

And We Wonder Why Progress is So Slow...

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Abstract: This real-world, disguised case explores the complexities of a bully relationship at work. The case is appropriate for management, human resources, leadership, and organizational behavior classes.

LEARNING GOALS

The objectives below relate to the discussion questions at the end of the case. The concept of bullying was not included in the discussion questions to give the students the opportunity to diagnose the bully behaviors that are exhibited in the case.

At the end of this case, students will be able to:

1. Describe bully behaviors exhibited at work.
2. Analyze why an employee would bully coworkers.
3. Analyze the organizational and individual impact of bullying.
4. Analyze the legal complexities involved in bullying (especially when women bully women) in organizations.
5. Develop suggestions for managers who want to eliminate bullying within their organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Bully behavior at work has received attention in management and organizational textbooks (Vecchio, 2006) and in the popular press (Gergen, 2006). Articles about bullies at work can be found in trade publications from professions as diverse as nursing (Beech, 2007), hairdressing (Sparrow, 2006), and higher education (Thomas, 2005). Research indicates that the bully-at-work phenomenon also transcends borders. Studies in Scandinavia, Britain, and Canada, for instance, reported that between 4 and 10 percent of workers experienced bullying at work (Von Bergen, Zavaletta, & Soper, 2006). The situation in the United States, however, is even more grim. Although estimates vary depending on the research being reviewed, a sample of studies show that between 17 and 90 percent of those studied reported being victims of workplace bullying (Von Bergen, et al., 2006). Salin (2001) suggests that the number may be even higher because, although people may be frequent targets of bully attacks, they hesitate to label themselves as victims of bullying.

Although we tend to think of bullies as being male, the U.S. Hostile Workplace Survey found that men and women were equally responsible for bullying behavior, and 84 percent of those employees targeted for abuse are female. In addition, women bullies target women co-workers more often than they target males (Namie, 2000). This case, based on a situation that was experienced by an acquaintance of the authors, features a female boss who bullies one of her up-

and-coming star subordinates. This case explores the complexities of a bully relationship at work.

CASE MATERIALS

Case Abstract

Melissa, a well-qualified employee with a proven track record, began a new job at the company with optimism and the support of her immediate supervisor, Connie. After a few months and numerous public accolades, Melissa's supervisor started a covert campaign that was ruining Melissa's reputation. Unfortunately, her once-supportive coworkers do not want to get involved. Melissa was not prepared for the negative treatment and does not know how to respond.

Case Narrative

Melissa Frasier put her head down on her desk, defeated. The meeting she attended this morning was horrible, and she felt her job was probably in jeopardy. One year ago everything had seemed so wonderful: new job; new town; a great school for her 10-year old son. Now she was second-guessing her decision to relocate. She was even questioning her decision-making ability.

Previously, Melissa had been employed by a mid-size manufacturing organization for 12 years. When she began her career, her life was totally different. An unmarried MBA without children, she had started in the sales department of the organization and was happy to travel. When she met her husband Jim, an accountant in the company's tax department, her life seemed full and satisfying. After they married and had their son, Jake, both continued to work full-time. Melissa was well liked and respected for her creative problem solving abilities and strong work ethic. She had a series of promotions as the company grew and expanded, and she knew the industry well. For the past five years Melissa was involved in the strategic-planning activities for the organization. When she and Jim decided to divorce, co-workers were impressed by her professionalism and maturity in juggling the responsibilities of her career and home life.

One day during a department meeting with her staff, Melissa shared with her coworkers an opportunity that had come her way at an affiliated organization in nearby Pleasantville. The well-paying position at the headquarters of the international organization sounded as if it would fit Melissa perfectly and offer her opportunities for continued growth. She would use all of the skills she developed over the years, in addition to using her creative energies in the new assignment as Director of Strategic Analysis in the Sales Division at the larger company. The new company was stable and well-positioned for growth, and Pleasantville was close enough for Melissa and Jim to share custody of Jake. Melissa had already consulted Jim about the opportunity, and he encouraged her to pursue new experiences. The Pleasantville school system sounded ideal for Jake who already had friends on his soccer team from the new community.

When Melissa's coworkers heard about the job, they had truly mixed feelings. As a valued member of their team, she would be difficult to replace. She was skilled at synthesizing data, preparing meaningful reports, and making insightful recommendations that had directly

contributed to the organization's success. In addition, her thoughtful sharing had helped in the development of a group that was valued for its teamwork and dependability. On the other hand, Melissa's co-workers knew that a larger company and new city offered Melissa and Jake advantages not available in their current environment. So, with Melissa's best interest in mind, her colleagues encouraged her to make the move.

Because Melissa's abilities were already known by the affiliated company, the interviewing and hiring process went quickly and without any difficulty. Melissa's new supervisor, Connie McKeel, the Vice President of Sales, was enthusiastic about Melissa's credentials. "Wow, this company loves MBAs. You'll be on the fast-track to upper management in no time." The only little worry that Melissa experienced came from a comment made during an interview with Bob, one of the long-time VPs. "Gosh, we would be really happy to have more women in Connie's department. But, she seems to have a lot of turnover—it must be six females in the last two years." When Melissa asked the manager about the revolving door, he offered: "Well, even though Connie's educational credentials aren't that strong, management seems satisfied. She is one of the few women in management here." Bob proudly explained Connie's "success story" within the company. She had started in direct sales 20 years ago immediately after earning a bachelor's degree from a local college. Based on her strong performance in sales, she moved up in the sales organization ultimately earning a regional sales position. Four years ago Connie had been named VP of Sales.

After hearing this story, Melissa was convinced that her strategic analysis skills would compliment Connie's impressive sales background and thorough knowledge of the company. By the time Connie invited Melissa to attend the management retreat scheduled for the following weekend at an upscale resort Melissa had pushed any negative thoughts aside. When Melissa saw the first-class office space that had been reserved for her, she felt valued, encouraged, and as if this would be the chance of a lifetime. She would be foolish not to accept this great future for herself and Jake.

For the first three months, everything Melissa had been promised was provided. She was included in all of upper-management's planning sessions and was invited to attend key committee meetings. She was pleased to hear positive comments related to her performance. For instance, after presenting her department's reports at a Senior VP meeting, she overheard one of the Senior VPs tell Connie, "You know Melissa is a great addition; she really contributes a lot of strength to your team." Following one particularly effective performance, the Company President approached Connie and told her that her department's work was the best he had seen in the last five years. When Melissa shared the good news with Jake at dinner, she felt completely satisfied with her decision to join the company.

As Melissa became more self-assured, however, she started to notice that Connie was sharing fewer and fewer compliments. But, for six months, Connie had no problem adding to the list of responsibilities Melissa was to assume. While Melissa was flattered that Connie had confidence in her abilities, she also knew it was more and more difficult to complete all the tasks being sent her way. Nevertheless, Melissa worked a few more hours each week and continued to impress her colleagues. It was distressing, therefore, when Connie demonstrated displeasure when

others, particularly the other VPs, approached Melissa directly for help or collaboration. Connie would interrupt them when they dropped by Melissa's office or would quickly answer their questions before Melissa had a chance to respond.

Over time, Melissa found herself saying, "I'll have to ask Connie," or "Let me include Connie in this," even though she was comfortable with responding and knew that including Connie would slow progress. A couple of times Melissa offered to explain new project ideas to Connie, but she was rebuffed. "Oh, you MBA's assume coursework is a good substitute for experience. But, I know how this company operates, and change isn't necessarily a good thing." At first, Melissa believed Connie as she was aware how difficult change could be in certain corporate cultures. However, on more than one occasion Melissa learned indirectly that Connie had presented Melissa's insights or new project ideas to upper management without mentioning Melissa's name or involvement. While Melissa felt hurt, she convinced herself that the "bigger person" didn't need to be concerned so much about personal success as long as the team was progressing.

After eleven months, instead of feeling hopeful about upcoming opportunities at the company, Melissa felt the outlook for her future dimming. When Tom Hayes, the Senior VP of Sales and Marketing called to ask what she planned to present at the Board of Director's annual meeting, she had to admit that she had not been invited to attend. "But you are the best presenter in the department, what can Connie be thinking?" Melissa put down the phone and wondered about Tom's statement. Connie's behavior had become quite critical, and her signs of displeasure were becoming more public.

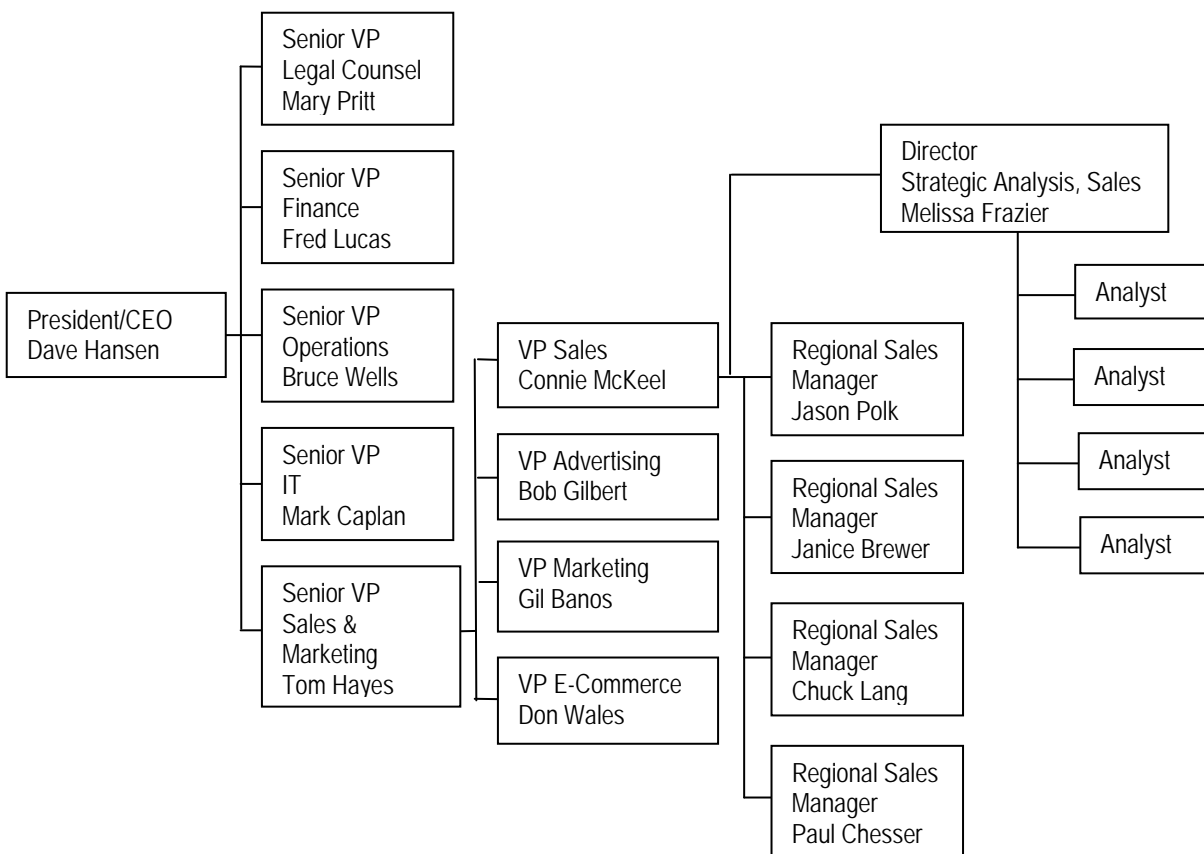
Recently, when the accounting department had called for the latest sales figures, one of the clerks suggested that Connie had blamed Melissa for the report being late. "Hey, what did you do to make Connie mad?" Anne Elliot asked. Melissa assured Anne that the report was sent to Connie early and that there were no problems in the department of which she was aware. But Melissa was embarrassed by the comment and tried to discuss it with Connie. "Oh, that's just Anne," Connie replied dismissively. When Melissa tried to make lighthearted, social comments, Connie kept her replies and eye contact to a minimum.

During department meetings, everyone else seemed aware that Connie had started to allocate some of Melissa's work to others in the department. Connie had even asked Jason Polk, one of the regional sales managers and a new hire, to duplicate analyses Melissa had already completed. When Melissa asked Connie about the reassignments, Connie cut her off in mid-sentence, "I think this is the best for the team; and I expect everyone to be a team player." After this chastisement in front of others in the meeting, Melissa noticed that her colleagues were no longer as friendly. In the coffee room or cafeteria, Melissa was not invited to join the others. When she approached ongoing conversations, department members seemed to disperse quickly. Melissa asked Janice Brewer, one of the Regional Sales Managers, if she was aware of any behaviors that could have caused the shift in Connie's loyalty. "Oh, you know I just don't like to get involved in office politics. I don't ever want to take sides."

This morning's meeting was the worst yet. In front of upper management, Melissa had been called on to present her recommendations for the advertising and e-commerce departments based

on the latest sales analysis. While Melissa’s group had completed the necessary statistics, Connie had not mentioned the need for a formal presentation that included recommendations. With few notes, limited exposure to the planning meetings, and no time to prepare thoughtful recommendations, Melissa’s presentation appeared disjointed and ill prepared. Connie watched the floundering from the sidelines with a slight smirk on her face. Finally, she stood and said, “Obviously, Melissa is not sure of her department’s role in meeting the company’s objectives. Maybe they don’t teach this in business school any more, but I’ll work with her and see if we can get her up to speed.”

Now back in her office, Melissa didn’t know where to turn. Analyzing her activities over the past 11 months, she knew that her efforts had been team-driven and considerate of best practices for the entire group. She was a strong leader but felt she also understood the role of a good follower. Did she miss warning signs? Or was Connie’s behavior different from other supervisors she had experienced? While she had not burned bridges at her old job, she did not want to uproot her son and return to her past. I know I have good skills, she thought. But how can I use them best?



Senior Management Structure and Sales Organization Structure

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What problems do you see in the organization?
2. Who is causing the problems and why?
3. How is the situation impacting the organization?
4. At this point, what should Melissa do? What should upper management do? What recourse does Melissa have?
5. How could the problems have been avoided?

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