs to you from staying are likely to be vastly disproportionate to the benefits, no matter how strong your commitment to the institution. This is especially the case if your bête noir is relatively recently appointed and basking in official favor.

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If the problem is more widely shared and/or acknowledged, you still must exercise great care and caution, and should still consider whether you’d be better off leaving. The nature of authority in organizations means that you’re facing an uphill battle in which you may well come to be seen as the problem. There are constructive steps that can be taken, but they are far beyond the scope of this book and require an ongoing delicate calculus, the essence of which, at every turn, must be whether it’s more costly to you to persevere than to move on.

Sutton is only slightly less pessimistic. If standing up to the bully is not a viable option for you, he recommends finding spaces and occasions where you can hide or counter, perhaps by going out of your way to be supportive of others (which could include students). “But,” he says “detached indifference, simply not giving a damn, might be the best that you can do to survive a workplace that subjects you to relentless humiliation.” He also says that finding other victims, if they exist, and sharing feelings and experiences with them might be helpful.

But talking with other people about your problems isn’t a panacea. . . . I’ve found that conversations, gossip sessions, and even therapy sessions led by professionals sometimes do more harm than good. These gatherings sometimes degenerate into ‘bitch sessions’ where victims complain bitterly about how bad things are and how powerless they are to stop it.

Sutton agrees with Gunsalus when he points out that attempting to adapt to bullying has a dark side. It “might provide
just enough protection (or, worse yet, fuel just enough delusion of protection) to stop people from bailing out of relentlessly demeaning situations—even when they have exit options."

Grenny has more optimistic counsel, but his advice centers on interacting with a powerful boss who tends to be defensive rather than with an unmitigated bully. He writes that "bosses will listen to just about anyone who is skilled at making them feel safe" and that "there are two special considerations in making bosses feel safe" (the wording that follows is a summary):

- You must show that you respect both your boss as well as his or her position.
- You must assure your boss that you are committed to his or her goals.

"When bosses get defensive (or anyone for that matter)," Grenny concludes, "it is generally because you have failed to assure them on one or both of these two points."

I have never been victimized by an out-and-out bully, but I’ve witnessed it happening to others. I’m not a psychologist, but I sense that the inner damage of intense bullying goes much deeper and persists much longer than most of us can appreciate. In this regard I can agree with Gunsalus and Sutton, who recommend cutting your losses and leaving. If taking a different job means disrupting the schooling of your children or your spouse’s job, I would deliberate with them and other important stakeholders, consider the options, and be prepared to deep-six the existing situation, move on, and celebrate being free from the kind of mistreatment that no one ever deserves.

\[\text{Summary for Dealing with Bullies}\]

Even if you don’t have a problem with bullying in your department, consider establishing antibullying policy. This is most effective if it’s institutional rather than departmental.

- Regularly revisit and uphold your policies on civility and bullying. Make it clear that bullying and incivility are not tolerated in your unit.
- Be on the lookout for signs of bullying; don’t assume it could not happen in your department.
- Be open and receptive to anyone (including students) who might approach you with claims or concerns regarding bullying. Make it safe for them to talk with you.
- Recognize that chairs can be bullies and are often prone to wink at bullying, especially if the perpetrator is an influential or favored colleague.
- Keep in mind that conventional approaches to dealing with problem faculty are often ineffective for dealing with bullies; it takes special experience and training to appreciate the nuances of the bully culture and to know what to do about it.
- Understand that removing a bully without changing the social order only creates a vacancy for the next one.

\[\text{Notes}\]

What About the Problem Characters Who Emerge During Times of Change?

David

David had been dean of the College of Arts and Sciences for four years. The college was in the midst of a reinvention. Whole departments had been dismantled and new ones formed, some out of pieces of three previous units. The college curriculum had been reduced by one-third. Satellite units had been closed. One of David's fellow deans from a different college shared his impression that "this is the sort of thing that results in earthquakes and suicides."

When David had come to the college from another university, a friend back home, who had himself been a dean, said, "Now remember, David, the last thing you ever want to do is reorganize. Just go down there and preside. Show up at events. Promote the goodness in people. Help them celebrate. Enjoy yourself." David had intended to follow that advice, but university demographics and budget cuts had led him to...
Appendix B

Approved by: [name of institution, department, committee]

Date of Approval: ______________

Contact Person: ______________

The University of ______ is committed to maintaining a workplace that is free from bullying and related behaviors, a workplace where all people are treated with courtesy and respect. We define bullying as any action that offends, intimidates, humiliates, ridicules, demeans, undermines, or threatens another individual, especially if it undermines the person's physical or emotional health. Such conduct is unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

Examples of bullying may include but are not limited to the following:

- Threats or actual violence
- Aggressive, abusive, or offensive language including vulgarity
- Unnecessary physical contact
- Recurring nonconstructive or excessive criticism
- Hounding or disproportionate scrutiny
- Ridicule, scorn, teasing, mocking
- Being asked to do trivial, unpleasant work including that below your level of competence
- Being isolated, shunned, ignored, rejected, or excluded from normal activities
- Having information or entitlements afforded others withheld from you
- Having fabrications made about or against you

Bullying is typically committed by a person who is relatively more powerful against a person who is less powerful either in status or personality, and it leaves the targeted person feeling less secure, less respected, less energized, and less welcome at work. Thus the best person to determine when bullying is occurring is the victim, not the perpetrator or even a bystander. It is therefore important that any employee who feels that he or she is being bullied be granted a receptive audience with the contact person identified above and that this person not dismiss or negate the validity of the victim's assertion. In addition, it is essential that any department employee who comes forward with a concern about bullying, either as a witness or as a victim, not be retaliated against by the alleged bully or by any others.

Bona fide bullying normally consists of a recurring pattern of conduct. Bullying may be perpetrated by or against either gender. An isolated incident is not considered bullying but may warrant discipline. Conducting performance evaluations or peer reviews or enacting disciplinary procedures does not in and of itself constitute bullying. Constructive feedback and comments are expected in the carrying out of university business but must be done in a way that does not demean or humiliate.

Anyone who bullies will be subject to discipline, which could consist of a verbal admonition, a formal written warning, probation, a decrease in pay, or loss of employment.