

The Bully Problem

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While the topics of harassment and abuse have received considerable attention (and are certainly problems about which we need to be vigilant), bullying is a much more pervasive and insidious behaviour in sport. Coaches are bullies, athletes are bullies, parents and volunteers are bullies. Are you a bully? Have you ever been victimized by a bully?

For two years, the Centre for Sport and Law sat at the end of a harassment hotline for amateur sport across Canada. For more years than that, we have been listening to people of all ages, positions, and sports describe situations they believe to involve harassment or abuse. The reality is that most of those situations describe perfectly the behaviour of the bully. Unfortunately, too many people exhibiting such behaviours have been coaches.

“Bullying” is a form of harassment, but also has some of its own defining characteristics. Harassment is illegal; bullying is not necessarily illegal, but it is always wrong and should never be condoned, let alone be allowed to exist within an organization.

Bullies are mean. They engage in nasty, disrespectful, hurtful behaviour. Their intention, whether conscious or unconscious, is to control. To do this, they diminish, humiliate, and sabotage other people.

Gary and Ruth Namie¹ have catalogued the top 10 bullying behaviours in the workplace. Clear parallels can be found in sport. These bullying behaviours include

- yelling and screaming
- blaming the target of bullying for “errors”
- making unreasonable performance or job demands
- criticizing the target’s abilities
- applying rules inconsistently
- threatening loss of opportunity
- insulting and putting-down
- discounting or denying accomplishments
- excluding or ostracizing the target
- stealing credit from others.

THE ORGANIZATION AS THE ACCOMPLICE

What is interesting and, unfortunately, all too prevalent, is the fact that the organization (and the people in it) often becomes the accomplice of the bully. The only way to stop a bully is through the proactive efforts of a third party. In other words, left unchecked, the bullying will continue. In fact, bullies keep up the

behaviour where it is ignored or implicitly condoned. The bully certainly is not going to stop himself or herself—and why stop what you are apparently having success doing?

Research² shows that in workplace bullying, the employer is often seen by the target as playing a vital role in sustaining, if not actually enabling, the bullying.

Bullies	60 per cent responsible
Employer	24 per cent responsible
Society at large	8 per cent responsible
Target	8 per cent responsible

It is interesting that disputes between bullies and targets typically take the form of “he said/he said” dialogues. This is exactly the kind of situation sport organizations don’t like to get involved in. It’s messy and typically comes down to issues of credibility (“where’s the proof?”). Unfortunately, this means that all too often nothing is done. Perhaps the most insidious outcome is that the bullying behaviour is condoned and the perception that the organization will do nothing is reinforced for both the bully (who will thus continue) and the target of the bullying behaviour (who will perceive that complaints will not be taken seriously, or that the organization has ineffective procedures for dealing with such matters). The organization has become an accomplice.

RESPONDING TO HARASSMENT AND BULLYING

Recent research in the field of harassment shows that there are four general categories of response to a situation of harassment. Occurring along a continuum, these categories are

AVOIDANCE. The least assertive of the responses, examples of avoidance include ignoring the harassment, distancing oneself from the harasser, or, in the extreme, removing oneself from the environment completely perhaps by quitting a team, a club, or even the sport altogether. Avoidance is usually the first way that people respond to harassment and bullying.

DEFUSION. Responses in this slightly more active category involve trying to “normalize” the situation by going along with the behaviour, trying to make a joke about it, or confiding in personal friends in an attempt to make the situation more tolerable. Defusing behaviours may be misinterpreted as acceptance of the harassment or bullying treatment.

NEGOTIATION. A more direct category of response, it involves negotiating with the harasser or bully to stop. This is often risky, because the harasser may retaliate or isolate the target even further and the situation may escalate.

CONFRONTATION. Typically the response of last resort, this is the most assertive category on the continuum of responses. It has two components: aggressive personal responses or requesting help from the organization through a formal complaint.

We now know that reporting bullying is usually the last response, and we can infer that many people who experience harassment or bullying never even take this final step, believing they won’t be supported or believed.

This does not mean that policy-based approaches are not important. Rather, it suggests that organizations, and people within organizations, must also pursue more proactive measures designed to prevent situations of harassment and bullying from occurring in the first place. The onus must shift to the organization to create an environment that does not tolerate these types of conduct. This is achieved through a number of measures including timely and decisive intervention when such conduct occurs. This is everybody's responsibility.

1. Adapted from Namie, G. and Namie, R. 2000. *The Bully at Work*. Naperville, Ill.: Sourcebooks, Inc.
2. Ibid, p.35.