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Case Study

How can bullying damage the organizational climate?

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ABSTRACT

This case presents an intense conflict between Ananya Rastogi who has recently joined the Dubai Office of Bharat & Spring Advisory Services and an old timer at the firm Rohit Madan. As Accounts Head, Rohit has been associated with the firm for long and has thus developed a close connection with the co-founders. Rohit uses his proximity with the co-founders to bully colleagues. While most of the old employees have accepted Rohit's transgressions quietly, Ananya found it difficult to let go the intimidation meted out to her. Being a successful sales professional, she knew to retain clients, develop business and grow revenue for the firm. But she needed a professional organizational climate based on equity, transparency and mutual respect to function efficiently in the new firm. Ananya is in dilemma whether to upset the applecart and jeopardize her career by sharing her ordeals with the co-founders or keep quiet and let the things settle on its own in due course while taking humiliations in her stride as a price for keeping the job. The case study is based on real incident. However, the names of the protagonists and that of the company have been fictionalized to protect their identities.

KEYWORDS: Bullying, Organizational Climate, Interpersonal Conflicts, Talent Retention

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THE SCENARIO

Ananya Rastogi joined the Dubai Office of Bharat & Spring Advisory Services as Sales Head in December 2024. It was her first international assignment. Earlier, she had worked as business development manager for a large consulting firm in New Delhi for past six years. She had an MBA from a top Indian university. Ananya had promised to double the revenue of the firm in next two years during her interaction with the firm's co-founders Bharat Gupta and Mohit Spring. They told her to get in touch with Rohit Madan, the Accounts Head, for any support.

BACKGROUND

Bharat & Spring Advisory Services –a boutique consulting firm, started its office in Dubai in 2024. The firm had cultivated a robust clientele in India since its inception in 2005. Co-founders of the firm had shifted their base to Dubai after the Covid-19 pandemic, while most of the leadership operated from New Delhi office. Both the co-founders now wanted to expand their consulting in the Middle East region and hence convinced their leadership team to relocate to the Dubai office with a mandate to visit India based on needs of the clients. Rohit was already in Dubai. Other senior employees soon relocated to Dubai.

Rohit was working with the firm since its inception. He had led several projects, going beyond his core accounting function. He made things difficult for all by raising the expectations. Often, Sales Heads became target of his wrath when sales revenue fell. He never minced words to chastise the senior colleagues if his account books looked grim. Rohit was handling the sales team of 5 in absence of a Sales Head for quite some time. Despite his iron hand, the sales revenue was declining sharply. Obviously, Rohit was frustrated. Looking at the current trends, he doubted Ananya's promise of revenue growth in two years

Sales team was capable but demoralized. When Ananya joined, they had a glimmer of hope. In her first interaction with sales team, the members poured out their heart. During the weekend, she met a few other colleagues who shared anecdotes of Rohit's wayward behaviour. Nobody dared to challenge him because he commanded absolute trust of the co-founders.

As Ananya was preparing for a meeting with the co-founders in the coming week, she was contemplating whether to raise the issue of bullying by Rohit which affected morale of the employees who generally kept quiet for fear of retribution.

THE CONVERSATION

Ananya mustered courage to have a word with Rohit before the meeting with the co-founders:

Ananya: Rohit, I understand that you have been handling the sales team before I joined the office, now how do you want me to work out my plans to double the revenue?

Rohit: I have been working with the firm since 2005. I have worked hard to earn the trust of the co-founders. I know the firm and its clients well. You are new and you must prove your loyalty.

Ananya: Look Rohit, I am a professional. I have demonstrated my worth in my previous organization. That's why, I was hired as Sales Head in this firm. I need free hand to manage my sales team and budget for business development to double the sales revenue in next two years or so.

Rohit: Free hand may there in the MBA textbooks. The co-founders of the firm trust me to run the business. Hence, I am duty bound to scrutinize everything before it reaches them. You can try your luck in the next meeting with the co-founders. This is how things operate here. I keep a close watch on everything within the firm because I have strong sense of ownership and responsibility. Now you must figure out how you attain your targets while working within the boundary of the firm.

'Working within the boundary of the firm' resonated in her ears as she was trying to come out of the shocking conversation with Rohit. She knew, who was setting the boundary of the firm, but had no clue about how to transcend that. At the same time, she did not want an abrupt end to her first ever international assignment. She also thought whether she would get protection under the labour laws of UAE in case she chose to speak up against the bullying.

DILEMMA

How should Ananya raise the issue of bullying by Rohit, who commanded absolute trust and clout with the founders, without risking her own professional journey with Bharat & Spring?

TEACHING NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Identify the sources or triggers of bullying at workplace.
- Understand the consequences of bullying at workplace on employees in general and the victims in particular.
- Explore how bullying at the workplace can be minimized in the short run and eliminated in due course.

Sample Lesson Plan (60 minutes)

Introduce the case (2 Minutes)

Students read the case (10 minutes)

Students discuss the case (30 minutes)

Debrief with the class (18 minutes)

Potential Approaches to Discussion

Discussion on this case would be meaningful if the students can refer to the suggested reading materials before the class.

Most of the people have faced some sort of bullying in their community or school or workplace, but few are willing to talk about it or report the matter to the higher authorities for reasons unknown. Instructor can start the discussion by prompting the students to share their own experiences related to bullying and then explore the possible reasons why the bully behaved in a particular manner, why the victims tolerated such conduct and how it impacted their holistic development and career progression.

Then, they can be encouraged to talk about why Rohit tried to bully Ananya and the sales team among other employees and how such behaviour impacted the organizational climate at Bharat & Spring leading to overall decline in sales and revenue besides demoralizing and demotivating the staff who were reeling under stress, anxiety and depression. During debriefing, the instructor can relate the whole discussion with a few key concepts such as Dark Triad Trait, Tolerant or Permissive Culture, and Power Imbalance Theory. The discussion may close with the possibility of having Anti-Bullying Policy as a safeguard.

This case will not only sensitize the students of Human Resource Management about adverse impact of bullying at workplace on organizational climate but also prepare them to deal with such aberrations in a professional and objective manner. Ignoring the instances of bullying at workplace can be damaging for both the employees and the organization.

Assignment Questions with Suggested Answers

Why do some of the employees indulge in bullying at workplace?

Employees may be intimidated by their bosses, colleagues at the same level, or even their team members. While bullying is not common, it may occur at the workplace. Bullying not only affects the victims of bullying alone. Even the bystanders who witness such aggressive incidents invariably get affected and the whole organizational climate dips. Victims not only face subtle aggression, but also social isolation and the perpetrators often make it difficult for them to carry out their work. Further, the victims may also face personal attack and be stigmatized. Victims of bullying usually show signs of stress, anxiety, sleeplessness, withdrawal of efforts at work, and high turnover intentions.

Instructor can encourage the students to come out with the possible reasons to figure out why certain employee indulges in bullying. Exhibit 1 can be used as prompts to help the students start thinking. The factors have been presented in alphabetical order.

Exhibit 1: Sources of Bullying at Workplace

Sl. No.	Individual factors	Organizational factors
1.	Aggressive personality traits	Ambiguous job description
2.	Competition for status, position	Ambiguous performance metrics
3.	Differences of opinion	Ambiguous reporting arrangements
4.	Envy	Bureaucratic organizational structure
5.	Gender bias	Centralized decision-making
6.	Inter-departmental rivalry	Concentration of power in a few hands
7.	Lack of interpersonal skills	Conservative work culture
8.	Low self esteem	Fluid key performance indicators
9.	Power differences	Lesser involvement of the Board
10.	Psychological insecurity	Role ambiguity

How should Ananya raise the issue of bullying by Rohit, who commanded absolute trust and clout with the founders, without risking her own professional journey with Bharat & Spring?

The instructor can encourage students to think about possible action points for Ananya in the wake of perceived bullying by Rohit.

Students may come up with several alternatives for Ananya:

Do nothing –Ananya can ignore the attempts by Rohit to intimidate her as one-off incident and focus on her new role. Alternatively, she can start looking for new job in Dubai.

Talk to HR –Ananya can approach HR of the firm to explore how a grievance can be raised. She can figure out whether HR has received any complaints of this sort against Rohit earlier and whether any action has been taken against him. At least, Ananya will get an ear to vent out her ordeal.

Confront Rohit –Ananya can directly confront Rohit and share her expectations of mutual respect from him as a senior colleague at the same level. She can tell him that his conduct was unbecoming of a professional manager. Ananya can assure him of attaining the target in case she is given free hand and appropriate resources. She can tell Rohit that her team is quite demotivated and demoralized and needs a fair deal.

Talk to the Co-founders –Ananya is anyway meeting with the Co-founders to discuss her plan of action. In the meeting, she can raise the issue of intimidating nature of Rohit and seek their help in getting autonomy to run her Sales and Business Development efforts without interference. She can tell the Co-founders that while Rohit is an efficient senior manager and loyal to the company, his intimidating nature demoralizes the employees and make the climate of the organization quite stressful. Being new to the organization, she can share her initial experience and how one of the old timers is ruining the firm's climate by leveraging his proximity to the Co-founders. It is possible that the Co-founders are unaware of how Rohit behaves with the employees and Ananya's revelations may trigger structural changes in the company.

How can the local labour laws of Dubai protect Ananya Rastogi in case she complains against the top brass of at Bharat & Spring Advisory Services?

Employees of private sector companies operating in United Arab Emirates (UAE) are protected against any form of bullying at workplace by Article 14 of the Federal Decree Law No. 33 of 2021 (also known as UAE Labour Law). Even the expatriates are protected under the UAE Labour Law. Penalties can be imposed on the employers for one-off bullying incident or repeated instances of bullying. Minimum fine for the breach of UAE Labour Law is AED 5000 while maximum penalty is AED 1 million. Victims can approach the Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratisation, UAE.

In the present case, Ananya Rastogi has the option of reaching out to the Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratisation in case her employers do not pay any heed to her complaints regarding bullying by her senior colleague, Rohit Madan. UAE Labour Law provides protective cover to all the employees of private sector, including the expatriate. Hence, in case the top management of Bharat & Spring Advisory Services does not redress the complaints of Ananya Rastogi, and the matter escalates, Article 14 of Federal Decree Law No. 33 can be invoked to ensure the victim's protection.

Other countries may have similar laws to protect the employees from bullying. The case instructor can encourage students to explore the legal provision vis-à-vis bullying in their own country while discussing the case.

If you were Ananya Rastogi, how would you view the nasty scenario of bullying at Bharat & Spring Advisory Services?

The instructor can encourage the students to look at the bullying incident at Bharat & Spring Advisory Services from the perspective of the victim i.e., Ananya.

At this stage, the instructor can introduce the concept of Dark Triad Trait propounded by Delroy Paulhus and Kevin Williams. This concept decodes the behavioural traits of a perpetrator as Narcissism, Machiavellianism, and Psychopathy. Character of Rohit in this case is not only self-obsessed but also cunning, scheming and a little boisterous. Dark Triad Trait explains why Rohit is bullying his colleagues at the firm. A person with Dark Triad Trait is likely to be dominating sans empathy. Hence, bullying nature of Rohit is a psychological issue and it is he

who needs help, not Ananya who is a promising sales professional with impeccable track of accomplishments.

The instructor can encourage the students to think whether the Tolerant or Permissive Culture at Bharat & Spring Advisory Services contributed to bullying at the firm level. It appears from the narrative in the case that the Bharat & Spring Advisory Services is a boutique consultancy with fluid corporate structure. Hence, the possibility of the firm being tolerant i.e., being inclusive is unfounded. On the other hand, fluid nature of organizational structure indicates that the firm has a permissive culture which implies lack of clear rules, accountability, transparency and objectivity. Permissive culture at Bharat & Spring Advisory Services makes its employees vulnerable to workplace bullying.

Power Imbalance Theory can also help the students explain bullying at Bharat & Spring Advisory Services. Power Imbalance Theory implies that an individual has more power or authority as compared to others in the organization and he/she uses the same to dominate and exploit others. In this case, character of Rohit manifests Power Imbalance Theory in true sense.

What should the co-founders of the Bharat & Spring Advisory Services do to reduce the standoff among team members and create a better workplace with zero tolerance to bullying?

The co-founders of Bharat & Spring Advisory Services can sensitize Rohit Madan to be respectful towards all the colleagues. Further, Rohit can undergo a training in interpersonal relations.

At the firm level, the co-founders may instruct the HR to create an Employee Handbook mentioning 'Zero Tolerance Policy' towards workplace bullying. Moreover, the co-founders may advise the HR to organize awareness seminars on bullying from time to time. HR can also put up posters at prominent places in the office highlighting 'Zero Tolerance Policy towards Bullying'. The co-founders can constitute a committee for prevention of workplace bullying to receive complaints from employees and resolve the issues. Such a committee will function like a safety valve to avoid escalation of grievances on account of the workplace bullying by means of timely disposal of complaints.

Case instructor can encourage students to brainstorm possible action points to eliminate the incidence of bullying at workplace in the long run. Some of the action points may include HR policy on non-discrimination and non-retaliation, regular Townhall meetings, informal opportunities for socialization, increased participation of employees/team members in decision making, speak-up opportunities where the employees could be encouraged to speak their mind on matters related to their task, roles, and responsibilities, without any fear of retribution, inter-departmental sports competitions, role clarity workshops, training sessions on inter-personal relations, self-awareness, conflict management, transactional analysis, etc.

SUGGESTED READING

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