

NOT ACCEPTABLE

An Exploration of Workplace Bullying

Marijke T. Moerman



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firing the mind

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*For all those wounded by the bullying behaviour of others,
be it at home, at a place of work, or at play.*

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About the author

Marijke T. Moerman has worked as a person-centred therapist with clients in the mental health field and in private practice. She spent many years researching the phenomenon of workplace bullying, which took on a form of urgency after she experienced the devastation of her own episode of being bullied in her place of work. Since then, she has designed and delivered workshops and published on the subject.

Her book, *Not Acceptable: An Exploration of Workplace Bullying*, is a succinct and accessible text which was a direct outcome of her own experience and written in the hope it will serve others with similar experiences and to support practitioners, and others, who work with victims of workplace bullying.

She earned her BSc in social science (psychology) from the Open University and her MSc in counselling from the University of Abertay in Dundee. She gained a doctorate in counselling studies in 2011 from the University of Manchester, with a thesis entitled “Working with suicide: The impact on the person-centred counsellor”. Marijke found this both challenging and rewarding.

When Marijke is not writing on her next subject of interest, you might find her indulging in spending time with her grandchildren, volunteering in the local museum, spending time with friends, and travelling abroad.

Preface

Workplace bullying often flies under the radar and is an insidious, toxic, isolating, and shameful practice which frequently leaves those targeted with long-term psychological scarring. Productivity and performance, morale, and employee relations as well as retention rates among employees and absences from work being seriously counterproductive, it will gravely compromise organisational strength and health within a company when bullying becomes a reality.

For the individual caught in the bullying drama the impact and consequences on working life will be to their personal and professional cost. Psychologically the person will ultimately, after suffering a considerable time of exposure to bullying and harassing behaviour at work, become vulnerable in their grief and isolation. They feel their confidence in self is waning, questioning themselves in their judgement of what is happening at work, unable to understand the behaviour of the bully as it feels to them to be well removed from reality. The person will start to feel alienated from work colleagues and feel their loyalty to the job questioned. The impact on their mental health will eventually be significant as stress, anxiety, low mood, depression, disturbed sleep patterns, panic attacks, paranoia, and at times suicidal thoughts,

evolve out of this situation. In some instances, the bullied person may give in to their suicidal thoughts and decide to end their life, with all the dramatic and deeply unsettling consequences thereby. The physical symptoms after a prolonged period of being exposed to bullying behaviour are well documented, and may present as, for instance, chronic headaches, stomach aches, back aches, insomnia, palpitations, irregular heartbeat, nausea, increased perspiration, anxiety, exhaustion.

This book has been written to give a short exploration of the most relevant points of a bullying situation, including legislation pertaining to workplace bullying and harassment to support counselling practitioners and others to provide some focused background information about the difficult interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships of the bullying drama when clients arrive at their therapy session disclosing a possible bullying situation. The bullying dynamic is complex and multifaceted, and it would therefore be prudent to be familiar with some of the various aspects the bullying phenomenon poses.

Since the voices of the bullied are seldom heard, emphasis has been placed on the narratives of individuals who were willing to share their experiences of workplace bullying to give the practitioner an idea of what to expect when welcoming the prospective client. Although the participants' full and often meticulous accounts are evidential of the impact bullying episodes have had on them, and that even after many years it is still "alive" in detail, it does not necessarily touch on the complexities involved in workplace bullying. A person's personality, perceptions, and behaviour may have had an impact on the bullying situation as there are multiple players involved, each needing to be considered, and how they impact on each other separately and collectively.

In literature on workplace bullying, the term "victim" is used more frequently than the term "target", and although both terms are used intermittently throughout the book it should be kept in mind that there is a distinct difference between the two.

Target—The bully has chosen someone as their next "person of interest", their target.

In acknowledging you are the chosen target it opens the door to become objective and generalise the bully's behaviour, thereby reducing the impact on physical and psychological health.

Victim—Feeling helpless, powerless, and fearful will invoke the victim mode. Physical and psychological consequences are most likely to follow.

A target still has preserved their power but sadly a victim has lost their power.

Background

A personal experience of workplace bullying, and its debilitating process and aftermath, provided the catalyst for the writing of this book. Not as a biography but rather as an endeavour to add to the body of knowledge on workplace bullying with not only a focus on the theoretical background of bullying and harassment in the workplace but also to hear the voice of the target and/or victim. The experience of being caught in the web of workplace bullying is a very individual feeling of confusion and despair, of loss, fear, and isolation, and is often soul-destroying in nature as is made clear in the extensive narratives of those portrayed in Part II.

As I had never previously experienced that level of antipathy in a professional environment and despite my training as a counsellor, I felt at a loss as to how to address the behaviour levelled at me and its impact on me. My work ethos of self-awareness, honesty, humility, and humanity forming the basis for being an empathic and effective practitioner, I found it difficult to understand the other's behaviour, the attitude towards me, the dismissive and at times mocking language that was used, and struggled to place my experience into something that was

meaningful to me, either positive or negative. The effect it had was even more potent as I was working in a mental health organisation.

Despite witnessing and experiencing bullying and harassing behaviour directed at several other members of a small staff group, I had not even considered or recognised that, eventually, also I was being bullied.

The tension started when, with other members of staff, I witnessed a colleague with nearly twenty-five years of loyal service being targeted by the newly arrived manager. Being aware that my colleague was being treated in an incredibly devious way, I voiced my disbelief to other colleagues who also were aware of the situation but felt unable to intervene. The message had been clear: “Do not get involved.” The situation scared me, and I felt quite powerless and weak. This unsettling incident left a mark of discontent within the team. I felt guilt and even disappointment in myself that I had not been strong enough to counter the unfairness and destructiveness of it all.

Shortly after our colleague was “released” from their post, the conflicting and confusing messages, indifferent attitudes expressed in dismissive body language and flippant remarks, the trivializing of concerns I brought forward, the lying and engaging in malicious degrading of my professional competence, all started. It was not only experienced as a personal attack but also created an insidious and toxic atmosphere in which some staff members became caught up and ultimately colluded with the bully. I later came to understand their reaction of distancing themselves from me as colleagues, as they may well have been afraid of receiving the same treatment or even losing their job.

The climax of this year-long situation came with a contemptuous look during a staff meeting from my superior who, incidentally, had previous counselling experience. For the outsider and perhaps onlooker an insignificant moment, but it was the point at which I felt that the very core of my values and beliefs of morality and integrity, of decency, had been “molested” and violated. At that moment I was left with a feeling of extreme vulnerability and inexplicable fear. I filed a concern with the management team. The concerns I brought forward to them were followed up as if they had amounted to a complaint; written statements to explain the nature of the concerns were pointed out as being “vitriolic”, and the bullying activities described as “a personality clash”. Instead of at first being able to voice my concerns and for management to hear,

assess, and hopefully de-escalate the situation, no individual support was offered. None of the staff team members were allowed to contact or even communicate with me, or another colleague who experienced a similar traumatic experience at the time. It left me feeling isolated and vulnerable. Team members, who had been witness to different instances of aggressive behaviour, were interviewed at very short notice, but were not able to give a true account of the situation, with some of them colluding with the bullying manager and therefore effectively having “morphed” from an observer into a bully. At the time it made me think they had become afraid of the bully and would be better off siding with them until I had been “dealt with”. This situation, drip-drip in nature, played out over a period of nearly two years, and ultimately led me to resign from a job I had enjoyed and was successful in. Not only did I lose my job but also in the process some of the friends I felt I had made at work, and in effect I felt I had been forced to leave earlier than I had envisaged.

My experience has had long-lasting effects that surfaced through physical and emotional problems such as panic attacks, anxiety, low mood, listlessness, loss of confidence, irregular heartbeat, back problems, disturbed sleep patterns, and irritability. In general, I felt emotionally paralysed. Workplace bullying can be equated to trauma and if not resolved or at least addressed and worked through can result in post-traumatic stress disorder and/or post traumatic embitterment disorder.

However, receiving unconditional support, understanding, and being made to feel validated by family, friends, supervisor, therapist, and a few work colleagues through endless chats, while attempting to analyse the dynamics of what had happened, and slowly but surely over time finding understanding and meaning from these exchanges, took me to a place where I was able to “reset” myself. This episode could so easily have had a lasting negative effect on myself, destroying my identity at work as a counsellor.

In therapy, the counsellor believing in me and validating the fact that what had happened was unjust and unfair was helpful. But working on my shattered confidence levels, it took long months of self-reflection and self-talk before I could restore faith in myself, and to put the unfairness of it all in a “box”. Naively, I did not understand at the time why

anyone would display such a malicious and venomous attitude for no apparent reason.

During this time, I had missed the deeper explanation of the workplace bullying dynamic. I felt I developed an almost pathological need to know more which, it appeared, kept me in a festering and victim mode, and within the perpetrator's radar.

This experience and its immediate aftermath left a hollowness, at first an inability to be productive on a personal and professional level. The feelings and thoughts I experienced were many and presented themselves in the desire for revenge, hate, disbelief, anger, fear, hurt, sadness, bitterness, disillusionment, to name a few. Feelings of revenge were at times unbridled and scary, an emotion apparently not unheard of, but common sense would prevail when I considered the destructive consequences of such an action.

To "reclaim" myself I felt I needed to find an in-depth understanding of my situation and with this understanding to come to a point of acceptance of what had turned out to be a deeply incapacitating experience through no fault of my own, and after a period of mourning my loss to be able to move on.

After some time, the paralysing state of indecisiveness and listlessness was slowly ebbing away, and moral strength started to appear in its place, and with it the curiosity of the phenomenon that bullying is. The "chats" with friends and colleagues became more focused and discussion more driven in nature. Extensive reading on the subject followed as I immersed myself more in the theoretical aspects of bullying, while further attempting to also gain understanding through academic knowledge and trying to achieve something positive out of a distinctively negative situation.

Finally, through a process of post-traumatic growth, I was able to "reset" myself, but not until nearly three years had passed.

Yet, by no means is my experience unique.

Ultimately, the whole episode had a positive impact both personally and professionally. It has given me a deeper insight into the feelings of distress, hopelessness, isolation, and injustice individuals experience when having been at the receiving end of the workplace bully, and the impact it may have on clients if they feel not acknowledged through a lack of knowledge of the workplace bullying dynamic.

This instilled a drive to look behind the scenes of the workplace bullying drama, not only with a focus on the players, but also the phenomenon that workplace bullying represents as well as the laws that should explain its illegality or fail to deliver justice for those affected.

Personally, it has given me an understanding of the harsh, unrelenting, and destructive reality that workplace bullying is and the difference we can make as professionals in a client's life dealing with this situation, all too often, in their working environment.

My hope is therefore that this book not only brings some enlightenment to those who find themselves in this predicament, and for it to be a guide to those supporting victims of workplace bullying.