

Bullies Cause Poor Performance

By Howard Bloom and Lynn Johnson. Copyright © 2005 by Lynn D. Johnson, Ph.D.

Are any of your managers or leaders bullies?

Jack was Senior VP of Finance when the company was acquired. The new owner was determined to improve financial returns. He sent in Charlie to 'whip the company into shape.'

When we met Jack, he was a nervous wreck. No matter what he and his staff did, Charlie terrorized them. It was never enough. As we walked around the department and spoke to people, we saw the fear in their eyes. And the resumes on their computers. Everyone was looking for work.

Jack hated his job, and was looking for a new position. What does it cost to replace a person at Jack's level? Probably at least one and one-half times his annual salary. If you hire wrong the costs could run into the millions of dollars.

High turnover? Low productivity? One possibility is there is a bully hiding in your organization.

Where do bullies come from? We can identify the bully early in life. These differences may not be genetic, but may start in the womb. An Italian scientist, Alessandra Piontelli, has studied identical twins from their first weeks as embryos to their childhoods. She's noticed that the two compete within their mother's uterus. One will become dominant and the other subordinate. The dominant will hog up the most comfortable space, leaving only a cramped corner to its brother or sister.

As one-year-olds, the two will show the same characteristics. One will be active, an extrovert, the other passive, an introvert. The extroverted, domineering twin will do most of the communicating, even if only by facial expression and gesture. The other will stay very still, huddled into itself as if it were still seeking protection from its more boisterous and expansive genetic double.

And it will watch its brother unstintingly. Keeping a close eye on your "superiors" is a key to that aspect of dominance hierarchy called the "attention structure," and shows up in creatures ranging from chimpanzees to psychiatrists.

The problem is obvious: The bully sucks up attention that should be focused on pleasing customers and producing high quality goods and services. Ironically, Charlie was producing the very problem he was sent to solve, unsatisfactory productivity. You cannot bully people into high performance.

How do you deal with a bully?

First, be willing to part company. We have seen companies where the bully was given free rein because it was believed the division couldn't exist without him. If you aren't willing to pull the plug, you can't do what is necessary to help transform the bully into a positive force.

Try these strategies:

1. Create a reward system that is based partly on retaining the best people and on measures of company morale.
2. Offer the bully coaching and training so he can succeed in the new environment. Tell him you want him to succeed.
3. Watch for times the bully listens well, shows sensitivity, or backs off. Give attention for cooperative behaviors, not for competitive ones. Bullies have a hunger for attention. Make

sure you feed that hunger appropriately.

4. Encourage direct feedback and facilitate face-to-face meetings where the employees have a chance to talk to the bully about their concerns.

5. Speak directly to the bully. Don't hesitate to tell him how his behavior is distracting you from accomplishing your mission. Point out how it is in his best interest to get the highest and best performance out of you and others. Tell him you don't work well under threats, and neither does anyone else.

Bullies make us fearful of speaking our minds. Overcome that fear, and have an exit strategy in mind. If you feel you could never leave your job, you will never have the courage to speak the truth.

At the same time, you must stay flexible. Any time the bully shows some gentleness or concern about others, speak up. Tell him how it makes you want to work harder. Don't assume he will get the message indirectly.

Jack finally found the courage to speak directly to Charlie. He told him bluntly he was thinking of leaving and if there weren't an atmosphere of respect he would leave. He said, with some emotion, that he had lost hope of ever pleasing Charlie and that coming to work was a torture. He had no energy left to make the company great, he was just trying to survive.

Charlie was shocked. He had no idea of the effect he was having, and in the coming months he improved his own behavior significantly. It wasn't enough. Jack eventually left the organization to form his own company.

Face your bullies. Don't let them rob your company or your career of its potential.

Quote:

The bully sucks up attention that should be focused on pleasing your customers.

Howard Bloom, the leading theorist in the field of mass behavior, is the author of [The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition Into the Forces of History](#) and [Global Brain: The Evolution of Mass Mind from the Big Bang to the 21st Century](#), and the forthcoming book, [Reinventing Capitalism: Putting Soul in the Machine](#). See www.howardbloom.net. Send questions or reactions to LJohnson@solution-consulting.com.

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