Framing the Bullying Revolution's Message

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Dr. Ruth Namie and I imported the term "workplace bullying" to the U.S. in mid-1997 and have been buried in the three domains of the phenomenon since. We started and continue to help bullied individuals by the thousands. We do intervene with willing employers and confront bullies there while implementing systemic solutions. We also direct the U.S. campaign to enact anti-bullying laws at the state and federal level. We have no laws yet. Our legal colleague David Yamada addresses the problem with American laws in his presentation.

It's apparent to us that bullying at work is a series of political acts. It involves competition for power and control characterized by artful and often dishonest practices.

From political discourse, we borrow UC Berkeley cognitive linguist George Lakoff's concept of "framing moral debates." He sees the central role of metaphor as more important than objective strength of logical, fact-based arguments to overcome opposition in the persuasion process. And every one of us in the bullying eradication struggle must be persuasive communicators. The major task for everyone in IABWH is to convince the constituents most relevant to your work to act to end the bullying.

For those comfortable with cognitive science, frames are similar to schemas and worldviews built through years of experience that become the heuristics that influence, and shortcut, an individual's decision making. They are the lenses through which one's world is perceived. Decisions are based less on fact gathering and careful deliberation than on uncritical snap judgments shaped by prior or vicarious experiences. In organizational life, legacies and traditions and "the way we do things here" drive schema-driven information processing. They bias input, encourage automaticity, and discourage mindful, deliberate fact finding before action.

Anti-target frames, schemas and mindlessness in organizations lead to well-known outcomes: targets suffer needlessly, witnesses fail to intervene, managers don't feel responsible to act, HR supports the bully, bullies bully with impunity and are reinforced, executives back the aggressors they favor, and organizations oust the innocent victims at high, but preventable, costs. Everyone loses except the perpetrators.

Let's detail a few existing counterproductive frames and scripts operating for four constituent groups – targets, co-workers, employers (including supervisors, HR & executives) and lawmakers. We then propose substitute frames to accelerate progress of the workplace bullying movement.

The principal constituent group – targets. Calling them targets instead of victims is the initial frame we use. Victimhood connotes a permanence of powerlessness.

Many bullied workers decline into self-destructive stress beginning with self-blame based on blind trust. It can be an overly positive set of assumptions (frame/schema/worldview) about the benevolence of others and an uncritical acceptance of an American mistake of preferring dispositional attributions for negative outcomes. The self-harming frame is that the world is fair (outcomes are proportional to input) and full of fair people looking out for your best interest.

A key characteristic of our target coaching is re-framing to help individuals fix responsibility for the bullying on the perpetrator who, in turn, is enabled by the employer. The causal locus for targets is external. Once they acknowledge this, they can start the journey to positive mental health and eventually extricates themselves from the situation. The healing frame: "you neither invited nor deserved" the bullying.

We focus on the health and safety of targets that have been involuntarily and arbitrarily denied them. We never instruct targets to confront their aggressors. If they could have, they would have. Holding victims accountable for their own abuse is counterproductive and cruel.

Framing bullying as abusive conduct makes it easier for targets to account for the health harm endured, to see the commonalities with domestic violence, and to differentiate their experiences from mere hostile (and illegal) work environments. We stopped blaming battered spouses; we can stop blaming bullied targets.

Another target schema that defeats the pursuit of dignity at work is a self-subordination/respect for authority frame. This makes the bully's work easier. These targets are not likely to ever report the abuse. Their physician will be one of the first to suggest that stress from work is damaging their health to the extent that leaving may be the only option. The best frame to reverse this is to discover a workplace bullying website that confirms that "you are not alone" and "everyone deserves to be treated in a non-abusive manner." This validating message triggers an introspective questioning of self-subordinating notions.

After targets put bullying behind them, they should be encouraged to depict themselves as "resilient, sturdy survivors" rather than victims. It resonates well

with American acceptance of people who overcome difficult circumstances – trauma victims, survivors of abuse, and individuals in recovery – to once again thrive. We love stories of successful turnarounds.

One can easily understand how a target's prior history of abuse creates a change-resistant schema dictating that the person does not deserve respectful treatment. For them, recovering from bullying at work presents a steeper gradient than for those with no prior history.

Over the years we have been stunned by the number of mental health professionals who refuse to acknowledge how bullying impacts a client's health. Bad clinicians misdiagnose injured targets as having personality disorders, invariant characterological problems. They seem to possess an authoritarian schema that cannot envision a worker's right to dignity and respect. An inexpert clinician's schema can re-traumatize and exacerbate the stigma for a target-patient. We have been training clinicians to prevent such preventable harm from occurring. Of course, professionals who treat victims abused in the family can readily help a patient abused at work.

Populating the target's world are co-workers who are sometimes direct witnesses. Ostensibly, they should rush to the rescue of the demoralized target. But the extensive literature on bystander non-intervention in emergencies and more recent work with interveners in sexual harassment cases demonstrates how difficult it is to overcome personal barriers that block action. Some of the prohibitive schemas are what Jerry Harvey (of Abilene Paradox fame) called negative fantasies, imagining worst-case outcomes. The non-intervener's frame predicts social disaster if bold enough to act – appearing foolish, botching the rescue, or eliciting a retaliatory response by the bully. All have fear in common. We have found that an effective counter to non-responsiveness is to designate interveners responsible to act whether immediately or not and to take low or high risks. Client organizations with trained teams of experts in bullying assign the task to team members. Thus, we institutionalize prosocial norms of social responsibility (intervention when needed) and reciprocity (if I'm there for you, you will be there for me in the future). Absent designated helpers, receiving voluntary help is unlikely.

Employers are the third constituent group. Bullying is perceived at three levels. The predominant frame happens at the interpersonal, intra-departmental level. Through the HR lens, bullying is minimized as "personality clash," "conflict," or the routine expression of a "tough management style." No executive need know if HR can silence or eliminate the bullied target through inappropriately applied conflict resolution and investigative procedures. To be fair, HR's role is mostly compliance with existing laws. When a target presents a complaint that does not

meet the legal criteria for an actionable complaint, it is easy for HR to discount the complaint as illegitimate and ignore it.

A corollary of the HR mistaken frame is to resolve problems on a case-by-case basis – the "bad seed" metaphor. This leads to inconsistent sanctions and an over-reliance on personality adjustment techniques like anger management and communication skills training for identified offenders. Resources spent on ineffective bully-changing strategies (because bullies are simply misunderstood visionaries) could be better spent restoring targets' safety and health.

The more appropriate frame for HR is to perceive bullying as "psychological violence" and ignored at HR's peril. The question to pose is "what if you missed all the signals of a potentially violent episode?". If HR knew, the organization knew and liability would ensue. We need to educate HR to adopt a "hypervigilant" schema identifying bullying as troublespots that have to be proactively addressed.

When HR has no policy with an explicit definition of what conduct is unacceptable, there is no standard to which the outrageous bullying can be compared. A non-declared, floating standard protects perpetrators and makes it impossible for a bullied target to be justly treated. The frame/schema is that nothing is outrageous when the perpetrator is a manager. "Managerial prerogative" is understood by organizations (and courts) to be limitless. With no policy limits, anything goes. As part of our consulting interventions, we supplement rights with "managerial responsibilities." Those rights may never be exercised abusively by managers in our client organizations.

Supervisors and managers who are the bully's allies predictably fail to help targets by siding with the bully. However, most managers are reluctant to intervene on behalf of the target who requested relief. They either do nothing, hoping the issue will resolve itself or they instruct the target to "work it out" with the bully on her or his own. This is an unreasonable expectation. The underlying frame/schema is probably "I'm no good at solving emotional problems of others." This is a skill deficiency that training can reverse. But with recessionary budget cutbacks, formal training for managers is abandoned in favor of on-the-job opportunities. The organization needs to re-frame managerial responsibility to include intervening on behalf of hurt workers asking for relief.

Investigations of bullying complaints that yield no positive results for the target are a significant problem. Here the investigator's (why would it ever be done by a lone individual?) biased schema is key. If the process only involves asking the alleged perpetrator if he or she did it, the outcome becomes a muddled "she said/she said," discouraging any finding of fault. When we create policy

enforcement procedures in organizations, multiple investigators are required simply to overcome the lone fact finder bias problem.

Also noteworthy is that our policy-enforcement-team of experts comprehensive program for employers we frame remedies as "restorations." They are designed less to punish offenders than to replace lost revenue, health, status and relationships.

The second employer level for perceiving bullying is in the executive (C-suite) ranks. Reports of internal bullying that reach the C-suite generates negative perceptions about the reporting employee. The current frame justifies indifference or blaming the target because the news about bullying conflicts with the personal relationship the executive sponsor has with the named offender. The unknown, and often lower ranking complainant, can easily be sacrificed because she or he threatens the bond with the bully. It is a cognitive dissonance model as a "frame" in which the executive chooses the resolution path of least resistance. The easiest thing to do is invoke an "executives support their managers" automatic schema.

One possible alternative frame to use with executives is that the "organization is an ethical, moral and socially responsible actor." Sadly, American employers act unethically with ease. Since bullying is legal in the U.S. (except for 20% of cases that involve discrimination), unethicality does not worry many employers. A possible second frame to use is the "business case" demonstrating the fiscal impact of bullying on organizations. Both tangible and intangible costs are substantial. Risk managers and legal counsel know this. A rational case can be made to stop bullying. However, loss data pale in comparison to preserving relationships with executives forged by ingratiating bullies.

Lakoff's analysis helps explain the irrationality of excusing destructive and costly misconduct. The existing employer metaphor prizes authoritarianism and hierarchy above all else. Though "respect for individuals" is frequently espoused, the protection of exective power is the only real goal. The most successful interventions we have had in American firms were when the CEO was a Canadian native and when the executive had been bullied in a prior company.

The assignment of responsibility for the work environment to employers seems obvious to management sciences, social sciences and occupational health academics. However, in popular American culture, work environment factors are relatively invisible, thus not seen as contributory. It is the American worker, as an individual, who is considered responsible for her or his workplace fate. The operative frame/schema is If a person is bullied, that individual must have been the reason for it. This is the fundamental attribution error frame. It is the curse of societal Individualism.

Corporations are not persons, despite a recent Supreme Court ruling. People are held accountable, but not corporations. A recent documentary, *The Corporation*, applies the metaphor of psychopathy to explain corporate conduct. Despite the great global recession triggered by Wall Street speculators, no one lost his job, nor were any of the too-big-to-fail financial services firms punished. When the British Petroleum oil well on the floor of the Gulf of Mexico exploded and created an ecological catastrophic disaster of a scope yet to be determined, the BP CEO stated without shame or guilt that the accident was not BP's responsibility. A variation of Individualism is that only non-supervisory individuals are held accountable, and erroneously blamed for outcomes that no person would willingly seek. Corporations and executives who run them are immune.

Consultant-advocates should strive to teach employers to accept responsibility. This is a major, very difficult, shift in framing to accomplish that runs counter to deeply entrenched cultural myths in America. The substitute schema to learn is that bullying happens only with explicit or tacit approval of executives. Bullying is not just an HR problem.

Another key shift we strive to accomplish in client organizations is to define bullying, the system of historical reinforcements and protections, as the problem. It is bullying, the impersonal system, more than bullies as troublesome individuals, that must be stopped. This is antithesis of the "bad seed" model. Systemic problems deserve systemic solutions. Bullybusting, witchhunting is a short-term, illusory fix. Bullying eradication requires reversing the reward/effort ratio for perpetrators. Make it more difficult with no hope of tangible rewards and bullying will be extinguished. So, our operating frame is to prevent and correct "bullying, not bullies."

It is noteworthy that some organizations pride themselves on being early adopters of progressive change initiatives. They strive to be designated a "great place to work" or the corporation that practices "social responsibility." These workplaces can be more easily persuaded to adopt anti-bullying programs which position them as "leading edge" organizations and "employers of choice." Though these organizations are rare, their operating schema/frame is congruent with the workplace bullying message.

If anti-bullying advocates believe in employee empowerment and democratization to create healthy, safe organizations, that "frame" is doomed to irreversibly clash with contemporary cutthroat practices in the American business marketplace. We can be, and are, easily ignored.

Dear advocate-practitioner, don't despair. Compliance with legal mandates still compels civil conduct by even unethical employers. That is, there exists an

automatic employer response to legal mandates – create and enforce policies to minimize risk exposure and legal liability. This frame/schema is the key to motivating employers at the HR and executive levels. When there are enacted laws, not merely introduced bills, employer behavior will change. That's why there have to be state and federal laws in the U.S. soon.

The fourth constituent group is comprised of public policymakers, elected state and federal representatives and senators. We began introducing workplace bullying in state legislatures in 2002. The first WBI anti-bullying Healthy Workplace Bill was introduced in 2003 in California. Since then, 17 (of 50) states have introduced our bill. Our bill rewards good employers and holds liable employers who establish or sustain health-harming abusive conduct by any employee. We've had modest successes, but no state has yet passed the bill into law. In 2010, we began the lobbying campaign for a federal law to protect employees of the federal government. The work is the product of a network of volunteer coordinators directed from our national office.

In America, as in all western democracies, discrimination/harassment based on protected group status is illegal. Bullying is legal harassment. So, one metaphorical frame used to convince lawmakers to sponsor our bill is to "fill the gap" in existing law. It minimizes the apparent magnitude of change the bill represents. A second frame is to "catch America up with civilized nations" that have enacted similar laws. This metaphor relies on American competitiveness and the desire to be first (or at least among the early adopters) to compel action. However, we have learned that stating the reality that many European nations have laws can backfire. Xenophobic lawmakers, comparisons to European progress is leads to branding us advocates as "anti-American."

Remarkably, lawmakers who readily embrace the bill and volunteer sponsorship are individuals who have experienced it directly or vicariously when it happened to family members. Actual experience trumps political partisanship. Vivid, emotional, deep-seated values-relevant impact governs decisions more than the most rational arguments, as Lakoff predicted. Unfortunately, we should not have to wait until every lawmaker has witnessed bullying personally before a law can be passed.

Resistance to our legislation consistently comes from businesses that argue additional regulations will render their organizations inoperable – corporations, government agencies and school districts. But this gives us the chance to counter with a stronger metaphor – if you (employers) oppose an anti-abuse law, you (employers) are in favor of abusing workers.

The newly minted (May 28, 2010) absurdity is that bullied individuals are "delicate teacups," hypersensitive weak folks. This is the product of an attorney

who subscribes to the tough guy couching of any legislation designed to protect any individuals as "nanny state" bills. The re-frame here is easily discerned by knowing a target to two. They wait too long to complain, keeping their noses to the grindstone tool long, getting sicker than anyone deserves. In fact, they are tough survivors. And that's the counter to this egregiously mean-spirited attack stereotype.

At every hearing for our bill in state houses, we combine statistical, scientific and anecdotal evidence. Emotional experiential testimony is probably most effective when it cues an internal deep-seated altruistic, compassionate need in the lawmaker. We all want to believe we would relieve another's pain when given the chance. It is a moral frame appealing to our better angels. It's a frame/schema calling for empathy for fellow human beings. Bullying's frame is that some people are "less than human and deserving of their fate." Tolerance of bullying is akin to tolerance of torture and murder. It speaks volumes about what is wrong with our society.

All of the above "frames" could and should be tried. Repeat the metaphors that strike a resonant chord with members of any or all of the constituent groups.

In conclusion, a meta-frame that we employ chronicles the history of various forms of abusive interpersonal behavior – child abuse, domestic violence, student bullying – that were once socially acceptable. Each now has been deemed socially unacceptable with prohibitive laws in place to stop them. Abuse in the workplace is the final traumatizing form of abuse to be treated as acceptable by enabling organizations and the law. It's time to stop bullying because, in the broadest frame possible, "it's the right thing to do."