



Behavior in Organizations

Leadership: Moving Away from Bullying

by Terry E. McSween, Ph.D., Trustee of the Cambridge Center

[From the newsletter of Quality Safety Edge.](#)

Do you have managers or supervisors that are guilty of bullying other employees in your organization? Bullying has been in the press a lot in these past few months: articles and news coverage on bullying in our schools and even in professional sports. Many people think that bullying is confined to the playground or high school hallways. Yet, some people at work use their positions at work to intimidate others and prefer to describe their intimidating behavior—throwing objects, slamming doors, yelling, threatening, name calling—with terms like “tough manager” or “high expectations” or “perfectionist.” They don’t realize or don’t want to admit that, in reality, they are bullies.

In an article last year, I discussed one of the factors that can prohibit the success of a behavior-based safety process: workplace bullying. In that article, I explained some of the causes of workplace bullying and the negative impact that it often has on organizations and promised to follow up with solutions to the problem. I suggest doing the following:

- Modeling positive leadership from the top
- Ensuring that positive leadership cascades down through the organization
- Identifying and coaching (or when necessary, terminating) bullies
- Empowering employees with effective responses to help address the problem
- I’ll use an unnamed past client from the past to illustrate each of these elements.

Modeling positive leadership from the top

Some years ago we worked with a petrochemical client that had a significant bullying problem. In fact, the problem was so bad that it threatened the survival of the facility. The facility employed a large number of foremen whose predominate experience was turnarounds. As discussed in the previous article, the management of turnarounds has a very different focus than a plant that depends on successful long-term working relationships. The site struggled with problems that are typical of start-up operations. In response to those problems, senior leadership developed a reputation for throwing temper tantrums and exhibiting threatening behavior. That same style soon cascaded through the organization, with threats and anger becoming the most commonly employed vehicle for motivating employees. The climate resulted in lack of quality in production, a high rate of errors in documentation, frustrated line management from foremen through management, and many angry employees. Departments had conflicts with one another and fought more than collaborated. The production managers blamed the maintenance group for not keeping the plant running. The maintenance people blamed the production personnel for not having the plant prepared for maintenance work, and claimed they always stood around for hours before they could start the job, then got yelled at when the completion was late. The poor employee relations created a variety of other kinds of problems. The passive-aggressive behavior of purposefully stopping up the toilets became a common problem, for example, causing even more leadership tantrums directed at the employees. The organization suffered from massive turnover, especially among the most skilled craft and professional personnel. No one who had a choice stayed around more than three months or so.

The first step in turning this organization around was getting a senior leadership team with the right interpersonal skills and emotional maturity to create a more positive leadership process, yet one that aggressively addressed occurrences of bullying, whether it was emotional displays of anger, harassment, discrimination, or retaliation. In this case, most of the site’s senior leadership team was replaced with an “A-Team” of talent that the Corporate Executives selected from elsewhere in the organization. The new leadership team had to create the expectation that all levels of leadership remain objective when dealing with problems and they modeled the correct behavior. This included promoting a strategy of recognizing one’s own emotions, whether feelings of anger or frustration, or other negative emotions, acknowledging the feeling, and deciding how to have the most constructive discussion about the issue.

To be clear, we did not try to make showing emotion a bad thing, rather the expectation was that your behavior must not direct anger (or other negative feelings) toward anyone in the workplace. So, the expectation was not that you control your feelings, but rather that you control your behavior, regardless of your feelings. Labeling your feelings and expressing them were okay, as in, “That (behavior or outcome) really makes me angry. I expect . . .” (followed by a discussion of the specifics).



Dr. Terry E. McSween, founder and CEO, [Quality Safety Edge](#) has twenty plus years of experience consulting in educational, institutional, and business settings. He speaks at safety conferences worldwide and founded the Behavioral Safety Now conference held each year. He is the author of *The Values-Based Safety Process: Improving Your Safety Culture with Behavior-Based Safety*.

Part of the strategy also involved creating the expectation that leaders investigate whatever is prompting the negative emotions. The outcome of their study should be a better understanding of the source of their feelings and what should be done about it. The established technique for dealing with these situations was to ask at least two questions to seek clarification of whatever was done or not done that caused the negative feelings. Then, when appropriate, provide feedback by stating what was done and the impact (or potential impact) on the organization.

Ensuring that positive leadership cascades down through the organization

While the starting place was senior leadership, all levels of leadership participated in a one-day workshop that reviewed the expectations of leadership and included specific training on the skills outlined above.

Identifying and coaching (or when necessary, terminating) bullies

Three months after the training was completed the organization conducted a survey to assess leadership practices throughout the organization. The senior leadership team used the survey data to identify areas with problems. Then they worked with the leaders in those areas to develop action plans and provided coaching to support improvement efforts in those areas.

Leaders conducted walk-arounds and visited with personnel throughout the facility. They asked questions about what they observed and how people felt about their part of the operation, particularly regarding any frustrations or barriers to doing their work safely and meeting quality standards.

Leadership responded promptly to investigate all reported incidences. Depending on the findings of those investigations, the response might include informal coaching, development of a performance improvement plan, a verbal warning, a written warning, suspension, or termination. Human Resources revised the employee manual to clarify expectations and define the criteria for disciplinary action. During this time, senior leadership had to terminate several supervisors who continued to be disrespectful in their interactions with others, or who were unable to get control of their tempers.

Empowering employees with responses to help address problems

Once the leadership foundation was established, the organization began to expand the involvement of employees in creating solutions to the plant's quality and production employees. The resulting improvements and accomplishments began to create a different level of pride in the plant's successes. The senior leadership actively solicited and recognized success stories and quality champions in the workplace.

The end result was a significant turnaround of the culture in less than nine months. The plant had other problems, but they had a process for addressing them. Once the bullying was eliminated, leaders and employees at all levels could work collaboratively to address whatever issues arose. That level of cooperation could not have occurred in an organization that had the level of conflict created by the bullying and heavy handed management. Fortunately, this organization was willing to examine the behaviors that were causing anger, frustration, and retaliation. They recognized that bullying can't be eliminated by simply calling it another name.