

# Bullies in the Workplace

MARTIN RINGER tells us why bullies are often more powerful than the skilled communicators in organisations.

MY LAST TWO ARTICLES have outlined the value of collaborative thinking, feeling and focussing on the task at work. This article explores some of the ways in which these qualities can be destroyed. In particular, bullying, coercion and domineering behaviour destroy collaborative thinking and action, whilst often ridiculing those who place value on emotional experience.

The bullies are quite often more powerful than the skilled communicators in organisations. So it seems much easier to destroy the “thinking space” than to build it. Should we then give up trying to improve our capacity for helpful interaction and enrol in the next bullying class?

I think not. But we do need to take a realistic view of communication in engineering organisations, rather than taking an idealistic view and hoping the bullying will just go away of its own accord. In this article I aim to develop ideas about real-life workplace communication where bullying, coercion and power games are a part of the rich tapestry of organisational life. In short, bullies *make the rules for communicating* so that bullying is legitimised. An essential step towards stopping bullying and coercive behaviour is to change the rules for communicating so that these behaviours are no longer favoured.

Actually I’m not only talking about bullying. There is an easily recognisable destructive pattern of communication that involves bullying, coercion, domineering, lack of personal responsibility and blaming. This pattern is very difficult to counter. Here’s an example based on a real situation (with all details changed beyond recognition).

Eric the Engineer had a disagreement with Clive the Constructor about a joint venture they were involved in. The situation evolved in the following sequence:

1. Eric was not really happy with Clive’s performance as a joint venture partner. He told his workmates about situations where Clive had failed and told Clive that he was not generally happy.
2. Clive called a meeting to clarify the situation with Eric but Eric said Clive was being too sensitive. Eric just maintained that Clive’s overall performance needed some attention but that, given his inexperience, maybe he’d improve with time.
3. After two weeks of apparently better communication between the two, with no warning Eric presented to the Joint Venture Board a detailed summary of Clive’s poor performance, thus justifying the

generally poor performance of the Joint Venture. Clive was at that meeting but had not had time to prepare a statement in his defence. Some of Eric’s information was false in Clive’s view.

4. Clive contested the most blatantly incorrect information at the Board meeting. Eric loudly contradicted him, but refused to give adequate details even when challenged. The Board sat impassively without comment.
5. Over the next few days Eric repeatedly blamed Clive for being oppositional because he had challenged Eric’s behaviour and ethics.
6. Eric then wrote to the Joint Venture Board asking that Clive be replaced because he was performing poorly, ‘oppositional’, ‘uncommunicative’ and ‘unco-operative’.
7. Eric was in no doubt that he had the high moral ground and so saw himself to be in a strong position to make further demands.
8. The Joint Venture Board told Clive and Eric to sort it out between themselves.
9. Clive was enraged but had no means of redressing the terrible situation he was in.

Eric’s pattern had some identifiable characteristics that you have probably been subjected to at some time yourself. In Eric’s view:

- Someone other than Eric is at fault whenever anything goes wrong.
- People who disagree with Eric are wrong, obstructive and/or difficult people.
- Eric should not have to go into silly levels of detail to justify his opinion. It’s obvious to any intelligent person that he’s right.
- In his internal processes Eric sees no need at all to question or reflect on his own part in the difficulty.
- When people talk about relationships, listening, or “thinking together” they are just using psychobabble to avoid the real issue which is usually that they’re hopeless.

Overall, Eric has made the “rules for relating” and these rules make helpful conversations impossible.

## Textbook-style communication does not break the pattern

The bullying domineering style is both built up and defended. The bedrock on which coercive/bullying patterns are built is that *the bully decides what is real, what is important and what is the correct way to treat others* whilst the other party has no influence on these rules,

In two cases, Empower's agents falsely represented that the consumers would continue to be supplied by their existing supplier. One consumer thought she was agreeing to make a donation when in fact she was signing an authority to switch suppliers. Another was told that her supplier had been taken over by Empower.

Empower Ltd represented to the third complainant that he had agreed to switch suppliers when he had not, and continued to send statements to the consumer even after being advised of the misunderstanding.

## Misleading Advertising

Two Christchurch car-rental companies have been fined \$5,000 and \$4,000 respectively for breaching the Fair Trading Act with misleading advertising in the Yellow Pages. Cut Price Rentals claimed in its advertisement that cars were available for as little as \$25 per day; but "special conditions" meant that this rate was available only for hire periods of 28 days or longer. Similarly, Al Backpacker Rentals used the phrase "conditions apply", advertising cars from \$19 per day. On investigation this price proved to be available only in off-peak months, and for a minimum hire period of 7 days. Commerce Commission Director or Fair Trading Deb Battell says that a series of complaints had led to investigations into the rental car industry. "We took a close look at trading practices in the industry, and found that advertising vehicles from a certain price with linked special conditions was a significant problem. We entered into settlements with seven companies and warned ten others."

even though he/she may have radically different opinions. The system of assault and defense that keeps the bully in power relies on this person *not caring about ethics, morals or relationships, and using this psychological disconnection as a launching pad for accusations about other*. To the well informed but independent observer the accusations that are launched by the bully in fact describe the behaviour of the bully better than they do the behaviour of the person whom the bully is attacking. Nonetheless, the bully is not deterred and vigorously defends them as truths.

Normal patterns of helpful behaviour are not effective at intercepting bullying and coercive behaviours. Let's see an example where a client – this time the bully – applies coercive techniques in a conversation with an engineer:-

**Client:** This is so overpriced that we're reconsidering our contract with you. As it is it's madness. Take the whole thing back and re-do it. Submit the estimate again when you've got a sane price and I'll see if we can forget that you ever tried to rob us with this estimate here.

**Engineer:** I can see that you're shocked by our estimate. I'll go through the basis of the calculations with you now then let's see where we go from there.

**Client:** I haven't got time to waste while you burble on justifying your mistakes.

**Engineer:** To get the best engineering solution, you and I need to sit and think together about this. We need to listen to each other's point of view instead of getting into a fight.

**Client:** Thank you for your advice Dr Freud! (The client leaves the room).

In that example, the significant theme is that *the client made the rules for relating*. The client's bullying and domineering proved to be the more powerful tactic. The engineer was right and was much more helpful than the client, but being right and helpful does not guarantee success.

It is all very well then to believe in the usefulness of emotion and the benefit of creating a thinking space between people, but that belief alone is not enough. In raw terms, the balance of power needs to favor "thinking together" rather than the bullying domineering dynamic. Many people who

have attended communications skills training will also have found that using good communications skills does not guarantee good communication behaviour from the other party.

## Breaking entrenched destructive patterns requires power at many different levels

The kind of destructive patterns illustrated above came from two main sources. I will describe them separately, although one rarely occurs in the complete absence of the other. Domineering behaviour may emerge from the dynamic of a group, where one member of the team gradually builds on his/her own predisposition for coercion but is subtly encouraged by other team members to act with aggression. In this way, other team members avoid having to face their own tendency for aggression because they can point the finger at "the bully." I will not delve any further into this pattern here.

The second source of bullying and coercion lies mainly in the pre-disposition or personality of the bully. Sad but true, some people spend a lot of their time being unpleasant and there's very little that anyone can do to change them. Psychologists have a number of different labels for people who habitually act in the unhelpful ways that I have described above. "Narcissistic" and "borderline personality disorders" are the most common and neither refers to characteristics that change readily.

So if you've got a bully in your team or client system you need to stop whinging about why they won't change, you need to stop trying to change their personality, you would be advised to stop trying to understand why they are like they are, and it would pay you to set in place some counter-measures to protect yourself and your work. The bully/coerce/domineer system has a number of power bases, all of which need to be countered simultaneously. Some sources of strength you may draw upon follow:

### The power to do the job you've agreed to do

Persistently state your understanding of the job that you've agreed to do. *Much of your authority to act comes from a shared understanding of the task that you're meant to be doing.*

### The formal power of your organisation's management and the management of the client's organisation

Bullying often persists because the management of one or more stakeholders doesn't understand the need for useful patterns of communication. Sometimes you will be lucky enough to identify the financial cost of bullying and convince management but this is all too seldom effective because many managers can't hold up against the bullying assault either.

### The power to carry out key tasks and roles, use resources and disseminate and receive information

Each project consists of key tasks, with key resources, using key information with key people in key roles. Consistent, persistent and clear re-stating of all of these helps your authority to act.

### The power for you to decide how you will relate to people

You can keep telling the bully that he/she is bullying even when he/she does not agree. I was involved in a case recently where I had described a bullying/coercive pattern monotonously for over a year before the right person heard what I was saying. Also don't forget the power to enlist support from your colleagues. You can bet the bully is working hard to build support for him/herself, and you need your own social power base.

### The power of your own competence

Just being competent is not enough, but being competent and maintaining competent performance in the face of bullying and coercion does help your power base. All too often the bully reduces the other party to acting incompetently and then the bully has some real ammunition.

### The power of your ability to manage yourself emotionally

Bullies are psychologically weak. They have empty insides that are heavily defended with bluster and bovine faeces. Managing your

own emotional stability is the most difficult of all things to do in the face of some of the outrageous stuff that you're subjected to. Enlist help. Employee Assistance Counselling can be a good option.

### The power of organisational culture and values and stories

Bullying and coercion are almost impossible in organisations where lived values – not just stated values – discourage this behaviour. Consistently respectful behaviour throughout an organisation simply extinguishes bullying. No one person controls organisational culture and values and it seems that senior people usually have more influence than those lower in the hierarchy. But don't ever forget your part in modelling sound values-based behaviour in the face of coercion and bullying. You may be making a new story line for your organisation.

Poor quality thinking spaces are all too common in engineering organisations where technical expertise is valued to the exclusion of the ability to relate to other human beings, where feelings – other than anger – are considered to be irrelevant and where power and masculinity are equated with tough talking. Let's hope your organisation and your client organisations are not in that category.

### Courage

It actually requires more courage to build a thinking culture than to resort to the emotional violence of the alternatives. Bullying and coercion are acts of cowardice.

*For more information on the models and theories on which this article is based, please contact the author through [www.martinringer.com](http://www.martinringer.com)*

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