

Successful Supervisor Part 28

Dealing With Bullies

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

In any group of people (or even animals) there is usually one or more bullies. For this series I will give tips for people, but if you spend much time watching animals you will see ample evidence of bully behavior.

For any supervisor, the bullies take up an inordinate amount of time and energy to keep in check. Reason: these people have found out that they can usually get their way by being the most formidable people in the group. They learned that the technique works years ago on the school-yard playground.

In order to have peace in the valley, other people eventually learn to not challenge the bully, so it falls on the shoulders of the supervisor to maintain order. Sometimes it is the supervisor herself that exhibits the tendencies of a bully.

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 every day 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 supervisors 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 or supervisors 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, I suspect 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. Supervisors who bully their way to get people to do their bidding are actually building up resentment and hostility. While this practice may produce short term compliance, it works against objectives long term. By taking a kinder approach, supervisors 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. Keep in mind that the definition of what constitutes being yelled at is in the head of the "Yellee" rather than the "Yeller." (My apologies to "Old Yeller").
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 & Don't be a "Steamroller"** - 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, or even tomorrow?

Supervisors must recognize that when they are bossing people around, they are really working at cross purposes to the culture they would like to have in their area. It takes effort to retrain yourself to avoid bully-like behavior if you have been practicing it since you were a child. Following the tips above is a good place to start changing.

This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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