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Advancing Women In Leadership

## When the Wrong Woman Wins: Building Bullies and Perpetuating Patriarch

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Some women are not good managers; and that is exactly why some companies keep them. For 30 years, researchers and working women have watched the progression of females into America's corporate management positions, and in their examination of the glass ceiling phenomenon, Corsun and Costen (2001) report that 40% of US executives, managers, and administrators are now women. During the early years of the women's movement, it was hypothesized that as the number of women entering the working public increased, a feminization or softening of business organizations would also occur. Publications such as Helgesen's (1990) *The Female Advantage*, Helgesen's (1995) *The Web of Inclusion*, and Rosener's (1990) "Ways Women Lead" led us to believe that kinder, gentler, and nurturing environments fostered by humane, caring, and intuitive leaders were developing. Multiculturalism and diversity were the expected outcomes.

The facts reported today do not support this earlier view. Most women managers remain at the lower to mid-level ranks of management, and the workplace is more violent, competitive, and aggressive than before (Corsun & Costen, 2001). Popular media such as *Time* (Labi, 2001), *Management Today* (Kennett, 2001), and *Psychology Today* (Bertuccio, 2001) have all featured stories concerning bully pervasiveness, and as many as 21% of workers may have been targeted directly by office bullies (Keashly & Jagatic, 2000; Namie & Namie, 2000). In situations involving bullying, 81% of the bully behavior is attributed to employees in a

supervisory role (Namie & Namie, 2000).

One expectation is that much of the bullying is perpetrated by males, perhaps threatened by the increased number of women in the management ranks. Sadly, however, this is not the case. According to Namie's U.S. Hostile Workplace Survey (2000), men and women are equally responsible for the bullying behavior, and 84% of those employees targeted for the abuse are female. Surprisingly, women bullies target women employees more often than they target males (Namie, 2000; Namie & Namie, 2000).

In other words, despite the increasing number of women in America's workforce, the corporate environment has become even more hostile, especially to women. Instead of laying the groundwork for the advancement of the sisterhood, women have joined men in the harassment of their own gender. This in no way suggests that women should be denied admittance to the hallowed halls of corporate work; it does, however, encourage examination of the phenomena contributing to this unexpected outcome. What type of system fosters or maintains a bully's growth? Why do women bullies target women? Are women bullies helping to perpetuate the existing workplace patriarchy? This paper explores the dynamics that promote the development of women as bullies and that encourage women, perhaps unconsciously, to support a system that keeps them subordinate.

## The Bully Model

In her book *Why So Slow?*, Valian (1999) contends that the glass ceiling continues to be held up, in part, by gender schemas: those stereotypes and biases learned in childhood and that perpetuate into adulthood and consequently into the workplace. The gender schema for men includes "being capable of independent, autonomous action...assertive, instrumental, and task-oriented" (Valian, 1999, p. 13). For women, the schema is different and includes "being nurturant, expressive, communal, and concerned about others" (Valian, 1999, p. 13). While everyone, regardless of gender, has and expresses all of the behavioral traits to a certain degree, men present to the world more of the masculine traits and women present more of the feminine (Matusak, 2001; Valian, 1998). The norms of organizations are defined in masculine terms, and "feminine attributes are valued only in the most marginal sense" (Ely & Meyerson, 2000, p. 109). The criteria for success that organizations have established are based on the stereotypical male characteristics such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, and autonomy (Bailyn, 1993). Over time, these leadership traits are taken for granted and become legitimized, though often invisible, guides for future leader evaluation. Employees who want to advance up the corporate ladder may feel they must demonstrate that they carry the male leadership traits and that they are willing to use them. Instead of embracing the feminine characteristics that could balance the historical male hierarchical model, corporations may force women to assume the characteristics of the dominant culture or may base promotions on the masculine traits that women possess (Corsun & Costen, 2001; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Valian, 1998).

Bully behavior is the amplified acting out of masculine behaviors that range from blatant demonstrations such as aggressively screaming, yelling, and threatening

dismissals to subtle, underhanded displays. Making unreasonable job demands, criticizing abilities, and excluding targeted employees from meetings and necessary information are all found in the bully's repertoire (Namie & Namie, 2000). Research on bully behavior and harassment concludes that bullies, like harassers, are driven by a need for power and control and choose to seek out a perceived weaker employee to dominate (Namie & Namie, 2000; Kurth, Spiller, & Travis, 2000).

The corporate world in which workplace bullies thrive is established according to the white male experience and represents an extension of the military and sports models followed by men for generations (Corsun & Costen, 2001; Harragan, 1977; Hornstein, 1996). "Organizational power hierarchies, competitive work climates, and the bunker mentality of contemporary corporate life all provide a hospitable environment for the toxin of disrespect, and even induce it, from bosses who would otherwise be just" (Hornstein, 1996, p.6). According to Corsun and Costen (2001), competitiveness and the desire to dominate are understandable consequences of the existing corporate system:

The corporate office is the habitat of the powerful. Corporate America is the kind of place that is natural for white males. The game of business has a unique military-sports theme, the rules of which were established years ago by White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant male 'captains of industry.' The military influence is evident in organizational form and structure, whereas the organization's function (to win the game or make a profit) is influenced by team sports. (p. 4)

The bully's goals parallel those found both in military battles and in sports arenas; competition is the ultimate game in the bully's mind, and winning requires a singular focus. In order to win, bullies believe that their targets must be beaten up and eliminated (Namie & Namie, 2000). New leaders stepping into this existing military/sports model must seek and destroy the weakest opponents in order to prove their worthiness to the powers that be. Many managers who use these bullying techniques are viewed as effective and are rewarded for their take-no-prisoners style of tough leadership (Russell, 2001). Divide and conquer is the mode of operation that allows the bullies to maintain control over their employees. Any show of collegiality among ranks is perceived as threatening and quickly dispersed to forbid the development of strength in opposition (Cox, 1993).

As the numbers illustrate, women unfortunately are enlisting, or are being drafted, into the bully battalion at a rate similar to that of their male counterparts. And, more frequently than men, the opponents women challenge are other women (Namie & Namie, 2000). This becomes a more painful and confusing dynamic because the existing gender schemas indicate that women should be nurturing caregivers—especially toward the females who are already disadvantaged in the eyes of corporate observers. This is also a damaging dynamic, because women who oppress other women help to maintain the existing social order in which men remain dominant and women are subordinate (Acker, 1990; Brunner & Costello, 2002).

The Bully's Role in Perpetuating Tyranny

If there is a perceived lack of rewards for females throughout the corporate structure, the competition for power among women may be intensified. Because feminine traits, skills, qualifications, and accomplishments are undervalued in a masculine system, certain women may feel a greater need to demean other women in order to protect the little power base they have already achieved (Ely & Meyerson, 2000). With lower rank and limited financial resources, the most vulnerable member of the corporation is typically the subordinate female, and she provides the bully with the easiest prey in the competition. Thus, female bullies help limit the number of women able to challenge the existing hierarchy.

Through bully methods, women supervisors and managers may provide organizations with the underhanded behaviors that keep competent women from being noticed and promoted. When male executives allow female bullies to demonstrate these bad behaviors toward other women, the men remove themselves from the risk of legal and ethical concerns. Thus, female bullies protect and preserve the male-dominated, existing structure while men are able to keep their hands clean. The bully behavior is tolerated because "organizations of all kinds keep a comfortable place for bosses who will do their dirty work" (Hornstein, 1996, p. 103). Workers who publicly question "why can't women get along?" may not realize the part that the system plays in these power dynamics. The woman promoted to the highest levels in the organization may not need to possess great credentials or management skills. In fact, her sole strength may be her ability to puppet upper management's traditional agenda. So in addition to keeping other, more competent women from advancing, the female bully also serves as a poor representative and role model for workingwomen in general.

Lewis Maltby, President of the National Work Rights Institute, states, "Bullying is the sexual harassment of 20 years ago; everybody knows about it, but nobody wants to admit it" (Russell, 2001, p. 4). However, when a mean woman discriminates, harasses, and mistreats other women and no man is deemed responsible, it is difficult for the victim to find protection or legal recourse. In 1980, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) developed guidelines for identifying and dealing with a hostile work environment, but the interpretation is based on sexual discrimination and harassment, and bullying has yet to be defined in concrete legal terms. This means that the bully's victim, unlike the victim of sexual harassment, has no clear-cut path of protection to follow. And without consistent legal avenues readily available, the bully's victim cannot expect an alteration of organizational behavior and may believe that changing jobs is her only option.

According to the US Hostile Workplace Survey (Namie, 2000), 82% of bullied employees lost their jobs, and 38% left voluntarily. The target that chooses to stay in the organization may experience a drop in productivity, effectiveness, and opportunities for advancement. The Canada Safety Council (Institute of Management and Administration [IOMA], 2001) estimates that up to 52% of a target's day is devoted to counter-bully tactics such as building a defensive network, developing counteractive strategies, or seeking political allies. So, in reality, the bully has won, and the organizational structure remains intact.

Within this type of corporate atmosphere, other employees, wondering if they are the next target, understand that challenging the status quo may involve significant risk. In fact, employees often rally to support the bully out of fear of reprisals, thus weakening the prospects of other women forming support coalitions (Namie, 2000). Research shows majority group members are threatened by minorities who might join together for support (Cox, 1993); so the female bully once again, albeit inadvertently, helps to maintain a structure that limits the opportunities for all women, including the bully.

Even though she may feel she has joined the "good old boys' club", the club ultimately may not provide the female bully with the same upper-level positions afforded to its other members. Publicly, male leaders may compliment female bullies for demonstrating that "she kicks ass with the best of them" or "she's hard as nails," (Martin, 1996, p. 191); and in only 7% of the reported cases was the bully punished, transferred or terminated (Namie, 2000). But as Ely and Meyerson (2000) point out, aggressive, task-oriented women may also be criticized privately. While this criticism may remain secret because the organizational hierarchy does not want to appear discriminatory to women, it nevertheless may limit the bully's advancement thereby blocking the route for other women.

## Conclusion

Bully behavior, whether perpetrated by men or women, should be examined further because of the long-term costs allocated to both employees and the organizations in which they work. Health problems, legal problems, and productivity problems tied to bully behavior all represent expenses that could be avoided (Flynn, 1999; Hornstein, 1996; Namie, 2000). Turnover expense also should be examined-- and not just as it relates to replacing targets. Women who do not buy into a masculine style of leadership may find themselves in a position where they feel forced either to conform to bully behavior or to take their talents elsewhere; and starting over slows their progress. "To the extent that employees find it difficult to conform to the image of the successful employee, or find it difficult to bring all of their relevant skills and insights to their jobs, important human resources are lost" (Ely & Meyerson, 2000, p. 128).

Like other researchers, we agree that corporate management needs to acknowledge that bullying is a major employment issue and requires education, training, and a zero tolerance policy. More importantly, bullied employees need to feel there is a place to be heard and that interventions are possible. Existing laws concerning hostile work environment, defamation of character, and vicarious liability may need to be altered or expanded to include bullying behavior as a punishable offense (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 1999; Namie & Namie, 2000).

Real change, however, is possible only when management is willing to examine the model that rewards just a fraction of the behavioral traits that all employees possess. Until organizations recognize and reward "wholeness" of employees, the feminine and masculine traits we all embody, symptoms of a fragmented workplace will continue to rear their ugly heads. Sexual discrimination, sexual harassment,

and bullying fall on the same continuum and serve to maintain the existing corporate structure. While there is no shortage of change models available, what does seem to be missing on the part of executive management is willingness or desire to change. Women, even more than men, should not accept that the established model is infallible and certainly should not contribute to its continuing devaluation of feminine characteristics.

When the wrong woman wins, all employees lose. For thirty years we have wanted to believe that any woman manager would be a welcome change in any organization. We also have wanted to believe that as a woman climbed the corporate ladder she would extend her hand to other women following the leadership path. Recognizing that women are more likely than men to bully other women is hard to accept and even harder to discuss in a public forum. But the statistics should not be ignored. If half of the bullies in the workplace are women, then women managers need to assume responsibility for analyzing their roles and contributions to this organizational dynamic. Even one bully is too many.

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