

# Beware the Bully

By Robert Killoren

You have just entered your new job as director of research administration. You feel fully prepared to lead the staff in really making a difference at your institution. All the tools seem to be in place. Policies and procedures are carefully laid out. Processes are trim and honed. The office's mission statement and goals align perfectly with your concept of customer service. But something just isn't right.

After a couple of weeks you notice that office morale is low. There seems to be tension in the air. At staff meetings, you just cannot get people to participate, and when someone does, it is to criticize or point fingers. It may be time to check if you have a bully in the workplace.

Bullies can be found in almost any type of organization, including higher education. A 2010 scientific survey conducted by Zogby International for the Workplace Bullying Institute found that 35% of American workers have been bullied on the job. An additional 15% have witnessed work bullies in action and suffer vicariously.<sup>1</sup>

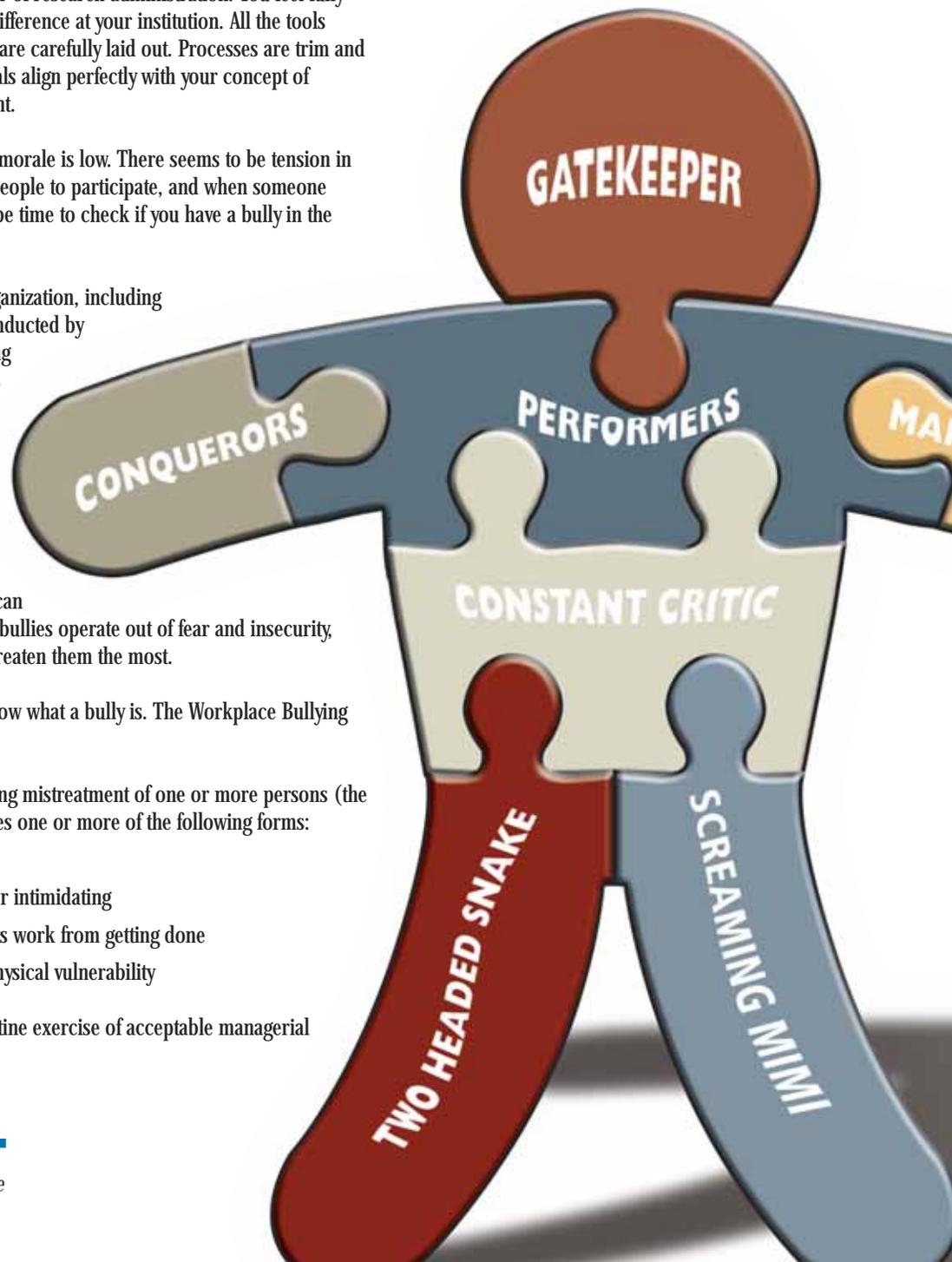
Bullies in the workplace make an office unresponsive, impersonal, and adversarial. They cause an increase in sick days and reduce employee retention. In fact, the bully can rob you of your best workers. That's because bullies operate out of fear and insecurity, and your best employees are the ones who threaten them the most.

How do you spot a bully? First you need to know what a bully is. The Workplace Bullying Institute<sup>1</sup> defines workplace bullying this way:

Workplace Bullying is repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators that takes one or more of the following forms:

- Verbal abuse
- Conduct which is threatening, humiliating or intimidating
- Work interference, sabotage, which prevents work from getting done
- Exploitation of a known psychological or physical vulnerability

It is not incivility, simple rudeness, or the routine exercise of acceptable managerial prerogative.



Workplace bullying may not be easy to spot, however. Bullies are masterful manipulators and most frequently work in hidden and secretive ways. They often know the rules of the game very well. They can spout the latest jargon from management self-help books and can walk a tightrope between subtle bullying and out and out harassment. Bullies may even work their way into your trust. They sometimes are very effective in meeting deadlines and production schedules. They kiss up and kick down, flattering the boss while victimizing those under them.

So, how do you spot a bully? Here are some suggestions from experts in the field.

## Bully Characteristics<sup>2</sup>

### CONQUERORS

Only interested in power and control and protecting their turf  
They try to make others feel less powerful  
Can act **DIRECTLY** (e.g. demeaning and/or rude words, gestures, or tones) or **INDIRECTLY** (e.g. orchestrating battles and watching others disembowel each other)

### PERFORMERS

Suffer from low self-esteem so belittle targeted persons (can be obvious or subtle put-downs)

### MANIPULATORS

Interested only in themselves  
Easily threatened and vindictive  
Experts at lying, deceiving and betraying  
Take credit for the work of others  
Never take responsibility for their own "errors"

## Bully Profiles<sup>3</sup>

### THE CONSTANT CRITIC

"[P]ut-downs, insults, belittling comments, name-calling"

Constantly criticizes the targeted person's competence

Glares at the targeted person or deliberately avoids eye contact when the targeted person speaks

"[N]egatively reacts to the targeted person's contributions with sighs, frowns or the "just sucked a lemon look"

"[B]lames the targeted person for fabricated errors"

"Makes unreasonable demands for work with impossible deadlines"

### THE TWO-HEADED SNAKE

Pretends to be nice while sabotaging the targeted person – one minute vicious, the next minute supportive and encouraging

Ensures that the targeted person doesn't have the necessary resources to do the work

Makes nasty, rude or hostile remarks to the targeted person privately; puts on friendly face in public

Steals credit for work done by the targeted person

Says one thing to the targeted person and something completely different behind the targeted person's back

Will "kiss up the ladder and attack those below"

### THE GATEKEEPER

Purposefully cuts the targeted person out of the communication loop

Ignores the targeted individual or gives that person the "silent treatment"

Models isolation or exclusion of the targeted person for others

### THE SCREAMING MIMI

Poisons the workplace with angry outbursts  
Intimidates through gestures

Purposefully interrupts the targeted person during meetings and conversations

Discounts/denies the targeted person's thoughts or feelings.

As the head of an office, you bear the responsibility of providing a safe and comfortable working environment for

your staff. Here are some things you could do to protect your workplace from bullies.<sup>4</sup>

- Make it clear that bullying will not be tolerated. (Contact your HR Department for help.)
- Offer training in the types and characteristics of workplace bullying.
- Provide workers a contact person for questions, concerns, or allegations
- Survey office climate
- Have a procedure to investigate allegations and document findings.
  - Take remedial action.
  - Meet with the alleged bully
  - Issue stern warning
  - Write up a remediation plan
  - Monitor remediation plan
- Terminate bully if remediation is not effective

An "accidental bully," one who is not aware of how his or her behavior is affecting others, will normally respond positively to a one-on-one conversation to address concerns and resolve the situation. Pursuing an "intentional bully" can be a difficult challenge but it is one a director needs to take on in order to provide a safe and productive office. **N**

### References

1. <http://www.workplacebullying.org/>
2. Harvey Hornstein; *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey: How to Identify and Overcome Abuse in the Workplace*, Riverhead Books, 1996 (As cited by and quoted from Richardson and McCord, see below.)
3. Gary and Ruth Namie; *The Bully at Work: What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity on the Job* (As cited by and quoted from Richardson and McCord, see below.)
4. John E. Richardson and Linnea B. McCord, "Are Workplace Bullies Sabotaging Your Ability to Compete?" *Graziadio Business Review*, Pepperdine University, 2001



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