



Leading Without Bullying

by Robert Whipple: MBA, CPLP

As I was having breakfast today, I was gazing out the window watching some robins chase each other around the back yard. I started thinking of the various animal species and the fact that in every group of animals, a certain amount of bullying behavior goes on. It is a "survival of the fittest" world in the animal kingdom. Maybe that is why we humans often exhibit some form of bullying behavior in order to get our way.

Bullying has become a key concept in our society. We see forms of it in every area from the school yard to Congress, from the boardroom to the barroom. We universally abhor the behavior in school kids, but yet we often see it practiced unchallenged as adults.

We know the incredible destructive nature of bullying because all of us have been bullied at some point in our lives, and we know it does not feel good. We know it leads to suicide in rare cases, especially in children, because they do not know how to cope with the powerless feeling of being bullied. They would simply rather die.

It is also true that each one of us has been guilty of bullying another person at some point. If you wish to deny that, you need to think harder. Some of us have played the role of the bully more than others. Some managers have it down to a fine art. Unfortunately, people in power positions have a greater temptation to use bullying because it is a way to obtain compliance. The problem is that, in organizations, mere compliance is not going to get the job done.

Organizational bullying is not confined to verbal abuse or strong body language. It also occurs when headstrong managers become so fixated on their own agenda that it renders them effectively deaf to the ideas or concerns of others. They become like a steamroller and push their agenda with little regard for what others think. In this area, there is a fine line between being a passionate, driving leader who really believes and advocates for the goal versus one who is willing to hear and consider alternate points of view.

While we are mammals, we have a more developed brain and greater power to reason than lesser species. If we use that power, we should realize that bullying behavior usually leads to the opposite of what we are trying to achieve. It may seem like a convenient expedient, but it does not work well in the long run.

If you are an elk, you are only thinking of the situation at hand and reacting to a threat to your power or position. You are not thinking longer term about relationships and possible future alliances, nor do you care how your behaviors might inspire other elk to perform at their best. The aptitude to plan and care is what separates man from the animal world.

Applying this logic in an organization is pretty simple. Managers who bully their way to get people to do their bidding are actually building up resentment and hostility. While this may produce short term compliance, it works against objectives long term. By taking a kinder approach, managers can achieve more consistent results over the long haul and obtain full cooperation from people rather than simple compliance.

Here are ten tips to reduce the tendency to bully other people:

1. **Ask if you would want to be treated this way** - Simply apply the Golden Rule.
2. **Observe the reaction and body language in other people** - If they cower or retreat when you bark out commands, you are coming on too strong.
3. **Be sensitive to feedback** - It takes courage to listen when someone tells you that you are being a bully. Ask for that feedback, and listen when it is given.
4. **Speak more softly and slowly** - Yelling at people makes them feel bullied even if that is not your intention. When you get excited, lower rather than raise your voice.
5. **Ask for opinions often** - Managers who seek knowledge as opposed to impressing their brilliance or agenda on others have less tendency to be bullies.
6. **Think before speaking** - Ask yourself if this is the way to gain real commitment or just temporary compliance. Is it good for the culture?
7. **Reduce the number of absolutes you use** - Saying "You never do anything right" cannot possibly be true. Soften absolutes to allow for some reason.
8. **Listen more and talk less** - When you are shouting at people you cannot possibly hear their rationale or their point of view. Hear people out; do not interrupt them.
9. **Don't attack or abuse the weak** - Just because you know an individual is too insecure to fight back is no reason to run over him or her. It only reveals your own weakness.
10. **Write your epitaph** - Regarding your relationships with people close to you, how would you like to be remembered after you are gone?

My breakfast observation for today was that animals have a hard time following the Golden Rule, and there is a bully in every group. We humans have the power to actually modify our behavior to think more strategically and do things that are not only right for now, but right for the long term. Caring for people creates a culture of trust that is sustainable.

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