

The Journal

of the



November 2005
Volume 7 Number 1



**The Journal 2005
of the
CALIFORNIA CAUCUS OF COLLEGE
AND UNIVERSITY OMBUDS**

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Bullying in Academia: What's an Ombudsman to do?

by Sue Theiss



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One of the many challenges faced by ombuds occurs when assisting constituents with problems for which there are seemingly no solutions. Where bullying is concerned, “the buck” often never stops...anywhere. Often those with the most power to influence a change in the course of bullying patterns do not have a clear understanding of what bullying is. Even when cases of bullying are recognized, it can be difficult for a manager or administrator to act, since tactics used by bullies are rarely illegal or clear violations of organizational policies. The extent of the impact bullying behaviors can have on an organization and its members—making everyone involved victims in a cycle of aggressive behaviors—is not always apparent and is difficult to measure. This article considers the literature and research on bullying and offers options to ombuds for assisting constituents with such cases.

Bullying Defined

There are a variety of definitions and identified characteristics of bullying behavior. Such behaviors usually evolve over time, and are part of a dynamic process. Studies have shown that abuse related to workplace bullying “...seem mostly to be of a verbal nature and seldom include physical violence” (Keashly, 1998, as cited by Einarson, 1999, p. 18). Verbal aggressiveness involves “the inclination to attack the self-concepts of individuals instead of, or in addition to, their positions on particular issues.” (Infante, 1988, p. 7). Bullying may also be described as a form of harassment, “mobbing”, or mistreatment. “Bullying occurs when someone [or group] is systematically subjected to aggressive behaviors...” which lead, either intentionally or unintentionally, to a stigmatization and victimization of the recipient (Einarson, 1999, p. 16).

The bully's actions may be deliberate or subconscious. Regardless of the initiator's personal characteristics or intent, their actions are unwanted by the recipient, who perceives him or herself as the target of ongoing, aggressive behaviors.

Bullying tactics can include verbal abuse, such as yelling, blaming, or making degrading comments and non-verbal abuse, including physical behaviors, the “silent treatment”, and withholding information. These tactics can be direct or indirect. Examples of indirect actions include scapegoating, malicious gossiping, posturing oneself to appear comparably more credible within a shared community, avoidance, exclusion of the target, and undermining behaviors (Duffy, et. al. 2002). These are common tactics used by different types of bullies in various settings. Any ombuds would be able to add to these lists of abusive behaviors from their own experiences with cases of bullying and harassment.

Types of Bullies

Varying characteristics are associated with different types of bullying situations:

- **Predatory** bullying occurs in cases where the victim has done nothing to provoke the bully (Einarsen, 1999). The victim could be part of a group that is being excluded socially, or there may be other organizational factors that have motivated the bully to take action toward the recipient. This type tends to be more prevalent within organizations whose practices institutionalize bullying, such as government and academia.

For example, a tenured physician in a medical school may be consistently verbally abusive towards a resident since this was how he was treated as a resident. This practice is commonly accepted (and therefore reinforced) by colleagues. In such institutions, responses tend to be more rule oriented and bureaucratic (Ferris, 2004). If a person of lesser power in the system complains, such as the resident, they have literally no voice through the policies provided, while the rules support the tenured physician. Referrals to processes and offices that do not accommodate or balance the power differences at play between an employee and their bully can result in reinforcing the power of the bully, which in turn institutionalizes bullying behaviors.

- **Dispute-Related** bullying (Einarsen, 1999, Namie and

Namie, 2000) occurs as the result of an escalated conflict. Coercive or aggressive resolution strategies are used to resolve an ongoing dispute.

Namie and Namie (2000) identify four characteristics or “types” of bullies:

- **Chronic** – Those who use aggressive, dominating, and coercive strategies in nearly every encounter (within and outside of work or the classroom);
- **Opportunist** – Those who “suspend” their aggressive behaviors outside of work but believe “careers are built with political gamesmanship”. Supporters of the opportunist often believe “they can do no wrong.” Once the opportunist’s behaviors have been reinforced by the organization, the bully will continue to use them;
- **Accidental** – Those who unknowingly take actions that victimize the recipients, and may retreat and/or apologize when confronted about the behaviors;
- **Substance-Abusing** – Those bullying behaviors initiated by substance-abusers, where “rationality and logic are tossed out the window.”

Recognizing the characteristics and types of bullying behaviors can be helpful guides for ombuds in knowing how to appropriately assist the victim and administrator, and to address the perceived abuser.

For example, in cases involving **substance-abusing or chronic** bullies, clear boundaries and conse-

quences need to be established by the organization, including discontinued employment if the behaviors do not change. An ombuds can provide coaching to management on how to recognize and address current behaviors. They can also provide feedback to the organization to guide them towards establishing policies that do not tolerate, or reinforce, these types of bullying behaviors.

In cases of **dispute-related** or **accidental** bullying, with the permission of a complainant, the perceived abuser can be educated by an ombuds on more effective and socially productive conflict resolution skills and be made aware of available resources for assistance. For example, in a situation where a resident assistant and the hall director for a dormitory begin arguing over work schedules, and the director uses his or her position of power to impose cooperation from the RA, this action may influence future interactions. Minor disputes which arise may lead to repeated misuses of power by the supervisor, forcing the RA’s cooperation and reminding them of their “place” in the relationship. Once this relationship has been harmed, and the RA contacts the ombuds for assistance with their “abusive” supervisor, the ombuds can, with the permission of the RA, coach the supervisor on more effective ways to elicit cooperation. Effective resolution skills can be modeled for both parties through mediation. If the bullying behaviors are truly dispute-related or accidental, a supervisor will likely be open to learning new skills if it means improving the situation.

When **predatory** bullying occurs, and/or **opportunistic** characteristics are evident, the organization must take action to assure an environment exists which does not reinforce or encourage harassing behavior. The ombuds role in this situation is not only to help the victim address their immediate needs, but to serve as a change agent for the organization; helping create an organizational climate which prevents bullying tactics from being effective. When an organizational structure permits one person to exert more influence over another, the likelihood of reaching mutually beneficial resolutions and repairing relationships decreases (Folger, et al., 2005). An ombuds provides balance by assisting all willing parties involved with their unique needs and effects systemic change by providing feedback to management regarding observed patterns of bullying throughout the year.

Consider the following scenario:

A graduate student, Ethan, visits the ombuds office, complaining that he wants to change advisors. "My advisor took credit for a paper written by another graduate student, Keli. She tried to address the issue with him, but has been told that's the way things are done, and is repeatedly reminded that **she** works for **him**. The other faculty advised Keli to be quiet and just get through her doctoral program. The more the issue is discussed, the more my advisor bad mouths Keli to others. I don't want the same thing to happen to me."

Targets are not the only victims in cases of bullying. In this in-

stance, the visitor (Ethan) is a bystander, but fears reprisal if the same circumstances should occur with him. There are interpersonal relationships to consider between Ethan and the advisor, the perceived target (Keli) and the bully (the advisor/professor), the other faculty influencing perceptions, behaviors, and the organizational climate, and the relationship between management and all parties affected.

An ombuds' strategies for intervention may be different for each relationship. For example, Ethan may need to know the procedure to change advisors, as well as the consequences of changing advisors before he chooses that path. If Keli wishes to meet with an ombuds, he or she may be able to offer Keli an empathic ear, help her consider her options, keep her focused on realistic solutions, refer her to counseling to help her deal with the stress of her situation if needed, and follow-up with management and/or the advisor if Keli gives permission to do so.

If the ombuds has access to management, he or she could educate the department chair or dean on the types and stages of bullying (although care should be taken to share the stages themselves, rather than label the bully). The ombuds can provide coaching and options on appropriate strategies given the type of bullying that might exist, as well as the stage in which they are intervening. As a prevention strategy, the ombuds may offer education for the department or college faculty on conflict resolution skills and conflict management. In a case such as Ethan's, where triangulation

has occurred (people talking about, rather than directly to, one another), the ombuds can explain how this will damage relationships and escalate, rather than solve, the conflict.

Consider a related scenario, from a different perspective:

A student's advisor, Dr. Jones, visits the ombuds office concerned that a dispute with a student regarding authorship has taken a turn for the worse. Dr. Jones explains that "Keli does not understand that as a graduate assistant she is working for the faculty, and that students do not 'own' the information we ask them to collect. I've tried explaining the protocol regarding authorship to her, repeatedly, but she doesn't understand. To make matters worse, she continues to ask other faculty their perspective on the situation, so I am constantly meeting with my colleagues to explain things. I have asked her to stop talking to others about this issue."

In a best case scenario, the ombuds will be able to meet with all parties involved in this conflict and help provide each side with the opportunity to understand the other's perspective. The ombuds can assist the advisor by helping him or her understand how differences in power between faculty and students can potentially lead a student to perceive themselves as powerless during a conflict. They can offer the advisor options for more effective communication strategies, and reinforce the importance of students having a safe avenue to share concerns. The ombuds may offer to mediate a conversation between Keli and Dr. Jones to help end the triangulation

occurring and facilitate resolution. The ombuds may also suggest that department faculty collaboratively develop and agree to standards regarding authorship, and that guidelines are shared with students (and each other) before authoring begins.

In the previous scenarios, the facts, perceptions, and related effects determine the type of bullying occurring, if any. The student may have misunderstood the department's protocol of authorship, or she may have actually been a primary contributor, deserving of credit. The advisor may have been working within the guidelines of his institution, or he may have inappropriately assigned himself credit. Extensive inquiry, within the boundaries of an ombuds' position, is essential in determining what type of bullying (if any) may be occurring, and what options are appropriate to consider. An ombuds can also provide information to university administrators at the end of the year on the pattern of bullying occurrences, their effects, and what prevention practices can be enacted through their intervention and changes in policy.

There are many options available for ombuds when addressing cases of perceived bullying. To effectively explore these options an ombuds needs to not only understand what bullying is, they need to understand how it works.

The Effects of Conflict Climate and Organizational Response

In a study of 1000 cases of workplace harassment, Brodsky (1976)

found that "for harassment to occur, elements exist within a culture that permits or even rewards" the behavior (Brodsky, 1976, cited by Einarson, 1999, p. 24). Organizational tolerance of bullying is communicated through policies and the establishment of norms and values, as well as how management does or does not act upon them (O'Leary-Kelly, Griffin, & Glew, 1996). Bullying will take place if the initiator believes he or she can get away with it. Administrators and managers can be influential in changing the environment for the better. But how can they recognize a bullying situation for what it is? How can an ombuds provide assistance and facilitate change?

The involvement of a third party, such as an ombuds, can often bring about change in any conflict simply by creating a climate that encourages a balance of power (by allowing all voices to be heard), encourages all parties to be more careful about how they communicate, and brings a sense of optimism to previously negative interactions (Folger, et. al., 2005). However, in cases of bullying, ombuds must be careful to understand how bullying works, to be certain that any intervention strategies used do not further victimize the target, or inappropriately label the perceived abuser.

The Stages of Bullying

Einarsen (1999) identifies Four-Stages of Bullying: 1) Aggressive Behavior, 2) Bullying 3) Stigmatization, and 4) Severe Trauma. It's helpful for ombuds

to understand the critical turning points between each of these stages to recognize when inconsequential aggressive behavior becomes bullying, and eventually leads to a stigmatization of the victim.

Often, ombuds are brought into the cycle at a point where the target is beginning to recognize that aggressive behaviors toward them have become frequent and she or he is having difficulty defending him or herself. This is the point at which the stage has moved from subtle, direct, or indirect *aggressive behavior*, to *bullying*.

Soon the victim's inability to defend him or herself, and the stress which highlights his or her inabilities, becomes the focus of the bully, some bystanders, and management. This leads to a *stigmatization* of the target and is typically the point at which administrators are brought in to intervene. The weaknesses of the victim, such as performance problems, then become the focus of the bully, and of the intervening administrator. "When stepping into the case, upper management ... or personnel administration tends to accept the prejudices produced by the offenders, thus blaming the victim for its misfortune." (Einarsen, 1999, p. 20). If administrators cannot address the situation without further victimizing the target, this can lead to *severe trauma* for the recipient of the abuse.

Empirical studies have focused primarily on the roles and personalities of the targets and their bullies, and the perceptions of management's interventions through the eyes of the targets (Keashly & Harvey, 2005; Namie

& Namie, 2000; Rayner & Keashly, 2005). Assistance and training for administrators who must intervene in these situations is essential. "Leaders and managers must use their position power very carefully to keep employees, members of departments, or other subordinates from feeling abused." (Chedelin, 2004, p. 5). A review of related literature reveals that most employees prefer not to use formal systems to address issues of bullying (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005; Namie, 2000; Rowe, 1996). At the same time, intervention by management can be effective towards stopping bullying behaviors (Ferris, 2004). Unfortunately, effective intervention by management to end bullying behaviors is estimated to occur only 7% of the time (Namie, 2000).

Ombuds can help administrators to understand the stages and types of bullying behavior, and help them explore options and appropriate steps for intervention. When considering the stages of bullying, an ombuds' attention should be placed on the dynamics of each stage where bullying progresses and on the consequences to all parties involved, especially when the effects are not attended to.

For example, an ombuds may recommend that coaching and education be offered to an **accidental** bully. If a case has reached the **stigmatization** stage of bullying, an ombuds may assist an administrator in moving their focus from the stress related performance errors of the target, towards how to address and end the cycle of bullying.

What's an Ombuds to Do?

As with all ombuds cases, each conflict has its own unique participants and circumstances that must be considered. Who can stop the bullying in academia, and what can an ombuds do? While additional studies are needed to shed light on the impact of administrative and third party intervention in cases of bullying, we can start by considering how ombuds can help the targets:

Awareness - The more an ombuds understands the stages and effects of bullying on the target(s), the bully, bystanders, administrators, and the organization, the better prepared he or she will be during case assessment and intervention. Different cases of bullying, like all conflicts, require different strategies for interaction. Keeping apprised of current statistics regarding the effects on bullying can also be helpful. For example, based on the 2003 Report on Abusive Workplaces, an estimated 70% of bullied targets will eventually lose their jobs, either due to involuntary termination or choosing to quit. An additional 17% will transfer to other positions within the organization.

Ombuds should be realistic when assisting targets. Saving their jobs may not be the best solution, and guiding them towards pursuing other options (while addressing their current issues) may actually empower them to increase their options, and provide them with a safety net. Targets who are armed with a variety of options are better prepared to move on if needed,

while victims who hang on to a no-win situation may find themselves losing income as well as hope and self-esteem.

Empower the victim - Ombuds know the power of listening and providing information. Providing a safe place for the victim to be heard, and referring her or him to counseling if needed, can help with intra-personal healing and a movement from feelings of powerlessness to empowerment. "Some of the most common effects of workplace harassment are depression and a sense of powerlessness that stem from targets' beliefs that no one will believe their experience. These feelings are often intensified when targets are exposed to systematic intimidation with little recourse." (Lewis, et. al., 2002, p. 114).

At an interpersonal level, ombuds can help recipients of bullying behavior through reflective listening and by helping the targets name their experiences. Ombuds can provide information on the topic of bullying and workplace aggression, as well as direct the individual to helpful resources, to provide targets with information that helps "normalize" their experiences (Lewis, et. al., p. 115).

In some situations, an employee might believe that she or he has done something to instigate the actions of the bully, or worry that others perceive her or him as timid, thin-skinned, and even deserving of being bullied (Keashly & Harvey, 2005). It may raise their self-esteem and awareness to know that many targets are actually those who are well educated, refuse to be subservient, and/or are those whom the

bully finds threatening because of the target's exceptional knowledge, skills, or ability to establish effective relationships with others (Namie & Namie, 2000). Ironically, these are all admirable qualities.

Assessment - During an initial and ongoing inquiry of an alleged case of bullying, perspectives and facts should be collected from as many affected parties as possible within the scope of an ombuds' position, while maintaining the confidentiality and safety of those involved. This can include the perceived offender, victim(s), co-workers, students, and administrators. The broader the input and perspective an ombuds gains about the situation, the more likely s/he is to have an accurate understanding of the type of bullying occurring, the organization's impact, and the dynamics of all parties' interactions. This, however, may be difficult to do if one or more of the parties involved fears retaliation, and the climate allows for an abuse of power.

As with all cases where retaliation is feared, ombuds should first address those concerns with the individual, in a safe environment, and only pursue options with the permission of the individual. There are questions that can be asked to assess what fears might be alleviated through discussion, providing information, or considering additional options. Some include: Who have you already spoken with? What happened when you spoke with them? What do you imagine will happen if you pursue that option? What will happen if you do nothing?

What are you willing to do? Who will you permit me to speak with? Have you experienced reprisal from this person before? What happened that time?

Through asking questions like these, visitors will often expose what their fears and concerns are. You can then determine which of these fears and concerns (if any) can be alleviated by providing additional information, clarification on policies, or by helping the individual to consider other options that they may find less threatening.

In some cases employees may be threatened with consequences by their supervisor, for which the supervisor does not actually have the authority to enforce. Simply sharing with the targets that their supervisor is not in a position to carry out the threat can help the employees change their perspectives and reduce anxieties.

Helping the employee see a complete picture of all policies, procedures, and options available within the boundaries of the organizational structure can provide a more realistic picture of what options are available to them, and alleviate some of their fears. Unfortunately, many forms of reprisal can not be effectively prevented or addressed through formal channels, as many forms of retaliation are covert and cannot be resolved through enforcement of policies and rights-based procedures (Rowe, 1996). Offering reality checks and broadening options may help reduce some of a target's fears, but cannot alone offer complete or adequate solutions.

Know the Stages and Characteristics of Bullying - Extensive inquiry may bring to light whether you have, in fact, a case of bullying. If so, who's the true aggressor? Aggressors frequently claim they are the victims, and may portray themselves as such. Consider diagnosing the situation as your physician would diagnose an illness. What are the symptoms? One symptom by itself can mean many things. A case of "the sniffles" can be associated with cold, allergies, the beginnings of the flu, or a sinus infection. Consideration of multiple symptoms, such as adding a fever, aches, and chills, might narrow the diagnosis down to the flu. Look for the characteristics and stages of bullying as symptoms.

Symptoms also need to be taken into context. What is the patient's history? What are the past behaviors of the perceived bully, the victim, and the organization's response?

The symptoms, historical behaviors, and climate of the organization should all be considered when determining whether or not you are addressing a case of bullying, what the parties' roles are, and at what stage of severity the process is at. Consider the type of bullying occurring, and at what point in the bullying stages you and others have been brought into the picture. This will help you assess what options are truly appropriate to pursue, and at what level administrators need to be involved and coached.

For example, if you discover that a researcher who has just

been awarded a large, multi-project grant, did not exhibit aggressive behaviors towards her staff prior to the beginning of the project, this may be a case of *dispute-related* bullying where the climate has changed, and mediation or coaching of the parties involved may be an appropriate strategy for an ombuds to pursue.

If in another situation, an ombuds discovers through inquiry that a supervisor has a long history of bullying behaviors towards several co-workers, and has been referred before by management to an employee assistance program for substance abuse counseling, your approach may include coaching management regarding policy, safety issues, and how to set stronger and more immediate boundaries and consequences for the supervisor. It might also include coordinating a solution with human resource personnel.

Model Good Behavior – An ombuds always has the unique opportunity to model effective resolution skills through service, such as during the intake process or mediation. Administrators, targets, and even bullies, can learn how to collect relevant facts, consider multiple strategies, and facilitate communication in a non-adversarial manner, by witnessing how an ombuds approaches a case. Much of our learning occurs through observing others' behaviors. Anyone can acquire skills and be influenced to change behaviors by observing how others interact and perform (Bandura, 1986). Modeling can be especially influential in changing behavior when performing the be-

havior is seen as effective, and followed by a desirable outcome.

Through service and education ombuds can facilitate resolution of a current situation, as well as help to prevent future relapses. They can assist administrators with understanding the importance of their roles in (and options for) intervention, as well as establishing policies and norms that do *not* support, encourage, or reward bullying behaviors. This can be done through ongoing education on conflict resolution skills directed towards department chairs, deans, and administrators who deal with cases of bullying and harassment, as well as coaching during a given case of bullying.

Acting as Change Agent

Administrators can also be assisted by facilitating discussions that encourage colleges to make conflict management part of their strategic planning. In addition, ombuds can provide upward feedback to management to help identify policies and practices which support and institutionalize acts of bullying or create barriers for resolution options and therefore need to be changed.

For example, a college may have implemented a peer judicial committee to review acts of misconduct. If a case of bullying went through this committee process, it is possible the victim will be re-victimized and the chances of further stigmatization of the victim are high. Even if the committee has been asked to keep proceedings confidential, the bully will likely see a peer review as adversarial and an opportunity to lose face. The bully may then be motivated to find additional indirect means of retaliation

toward the victim in response to the target coming forward. A peer committee could be an ineffective and damaging option and the organization should be aware it is not appropriate for cases involving bullying, as it would not resolve the conflict and may actually encourage further bullying behavior.

An ombuds can provide feedback to management on patterns of cases which reflect structural flaws in an organization's systems. When there is a clear aggressor and victim identified, an ombuds may also suggest alternative programs and options that may assist both the aggressor and the victim to effectively address the effects of harm, such as a restorative justice program.

Conclusion

Ombuds can have a significant impact in their roles as facilitators and change agents where bullying exists. This requires an understanding of what bullying is, how it works, and what strategies for intervention can be effective given the multiple symptoms and contexts occurring during the various stages of bullying. These conflicts are rarely simple or easy to address. Several issues can be involved surrounding interpersonal as well as organizational relationships.

The many factors involved in cases of bullying often require a multidimensional approach toward resolution, which might require multiple strategies for intervention at different levels within the organization. Both interpersonal and intra-organizational interactions and influences must be considered

before appropriate intervention strategies can be determined.

Ombuds can help facilitate both short and long-term solutions to cases and issues of bullying through inquiry, analysis of the types of bullying occurring, identifying what stage the bullying process is in, and working with all parties involved to consider appropriate options, solutions, and feedback for resolution, prevention, and organizational change.

The author would like to thank Tom Sebok, from the University of Colorado at Boulder, for his encouragement and thoughtful feedback during earlier drafts of this paper.

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