

Bullying – we need to see the other side of the coin

Jill Flint-Taylor explains why managers must be allowed to apply the necessary pressure to get the best performance out of their staff – without fear of being labelled as bullies

We hear a lot about bullying these days, from headlines about senior politicians to quotes from trade union representatives in the BA strikes. In our work with public sector managers, we are increasingly asked how they can apply pressure positively, challenge their employees and tackle performance problems without being accused of bullying. Not surprisingly, anxiety about this is rising as the inevitable cuts loom large, and managers and their teams are going to have to do even more with even less. This anxiety deserves to be taken just as seriously as we take the anxiety, distress and damage caused by being bullied.



This is a tricky area, not least because bullying, like stress, has a subjective element based on the perceptions of the person at the receiving end. In some ways the two problems overlap – certainly bullying can be a cause of significant stress, and it might also be said that being stressed leads some people to behave in a bullying way.

There are, however, important differences. For one thing, it appears to be easier to make a successful claim of bullying or harassment than it is to claim work-related stress. This may be partly because bullying can be pinned down to the observable behaviour of one person or a small group of people, so it's easier to hold individuals – and through them the organisation – to account.

We have always taken a clear stand against bullying – it is one of the core questions we ask in our stress and wellbeing audits, and we have been involved in many successful interventions to help organisations reduce the incidence of this and other stress-inducing behaviour. Lately, however, I have become increasingly concerned about the extent to which managers feel at risk of being accused of bullying. I worry about the impact this has on their wellbeing and on their ability to create positive challenge pressure for their teams.

It is in no one's interest for the term "bully" to be used lightly – it leads to false accusations and devalues the term. Yet I feel this is happening too often. An accusation of bullying is, quite rightly, taken very seriously by public sector organisations. So if you feel that your manager is putting you under unacceptable pressure it may be tempting to say you feel bullied – this will get your concerns taken seriously, and will avoid you being labelled as someone who suffers from stress.

You might argue that if the pressure is unacceptable, the manager must be bullying. But the key is the manager's intentions – not the level of pressure or the impact on the recipient. The Directgov website makes this clear

in its definitions and illustrations: "Bullying at work is when someone tries to intimidate another worker, often in front of colleagues ... Bullying includes abuse, physical or verbal violence, humiliation and undermining someone's confidence."

Of course, it is not always easy to make these distinctions in practice – assertive and aggressive behaviour may be driven by very different intentions, but look similar to the person on the receiving end. Managers need to be aware of this, and must take responsibility for managing their behaviour accordingly. Most importantly, someone in authority who behaves aggressively must recognise that they run the risk of bullying others and of being accused of doing so. On the other hand, the manager who puts someone under pressure to perform should not be accused of bullying – even if this pressure is causing stress – unless there is evidence that the intention is to intimidate. After all, pressure is a legitimate part of the manager's toolkit for motivating and performance-managing staff. This is the common sense approach we would take to bullying at school or in other areas of life and it should be no different in the workplace. The key is in understanding: people in authority must do everything they can to make sure their intentions are properly understood, and those who report to them must play their part by checking their own assumptions.

It is the manager's role to provide both challenge and support. Without doubt, if the challenge pressure is tipping over and causing stress, something must be done to address this. The wellbeing and performance of teams and organisations depends on leaders' ability to get the right balance between challenge and support. The problem is that it has become too easy to frighten public sector managers into taking their foot off the "challenge" pedal. The results can be disastrous, not just for performance, but also for the wellbeing of other team members. On many occasions I have encountered the situation where a manager is blocked from taking firm action to address a performance issue, and I hear about it from other members of the team who are stressed by the imbalanced workload or other problems this has caused for the team as a whole.

The consequences of this for organisational performance have been seriously underestimated in the past. With times about to get much tougher in the public sector we need a motivated, energised and resilient workforce and it is important for senior leaders to tackle this problem now. Let's keep the term "bullying" for the ill-intentioned and intimidating behaviour it is meant to describe – it is to everyone's benefit that we do so.

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