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COLLABORATION GONE WRONG: WORKPLACE BULLYING

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Abstract: Sadly, bullying at the workplace can sometimes become a dire reality of one's professional life, with long-lasting effects on one's professional and personal image, self-esteem, motivation, and efficiency. Along with the pressure exerted by tight deadlines, collaboration with co-workers from diverse cultural backgrounds, rapid changes of market dynamics, bullying can prove extremely detrimental to one's productivity and inner life quality, and it can often result in the professional failure of an otherwise perfectly able and skilled individual. The paper explores the possibility of introducing the issue of workplace bullying to students as a part of the reality of the world of work during the "English for Professional Communication" seminar. It briefly tackles issues such as: definitions of the concept, forms of workplace bullying, causes and negative effects, possible ways of dealing with it, in an attempt at raising awareness of the existence of the problem and of the mechanisms behind it, in the hope that "forewarned is forearmed".

Keywords: bullying, emotional intelligence, English for Professional Communication, teamwork, victims/perpetrators

I. Introduction

Bullying has always been a sad reality of workplaces throughout history, but it has been hardly ever recognized as such. It is true that the last decades have witnessed a turn of tide related to the concept of communication at the workplace, as a result of the widespread acknowledgement of the fact that better communication and improved human relationships are likely to result in increased productivity and more flourishing businesses. Nevertheless, in spite of the countless courses on communication, teamwork, and leadership held in companies throughout the world, the phenomenon of bullying is neither eradicated nor likely to be so too soon.

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The present paper explores the possibility of introducing the concept of workplace bullying to students in the Polytechnic University of Bucharest, as part of the discussions about the world of work held during the "English for Professional Communication" seminar. Currently, the seminar deals with a series of issues related to communication at the workplace, among which intercultural communication, organizational culture, CV writing, interviews, oral presentations, teambuilding, issues approached by means of practical activities accompanied by brief theoretical presentations of the concepts. While the aim of the seminar is to add its small contribution to the formation of future professionals and to endow them with a positive attitude and some "soft" tools to meet the challenges posed by their professional life, I believe that one should also have in mind the worst case scenario, as pessimistic as this may seem. Thus, the idea of tackling the sensitive issue of workplace bullying stems from the need to raise awareness of the fact that, in spite of one's effort and willingness to make things work, sometimes collaboration may go terribly wrong, resulting not only in unattained business goals, but also (and perhaps more importantly), in significant personal damage.

I am aware that approaching a concept that belongs to the tricky domain of psychology during a language class may seem a presumptuous thing to do, at best. However, given that dealing with bullies is indeed a part of the realities of work as much as dealing with cultural differences or dealing with the need to have good public speaking skills, raising the issue of bullying before actually having to face it in the workplace may hopefully help students recognize, avoid, or openly fight the phenomenon, as the case may be; especially since "this silent epidemic" (Williams, 1) has been overlooked too often, in spite its potential of violence: "cavalier justification for accepting psychological injury at work include 'that is why they call it work', 'capitalism depends on competition' and 'get used to him, he's just that way, grow a thicker skin.' (Namie, 2003:3) Instead, it should be acknowledged for what it is, damaging behaviour which deprives the individual of the basic right to be respected, accepted, and recognized as a human being among other human beings. Thus, "bullying closely resembles the phenomenon of domestic violence. Both were shrouded in silence before being brought to public attention. Partner violence victims initially were blamed for their fate. Eventually, the behaviour was deemed unacceptable by society as codified in law. Workplace bullying deserves the same evolution from recognition to prohibition. The glaring difference between

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domestic and workplace psychological violence is that the latter finds the abuser on the employer's payroll." (Namie, 2003:3)

What follows is an overview of some of the topics worth taking into consideration in a discussion about bullying during the "English for Professional Communication" seminar; some of the questions to be raised are: What exactly counts as workplace bullying? What type of contexts can foster workplace bullying? Who is the typical bully? Who is the typical target? What kind of resistance methods do bullied employees develop? What are the effects that workplace bullying has on business outcomes and, especially, on the bullied individuals' psyche? And, finally, what can one do about it, given the fact that passivity is likely to foster other types of monsters: "Lack of intervention implies that bullying is acceptable and can be performed without fear of consequences; bullies learn that power and dominance lead to dominance and status, peers learn to align with the dominant individual for protection and status; victims may learn helplessness, submissiveness and negative means of gaining attention from peers and peers learn to blame the victim" (Pepler and Craig, 8).

II. Bullying at the Workplace: Related Issues

Research on bullying started as early as the 1970's in America and it continued to thrive in Europe during the following decades, especially in Scandinavia, probably due to the fact that, in terms of Hofstede's cultural models, these countries have a low level of power distance and feminine orientation, fostering equality and collaboration (Matthiesen and Einarsen, 204). The term of "workplace bullying" was coined by British journalist Andreas Adams in 1992 and there has been a lot of overlap between various words describing one and the same reality: "Psychological Violence, Psychological Harassment, Personal Harassment, "Status-blind" Harassment, Mobbing, Emotional Abuse at Work" (Workplace Bullying Institute, *Definition of Workplace Bullying*), with a host of euphemisms: "Incivility, Disrespect, Difficult People, Personality Conflict, Negative Conduct, Ill Treatment", which, according to the same institute, do nothing else than offend victims of bullying by rendering the phenomenon less serious than it is.

According to WBI, workplace bullying "is repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators. It is abusive conduct that is

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threatening, humiliating, or intimidating, or work interference − sabotage − which prevents work from getting done, or verbal abuse" (WBI, *Definition of Workplace Bullying*). The problem with identifying what counts as bullying is whether certain negative behaviours are to be seen only as mere isolated incidents or they can indeed be qualified as something much more serious. Bullying seems to have four main characteristics: "power imbalance; bully's intent to harm; victim's distress; repeated over time (reputations and power differential become consolidated) (Pepler and Craig, 4). Thus, a more extensive and a more complete definition of bullying would take into consideration these elements as well: "Bullying at workplace means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone's work. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e. g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of social negative acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal 'strength' are in conflict" (Einasern et al, 15).

Bullying can be overt or it can take more subtle forms, and that is why it is sometimes so hard to pinpoint and prove. Most of the time it is perpetrated by superiors against subordinates (72%, according to WBI, *Key Findings*), but there can be also peer-to-peer bulling. In terms of gender, 60% bullies are men and 57 % of victims are women (WBI, *Key Findings)*. Typical bullying behaviours seem to align along three dimensions of aggression: physical-verbal; passive-active; direct-indirect (Buss in Matthiesen and Einarsen 217). These behaviours include tendency to: isolate, ignore, single out, or discriminate the target on grounds of ethnicity, gender, religion etc.; constantly criticize and undermine the work, the proposals, the decisions and the personal and professional value of the victim; put words into the target's mouth, spread rumours about the target; insult, call names, threaten, scream, use domineering body language to intimidate the target; deny the victim access to opportunities to promote, to get trained, assign work overload, steal the victims' work and pass it for one's own (Wiedmer, 37; Winbolt, 8; Matthiesen and Einarsen, 217).

Another question to be tackled is how come that bullying can be possible in the first place, or what kind of contexts foster bullying. Some of the factors that contribute to the phenomenon are: stressful working environment and dissatisfaction with management

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(O'Moore and Lynch, 97; Matthiesen and Einarsen, 227), poor information flow, competition for promotion or financial benefits and for the leader's appreciation (Vartia in O'Moore and Lynch, 102; WBI), recruitment based on overt interpersonal aggression rather than teamwork skills and emotional intelligence (Naime, 2003: 4), management unwilling to punish bullies or unable to do so due to lack of specific legislation (WBI), co-workers' passivity (WBI; Pepler and Craig, 8), focus on outcomes and productivity at any cost, even one in terms of human dignity (Naime,2003:4), and, mostly, the very personality of the bully (Naime, 2003:3). Which leads us to the next questions: who is the typical bully/who is the typical target?

While on the playground or in the schoolyard, bullies may simply amuse themselves by inflicting suffering on others, having a distorted sense of what is right and what is wrong, research has concluded that typical workplace bullies have low self-esteem, which makes them resort to aggressive behaviour when feeling threatened by more competent co-workers, thus hoping to control the situation and even turn it into their favour (Matthiesen and Einarsen, 226; Namie, 2003: 4; Wiedmer, 36). They are often individuals who themselves used to be victims of bullying perpetrated in the family or by peers (Pepler and Craig, 6), or they simply lack self-management abilities and don't know how to cope with their own emotions (Moss, 1). They may also have this tendency innately, having high SDO − social dominance orientation, which makes them attracted to competitive environments with clear hierarchies, where social status and financial resources are highly regarded (Moss, 1). Conversely, they can acquire this tendency as a result of finding themselves in a position of authority – thus, they live the power paradox: "power puts us in something like a manic state − making us feel expansive, energized, omnipotent, hungry for rewards, and immune to risk − which opens us up to rash, rude, and unethical actions" (Keltner, 1), an idea much in tune with the Lucifer Effect theory, which states that, given certain contexts, any good person can turn evil: "we should be aware that a range of apparently simple situational factors can impact our behaviour more compellingly than we would expect and predict (Zimbardo, 47).

Bullies' relationship with power can ambivalent, as they misuse power when they are in a position of authority, but tend to be submissive and fearful when they are to report to those above them (O'Moore and Lynch, 100). They display a 'Jekyll and Hyde' nature – innocent and charming when in public and vengeful when there are no witnesses, and they seem to be unable to make the difference between leadership and bullying (Bullying Online,

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Who is Behind Workplace Bullying?). On the other hand, in their turn, targets are "prosocial", cooperative, empathic, and trustful (Namie, 2005:15), ethical and honest, thus more likely to become "whistle-blowers" (Wiedmer, 37), therefore sure victims of the bullies' revenge. They can also have "low propensity to violence and a strong forgiving streak", they are "quick to apologize, even if not guilty", and they "find it difficult to say no" (Bullying Online, *Why Me?*). Thus, many positive traits possessed by the targets turn against them the moment they start being perceived as signs of weakness. Being different in a way or another (in terms of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability etc.) will also make an individual prone to being bullied, as the odd one in the group.

The effects of bullying can be far-reaching and devastating at a personal level and as a consequence, at an organisational level as well, given that businesses are, after all, dependent on human beings. The victim can develop a large number of psychological problems with increased levels of somatisation: low self-esteem, guilt, severe anxiety, obsession with the bully, isolation, heightened sensitivity, lack of sleep, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic attacks (Namie 2003:3; Bullying Online, *What Does Bullying Do to Health* ?), anticipation of the negative event, loss of concentration or memory, depression, feelings of anger or helplessness, even suicidal thoughts (WBI, *Workplace Bullying Health Impact*), all these caused by "the shattering of the basic assumptions that victims hold about themselves and the world, including assumptions creating a sense of personal invulnerability"(Jannoff-Bulman in Matthiesen and Einarsen, 231).

Victims of bullying often develop a host of resistance strategies, which, in their turn, are often counteracted by the bullies, and differences of perception on one and the same act lead to escalation of conflict: "bullying-affected workers might frame their resistance as a moral imperative, essential defensive responses, or efforts to be treated with the basic minimum of human decency. Bullies and their supporters, on the other hand, might frame these same messages and actions as insubordination, disloyalty, and troublemaking" (Lutgen-Sandvik , 409). According to Lutgen-Sandvik's study, there are at least five ways in which targets choose to fight the aggression perpetrated on them: exodus (quitting), collective voice (co-workers agreeing on the existence of bullying at their work place and making plans to counter-act it), reverse discourse (taking formal/legal action against the bully), subversive disobedience (refusing to comply, avoiding the bully, retaliating), confrontation (directly

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confronting the bully with the aim of belittling the latter in public) (Lutgen-Sandvik, 412). From a pragmatic point of view, such strategies can lead to undesired organizational outcomes such as absenteeism and turnover, reduced productivity (Matthiesen and Einarsen, 233), damage to the reputation of the organisation, payment of compensation as a result of court decisions (Winbolt, 14).

These strategies are more or less consciously adopted and used at an individual level, some of them being instinctive systems of defense, through which bullied persons try to protect their human core and a sense of self-worth. At a more formal level, specialized advice on the steps to be taken against being bullied include: recognizing bullying for what it is, at the level of the bullied people, of the bystanders and of the higher authority in charge with the organization; seeking medical and psychotherapeutic help and getting health and self-esteem restored; seeking legal help and exposing the bully by documenting bullying actions and getting the employer/human resources/ trade union involved in the conflict (WBI *Target Action Plan*); if nothing else works, considering changing jobs in order to preserve your sense of humanity and wellbeing, which should prevail over everything else (Bullying Online, *What Can I Do if I am Being Bullied*?).

III. Conclusion

Workplace bullying can be counterproductive, at best, and heartbreaking, at worst; it needs to be addressed by organizations more seriously, starting with the recruitment process (screening out those candidates who have the potential of becoming bullies) up to the moment when early signs of bullying appear and when bullied employees ask for help. It is my belief that getting familiar with the theoretical concept and its manifestations from the very beginning of one's professional life or even earlier, during one's studies, is in fact an exercise of awareness of the realities of the world of work, one that helps young graduates avoid being caught unawares by this dire phenomenon; thus, tackling the topic, even if briefly, during the "English for Professional Communication" seminar may prove to be useful later on, especially for those students who are likely to be easy targets due to their cooperative, ethical, and trusting nature.

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