

## **Andrea Adams, British Pioneer Bio and Text of 1994 Speech**

Andrea Adams, British broadcaster and journalist was the first person to recognize the significance of bullying in the workplace in Britain and its overwhelmingly destructive influence on people's lives and personalities.

Her first two documentaries on the subject, broadcast on BBC Radio 4, elicited a flood of correspondence. No one, it seemed, was immune to the unjust and insidiously undermining effects of workplace bullying - no institution, no profession, nor any level within the hierarchy.

The programs changed Andrea's life, leading her to write a book 'Bullying At Work', published by Virago in 1992. The book remains a landmark in the field and is essential reading, not only for those victimized by bullying but also for all involved in effective management.

In 1993, Andrea was diagnosed with widespread cancer. It was typical of her that she made no secret of either the nature or gravity her illness and no concession to it either.

Until the last few weeks of her life, she continued to travel throughout the country, speaking at personnel and union conferences, running management workshops, giving media interviews and persistently lobbying government officials to strengthen existing employee legislation by specifying bullying alongside harassment.

Andrea Adams' death in 1995 left a legacy of many people affected by her personality and her work.

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### **Text of May 24, 1994 Speech by Andrea Adams given at a conference sponsored by the British Trade Union MSF (Manufacturing, Science and Finance)**

Isn't it amazing, the Employment Secretary has stated that the Government deplores workplace bullying. That it wishes to see employers adopt the most modern management practices and would always encourage employers to treat their employees with the consideration they are due. If this were truly the case, how does one explain the apparent failure of so many organisations to protect their people from one of the most stressful, destructive, humiliating and financially undermining forces at large in the British workplace.

Let me give you an example. Only last week I had a telephone call from a very angry and distressed managing director of a well known company who was being bullied by his immediate boss. He is employed within the same organisation, which 5 years ago repeatedly ignored the plight of 50 men and women in one branch of a high street bank. They suffered bullying for 4 + years before complaints about the behaviour of one of their managers was properly acknowledged.

So much for modern management practice. This is why people like you have a key role to play in identifying bullying, understanding why it happens and reminding employers of their legal obligation which is to protect the mental, as well as the physical health of their employees.

There is, actually, an important link between school bullying and workplace bullying. Just as for the child, terrified of going to school to be taunted all over again, adults being bullied in the workplace are reduced to the state of frightened children. As one man told me: "It made me feel as if I were five again" No wonder people have described this experience of going to the office as like entering the cage of an unpredictable animal, to face another week of professional crucifixion.

Workplace bullying constitutes offensive behaviour through vindictive, cruel, malicious or humiliating attempts to undermine an individual or groups of employees. And these persistently negative attacks on their personal and professional performance are typically unpredictable, irrational and often unfair. This abuse of power or position can cause such chronic stress and anxiety that the employees gradually lose belief in themselves, suffering physical ill-health and mental distress as a result.

Over the past five years, people have described this experience as everything from psychological terrorisation, to emotional rape, to entering a war zone. Their accounts are all so similar that I can now predict when somebody contacts me, what they are actually going to say and the way in which they identify bullying, and their physical and emotional responses to it. It establishes a clear trend and fear in the workplace.

When people are afraid of course, no one works well. The "telling the sod what to do" management style may appear to get the required results but when there is no let up, the real impact is to create individual, organisational and economic ill-health. Despite the fact that British research has linked workplace bullying to between one-third and one-half of all stress related illness, large numbers of employers appear to condone this destructive behaviour through their inaction.

Take the situation in one major company. Here, there was such unrest, absenteeism and prolonged illness, that one, untypically astute personnel manager decided to circulate a questionnaire among the 22 male staff to try and establish what was going wrong. Some of them wrote pages about their personnel manager using terms like "Genghis Kahn" and "Adolf Hitler" and if it wasn't for our Dunkirk spirit in the face of adversity this man would have no one left working for him.

With families to support and mortgages to finance, keeping quiet is usually the chosen option in preference to confronting the bully which, anyway, results in people getting the sack. It is also a chosen option in preference to making a formal complaint. The power of the bully lies in making people remain silent through fear. Without prescriptive legislation it is usually immensely effective. In this particular company the manager had the confidence of his superiors for 20 years because he appeared to get the right results, but at what costs?

Do they really want to be responsible for the suffering of these peoples, loved ones who bear the brunt of anxiety, irritability, depression and even outward aggression. When it is happening, it is insidious. It is like a malignant cancer, it creeps up on people without anybody able to appreciate what it is that is making that person feel these ill effects.

When it comes to people trying to explain what is happening to them, they find it difficult to pinpoint. Complaints can sound terribly trivial to the untrained ear. "He kept calling me Fishface in front of my colleagues and he would repeatedly have a go at me if I crossed my sevens when I was doing the figures at the end of the day," a bank worker wrote about his manager.

"She used to time how long we spent in the loo and then threaten to deduct it from our pay," a teenage clerk about her office supervisor. " In 3 years he only said good morning to me twice," a sales executive about his financial director. "He told me that I had a strange and warped personality and that I had got to change my attitude," that was an accusation regularly thrown at a popular colleague by a line manager who was sadly lacking in social skills.

It is a gradual wearing down process and it makes the individual feel demeaned and inadequate. When, you are told you are hopeless often enough it goes inside you and you begin to believe it. You begin to feel it is all your fault. So why does it so often go undetected? The fact is that complaints about such ill treatment are typically dismissed as a personality clash or bad attitude, or strong robust management, or working in a funny way. Call it bullying and the organisation is more than likely to throw up its hands in horror.

Bullying is always somebody else's problem and never theirs. Things like that happen in school playgrounds and not apparently respectable places of work. Yet, name calling is just as prevalent in the workplace as it is in the school playground. Take the clerk with the female boss who constantly made sneering references to her working class background. Always referring to her in front of colleagues as "a member of the lower orders." Papers that came through the post for that particular person, for the clerk to record, were withheld by the boss so she would sit at her desk for up to 2 days with nothing to do and would then be shouted at for being lazy.

Bullies are inclined to hover over people, like birds of prey waiting for a distant mouse to twitch. Constantly over monitoring peoples efforts. When they pounce they tend to torment their victim over trivia, belittling them with personal remarks and often nit-picking their way into irrationally explosive outbursts. Those staring eyes you hear people describe are no exaggeration. Fixed on an individual as they often are they cause grown men and women to feel afraid.

For more than two years now in one local government establishment, the senior manager has used threatening body language and the sound of his voice to terrify many of his staff into obedience. Reports that have been laboriously written, to his exact specifications are frequently greeted with " Well that's a load of shit. " He hurls papers across the room on a regular basis. He then moves the goal posts as if the first had never existed. Unsubstantiated criticism goes on all the time. He threatens, he

humiliates, he intimidates. But because he makes money for the organisation his employers regard this as good management style. And they have systematically dismissed complaints about this man's terror tactics which leave staff with a feeling of tremendous sense of injustice.

Bullying can take many forms. The list is endless but these are some examples:

- Setting objectives with impossible deadlines, unachievable tasks in the time given.
- Removing areas of responsibility and giving people menial or trivial tasks to do instead.
- Taking credit for other peoples ideas.
- Ignoring or excluding an individual by talking only to a third party to isolate another.
- Withholding information.
- Spreading malicious rumours.
- Constantly undervaluing effort.
- Persistent criticism.

You know the sort of thing, sitting in an office meeting, when one individual is ridiculed in front of the rest. They were publicly scorned for not putting forward ideas. Even if the ideas were forthcoming of course, they would probably be dismissed or ignored. The bully may then say that this person has no get up and go. In fact, that person may be too cowed to even make a move through fear of getting it in the neck again. These people will never win because the bully is someone who always thinks that they are 100 per cent right.

Bullies are also pretty good at taking credit for other people's ideas. Ignoring someone's existence is another way of putting someone down and keeping them under the bully's control. So is calling one person Mr. so and so, while everybody else is addressed by their first names. All this can be very demeaning and is it any wonder that peoples' confidence is so badly shaken and their confidence in their own ability is so badly damaged.

The more overt tactics to identify are the constant shouting at people to get things done. The appalling obscene language and the intimidating jabbing of the index finger, usually when the bully is blaming everybody but himself or herself, "You're a load of downright idiots, totally negligent, and as for you, you don't understand anything, you really have the smallest brain, didn't you ever go to school?" "And as for you, you fucking cow, when I tell you to do, you just do it, and you do it my way."

Everything this woman produced was returned covered in criticisms, ringed in red pen. Every time she left the room, she was asked to account for her absence. If she handed over a piece of work, in sight of colleagues, her boss would read it and then yawn ostentatiously before handing it back again. Telephone calls were being listened into, she was being moved from her own office to a windowless box room, containing only the bare essentials to do the job. This woman's only crime was efficiency.

Before the boss' promotion, this was a happy and effective department. Whenever the man concerned got things wrong he took it out on others. He also told lies all the time to

cover his tracks and he certainly didn't trust anyone but himself. That is why many bullies are very bad at delegating, it means losing control.

People who are constantly belittled and undermined suffer from loss of self-esteem. Their confidence crumbles and they believe that they are no longer good at anything. Workplace bullying leads to sleeplessness, many trips to the surgery for stress related conditions, such as anxiety, migraine, skin disorders, back pains, stomach problems, panic attacks, but most particularly, depression. People who have never touched cigarettes before often become heavy smokers because of the stress.

The needs of partners and children are often sidelined because the person being bullied can talk about nothing else. It is a way of relieving their intolerable stress. Last weekend I asked the three children of a successful sales manager what he was like during the two years that he was being bullied. "Aggressive", was their answer. "He completely lost interest in what we were doing". The wife of another man said there was no laughter in their house for three years while her husband was being bullied.

Does any employer really want to feel responsible for causing untold stress to the families of individual employees? Those who were not made ill, or driven out of their jobs as a result of this experience, would often try to clear their names in an attempt to regain their badly dented self-respect. Where no one appears to believe their side of the story, which is often the case, fighting back can become an obsession and the trouble with that is that it typically leaves people physically and emotionally drained.

Sometimes people resort to the same kind of petty behaviour as the bully. To try to get their own back. Take the woman who asked her boss if he would like a coffee and then spat in it when he wasn't looking. The teacher who let the Head's tyres down so he had difficulty getting home. Many others admit to ringing up the bully in the middle of the night just to disturb their sleep.

The way most bullies see themselves will rarely tally with the view of those placed under attack. While occasional anger to urge employees into action could be considered to have a constructive effect, the repeatedly damning, condemnatory and often covert behaviour of an adult bully results in a wholly destructive outcome.

For many people the bullying label has made sense of what has been happening to them and by putting a name to the experience has seemed less terrifying. It has given them back some sense of control. But don't expect these people to sit comfortably with the idea of unsupportive confrontation. Their paranoia is such that they will fear further recriminations whatever your assurances are. Many who try to fight their corner, seem to make matters worse for themselves and often get the sack as a result.

Those who pluck up courage to confront the issue are likely to be labelled trouble makers, or accused by the bully of insubordination. Furthermore, any complaints about a bullying boss can seem to imply criticism of those who placed this person in a position of trust and responsibility over others. So there you have another snag.

Since empowerment appears to be management buzz word for the 90's then recognition of the subtle, devious and hidden forms of workplace bullying is essential if this sort malicious ill treatment is to be legitimately challenged. However, in order to solve a problem you have to be able to recognise it and, in order to recognise it, you have to be able to give it a name.

Let me tell you the pitiful story of the effect on one man who was finally bullied out of his job in his 50s, without every discovering what it was that he was supposed to have done wrong. For 28 years he had worked for the same organisation without anyone in authority ever criticising his professional input. Then a new boss arrived and took a different tack. From then on he was regularly hauled into this man's office and barracked for a hour and a half at a time. This was a punishment he would remember for the rest of his life. In that respect the bully was certainly right.

Today, 15 months after early retirement on the grounds of ill-health he still wakes up terrified and sweating profusely in the early hours of the morning. He still doesn't know what it is he is supposed to have done wrong. As a result his sense of self respect has been irrevocably undermined. Unfortunately, for this man, he never knew precisely what to complain about. This is why the bullying label has proved to be so important for those people exposed to this dreadfully demoralising experience.

It is amazing to me that any organisation is prepared to condone an atmosphere of infectious fear simply through its inaction. Demeaning and devaluing men and women when they go to work is hardly an effective way of managing human beings, especially if they no longer enjoy doing their jobs. We all know that if we enjoy doing our jobs we tend to work well.

*Speech courtesy of Andy Ellis*