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Fall 12-15-2021

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#### Recommended Citation

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**Bullying in the C-Suite: A Nurse Leader Perspective**

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The author declares no conflict of interest and received no funding.

### **Abstract**

An estimated 35% of American workers have experienced bullying, and in 80% of those situations, the perpetrator was a supervisor or boss.<sup>1</sup> However, the reality is that bullying can come from anyone in the workplace, including subordinates. Victims are generally well liked and good performers, making them feel like threats to a bully's power base. Bullying, unlike harassment, is not a legally defined behavior, so no laws currently exist to punish it. Victims are, therefore, at the mercy of their bosses, supervisors, co-workers, and human resource departments for protection or relief. Bullying is not a singular event, but rather a pattern of malicious behavior intended to harm.<sup>2</sup> The term "corporate psychopath" is used to identify bullying CEOs and their psychopathic behavior.<sup>3</sup> It is vital for healthcare leaders to acquire the knowledge and skillset to build high-performing teams and positively influence others. Bullying is a learned behavior; therefore, implementing strategies to manage unwanted or toxic behavior may enable the nurse leader to be successful in dealing with a bully<sup>2</sup>. Suggested techniques for survival offer guidance for a nurse leader who may be the unfortunate victim of a corporate bully.

**Keywords:** bullying, corporate psychopath, incivility, workplace, nurse leader

Nurse leaders need to model professionalism and build high-performing teams in their pursuit of successful organizations. Incivility, bullying and toxic behaviors in any employee should not be tolerated or enabled. This paper describes a case study of bullying behavior in the executive suite and interventions for victims, regardless of their status in the organization.

### **Case Study**

Ann B., an experienced CNO interviewed with the leadership team at ABC Hospital in September of 2015. ABC hospital is a for-profit, 120 bed facility in a suburban community. During the interview, the CEO made derogatory comments about one of the leaders in the organization and said that he didn't stick to the interview questions and stated, "I don't have to, because I am the CEO". Ann interviewed well with the nursing leadership team and decided to ignore the comments made during the CEO interview. Ann accepted the position.

### **Favoritism**

Within a few months, Ann realized that she was going to have difficulties working with this CEO. His behavior was disrespectful, domineering, and inconsistent in his actions. One of the nursing directors, Lisa, was not a strong performer; however, she was well liked by the CEO. He would frequently call her into his office to solicit information about how Ann was doing. Ann received complaints from staff assigned to Lisa about her behavior towards them and their fear of retaliation if she knew they had complained. Nurse director colleagues of Lisa's also shared concerns with Ann about Lisa's lack of professional behavior towards staff and colleagues. Ann worked with Human Resources (HR) to begin addressing Lisa's performance. The CEO told Lisa that no matter what Ann did, he would "always have her back and that she would never be fired."

### **Public Rudeness**

When Ann's executive assistant wanted to transfer to another department, the CEO agreed to pay for her to attend a training course. When Ann submitted a request to have the Associate CNO attend a conference, the CEO walked into Ann's office, threw the request on the desk, and shouted "we need people working around here, not running around at conferences." When Ann interviewed candidates to fill the vacant assistant position, the CEO called HR without Ann's knowledge to ensure that a friend of his was offered the job.

#### Threats

Ann submitted a request for PTO to attend her nephew's college graduation, which was approved by the CEO. Three days prior to Ann's trip, the CEO told her that she needed to cancel the trip because the president of the company was coming to town. Ann refused. He then told her that her future would be limited if she didn't follow his instruction. Since the trip was previously approved, Ann went on the trip to be with her family.

#### Potential Violence

The CEO made disparaging remarks about the LGBTQ community, but always in private, with senior leadership and with the door closed. He put labels on desk accessories of a colleague that said "tubby," and "idiot," and then waited for someone to point them out to the individual. He threatened violence against anyone who "got in his way" and would say "I'll just take him out," ostensibly to shoot them.

#### Lack of Empathy

Ann's mother passed away about one year after her start with ABC Hospital. Within 30 days of her mother's funeral, Ann was called into the office and the CEO told her that she had lost her focus and needed to "pull herself together." He went on to say, "you're not the only one who has had a parent die." Ann had recruited and developed a strong nurse director team during

her time with this organization. Key quality and patient satisfaction scores went up significantly under Ann's leadership. Although she loved her work, and achieved great outcomes for the organization, Ann started looking for another job.

### **Background**

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines bullying as: "a form of aggressive behavior in which someone intentionally and repeatedly causes another person injury or discomfort. Bullying can take the form of physical contact, words or more subtle actions. The bullied individual typically has trouble defending him or herself and does nothing to 'cause' the bullying."<sup>4</sup>

An estimated 35% of American workers have experienced bullying,<sup>5</sup> and 90% of workers have experienced verbal abuse.<sup>6</sup> In his book, "*Bullying Bosses: A Survivors Guide*," Mueller states that 1 in 6 employees has been impacted by workplace bullying.<sup>7</sup> As often as 80% of the time, the bully is someone in a leadership position,<sup>8</sup> and 70% of the time, it's women bullying other women<sup>1</sup>. Data from 2015 reveal that healthcare workers are more likely to suffer from hostile work environments.<sup>9</sup> The data may vary due to location, type of business,<sup>10</sup> and position in the company. Scandinavian countries seem to have a lower incidence of bullying than other European countries, and unskilled workers report higher incidents of bullying than skilled workers.<sup>10</sup> The variation in reporting and recording incidents of bullying around the world is due to the way it is measured, as well as social culture.<sup>11</sup> Nielsen emphasizes the need for more research in this area. For this discussion, the male pronoun will be used for ease and consistency.

Bullying is not the same as harassment. In fact, bullying is not illegal in the United States. Harassment is defined as unwelcome behavior toward another based upon a protected category, such as a particular race or color, gender, disability, or sexual orientation.<sup>12</sup> It becomes

unlawful when the victim feels like he is in a work environment that others would describe as hostile or intimidating.<sup>12</sup> Harassment is a form of discrimination and violates the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>12</sup>

### Bullying vs. Retaliation

An example of harassment is represented by a manager telling a racist joke at a staff meeting. Another expression of bullying can be appreciated when the same manager arrives late to a staff meeting, starts yelling at the team about productivity, and shouts, “you’re all fired.” Bullying has nothing to do with management. The manager bully projects his weakness onto others, rather than face his own shortcomings.<sup>13</sup> Workplace bullying is not a singular event. If the manager above displayed that behavior once, most likely, he was having a bad day. Genuine bullying, though, is repetitive, calculated to have negative consequences, and intentional.<sup>2</sup>

Bullying is also different than retaliation. Employees in California are protected from retaliation if they have engaged in what is defined as a protected activity, such as reporting a safety violation, filing a worker’s compensation claim, or complaining about harassment.<sup>14</sup> However, in this article, we will assume that the instigator disregards the labor code; thus, bullying and retaliation may feel very similar. Hodgins and colleagues describe several types of bullying:<sup>15</sup>

- Physical: kicking, pushing, tripping
- Verbal: name-calling, insulting, harsh teasing
- Relational: exclusion from a peer group
- Reactive: response to personal victimization of bullying

- Cyberbullying: hostile, threatening, or disrespectful online messages, or sharing personal/confidential information/images of someone via electronic communication/social media.

Although this list addresses bullies in a school environment, these behaviors can be applied to the workplace in any organization. The workplace bully often lashes out verbally with insults about appearance, intelligence, or work performance. The bully boss sends his assistant out for coffee for the office, but does not include the victim in the coffee order. That same boss approves a vacation request, and then, at the last-minute, demands that it be canceled, with the threat of termination.

It is frequently assumed that victims of workplace bullying are weak, when in reality, the target is often a strong performer and well-liked.<sup>8</sup> Victims can be both vulnerable or provocative.<sup>16</sup> The bully generally aims for someone who is quiet and agreeable. Though victimized employees are often likeable, the bully senses a threat to his power base, and, therefore, seeks to push out, or at least demoralize, his victim through repeated mistreatment.<sup>16</sup>

It has taken decades for workplace bullying to move to the forefront of social and behavioral issues. The definition of workplace bullying and articles about the topic were first published in the late 1980s. Swedish psychologist Heinz Leymann was the first to define workplace bullying as “mobbing,” and the first to publish a peer-reviewed paper regarding mobbing in 1989.<sup>17</sup> This term is more common in Western Europe and more accurately describes a group of co-workers singling out an individual to whom they display bullying behavior, rather than an individual perpetrator. Leymann also identified that the behavior spans a period of time, as opposed to a single event.<sup>17</sup> Mobbing was added to the urban dictionary in 2006 and is defined as an extreme form of social stressors at work, also called bullying.<sup>18</sup> Andrea



Adams, a freelance journalist, was one of the first to expose what she found taking place in a London bank. Adams wrote a high profile story, which included a woman so fearful after being victimized by her boss, that she ate her lunch in the restroom to avoid being criticized for her eating habits.<sup>19</sup> Adams revealed that she had 50 more similar stories, and her work was ultimately released as a documentary on BBC radio in 1990. She went on to write a book about the subject.<sup>19</sup>

### **Bullying as Learned Behavior**

Harvey et al. compared nature and nurture as they relate to bullying.<sup>20</sup> There is research on the possible brain-related issues, such as diminished upload of glucose to the pre-frontal cortex, which can cause anti-social tendencies.<sup>20</sup> In addition, mutation of certain genes and an overly developed immune system may cause anti-social or aggressive behavior.<sup>20</sup> Antisocial behaviors in children tend to predict the same behavior in adulthood.<sup>20</sup> Antisocial and aggressive behavior is learned elsewhere and then imitated.<sup>20</sup> Despite science that may cause behaviors consistent with bullying, or merely learning the behavior from watching others, the result is a harmful and unacceptable behavior towards others.

Children are generally not taught to value themselves appropriately and may grow up regarding other people's opinions as more important than their own.<sup>13</sup> As adults, this may not be problematic until bullying arises. The bully tries to upset someone's sense of truth. Hard-working individuals who grew up within trusting relationships begin to question their own judgement.

Bullying rises above cultures and is a common characteristic of human behavior, and sometimes animals.<sup>21</sup> The social issues we face today are derived from ancient survival tactics. Studies done in rats and mice found that when subjected to bully-like behavior, the rats were less

likely to eat or drink.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, studies of baboons and chimpanzees found bullying-like behaviors, which were often physical in nature.<sup>21</sup> In a culture where violence and aggression are condoned, bullying may be more apparent.<sup>22</sup> Humans are not primates, and we have language that allows us to express emotion to others in words, rather than in physical acts of aggression. However, verbal aggression can be just as damaging as physical bullying.

Bullies are narcissistic, lack empathy, and have low self-esteem.<sup>21</sup> They can be friendly to those who can do something for them, but otherwise may use offensive language, spread false rumors, yell, and make someone the victim of cruel practical jokes. Their targets may endure bullying behavior due to shame, feeling trapped or powerless, or fear of retaliation.<sup>8</sup> Victims can find it challenging to get a co-worker involved. The employee doesn't want to be associated with what is going on, may be fearful of becoming the next victim, and may feel some shame about what is occurring around them.<sup>1</sup>

Nielsen and Einarsen highlight three main characteristics of a bully:<sup>10</sup>

1. Unwanted behavior inflicted on another
2. Behavior spans a period of time
3. Inability of the victim/employee to easily escape the situation

A phrase found during the research for this article was “kiss up, kick down.”<sup>23</sup> Although there was no scientific definition, the term was mentioned in several articles and defined in the Urban Dictionary using very similar wording: kiss up to superiors and kick those below you. This term was applied to National Security Advisor John Bolton, who had a reputation for telling his superiors whatever they wanted to hear and berating those he considered beneath him.<sup>23</sup>

Bullies need a conducive environment to thrive.<sup>24</sup> A tolerant organization that will turn a blind eye, or perhaps give the offender a proverbial slap on the wrist, is more likely to have a

bully or two in its midst. Typically, there needs to be a power imbalance, such as a boss bullying a subordinate. However, a power imbalance can develop between peers over time, when one inflicts malicious, damaging behavior toward another. If most companies claim zero-tolerance on this issue, how does it persist? There is no clear consensus on where the demarcation is between a boss who is strict or “hard on his executives” and the boss who bullies.

Every work environment has its own culture and politics, whether it is a nursing unit or an administrative suite. For an employee, “fitting in” is as important as being competent in one’s performance. It promotes a sense of belonging and acceptance. No one wants to arrive on the first day of work, doughnuts in hand, and find out the staff on 4North are all on Weight Watchers. Most people want to fit in to a group and not be treated differently than the rest of the team. If one has never been bullied before, an individual might not recognize the toxic behavior and initially assume personal wrongdoing. Bullying behavior is pervasive and rarely involves physical aggression.<sup>8</sup> Bullies are manipulative and skilled at invoking their intentional actions, and their targets tend to stay silent due to shame.<sup>25</sup>

#### Changing work environment in health care

The landscape of healthcare is continually changing. The perception of nurses working harder and with fewer resources, combined with ineffective coping skills, may be contributing to more difficult conflict management in workplace relationships.<sup>26</sup> Nurses are trained to work in teams; consequently, they share other group activities, such as potlucks, birthdays and baby showers. However, there is a significant difference between not being invited to someone’s birthday and a novice nurse failing to receive help from a coworker with a critical, clinical patient situation. Bullying in a clinical environment can be dangerous because the well-being of staff impacts patient outcomes.<sup>27,28</sup> Numerous articles document the studies that examined what

is called lateral violence among nurses. A search in PubMed using the words “lateral violence in nursing” revealed 101 results. What has not been studied or written about extensively is bullying in the c-suite.

The APA has redefined the term psychopath to describe someone with an antisocial personality disorder.<sup>29</sup> A psychopath displays a chronic and pervasive disposition to disregard and violate the rights of others.<sup>29</sup> The three similarities among psychopathic behavior and bullying behavior include lack of guilt, lack of empathy, and failure to accept responsibility for one’s actions.<sup>3,30</sup>

Clive Boddy started using the term “corporate psychopath” in his lectures in 2005.<sup>3</sup> Boddy estimates that about 3.5% of senior managers fit the description of a corporate psychopath.<sup>3</sup> The percentages might be higher in specific industries, such as banking, as it attracts individuals who are drawn to power and money. In this area of business, the incidence of senior leaders who fit the description of a corporate psychopath is as high as 25% to 33%.<sup>3</sup> Despite this harsh-sounding term, it does not mean that a bullying boss is going to predictably behave like psychopath, but it may feel that way just the same.

Corporate bullies are successful. As mentioned previously, they want attention from their superiors and will do and say whatever is necessary to get it. They are unconcerned with the opinions or feelings of peers and subordinates, are devious, and often subtle. Their charisma can be a cover for negative, toxic characteristics.<sup>30</sup> Hogan calls out the difference between healthy and unhealthy narcissism. “A healthy narcissist knows how to take advice about what he’s not so good at.”<sup>31</sup>

Leadership is far-reaching and significantly impacts those in a leader’s sphere of influence.<sup>32</sup> Leadership styles influence performance and attitude.<sup>32</sup> However, success should be

measured not only by individual performance, but also by the team's effectiveness. Fearful team members will not speak up, and information must be solicited in a meaningful and confidential manner when pursuing a complaint of workplace bullying.

### **Potential Interventions for Nurse Leaders**

One randomized, controlled trial focused on interventions, such as policy, communication, stress management training, and hostile behavior awareness training; however, analysis concluded that the interventions made no change in the bullying behavior.<sup>11</sup> This strategy is an initial step in any organization before pursuing more targeted interventions.

Another strategy suggested by Branch & Murray addresses early intervention and a no-blame approach if a bully stops the behavior.<sup>33</sup> An HR leader, particularly one at the c-suite level, would be the logical person to meet with the bully to address the malicious behavior.

The United States Department of Veteran Affairs developed a program called "CREW" (Civility Respect and Engagement in the Workplace).<sup>34</sup> It focuses on civility and respect in the workplace and decreased acceptance of inappropriate behaviors. A specific tactic prior to program adoption is to secure the commitment of the CEO and other senior leaders in the organization. Trained facilitators coordinate workgroups that meet regularly for at least 6 months. The participants define respectful behavior, barriers to civility, bad habits, and common goals regarding how members of the work group will behave.<sup>34</sup>

Working with senior leadership can ensure that one's organization adopts an anti-bullying policy. Facilitation of mandatory classes for senior leaders that emphasize soft skills and emotional intelligence is helpful. When an individual makes an allegation, practice active listening to convey genuine responsiveness. Companies with "zero-tolerance" policies must

enforce them. Stating that a policy exists, but failing to protect the victimized employee is no solution and may enable negative behavior patterns.

Confronting the bully is a suggested first step.<sup>35</sup> More specifically, someone with authority must insist that the bully engage in skill development focused on emotional intelligence and soft skills, such as compassion and empathy.<sup>35</sup> Leaders cannot be defined only by their contribution to the bottom line. Organizations must evaluate leaders for their abilities to build effective teams, promote a culture of trust, and motivate excellence.

A survey of 622 Chief Nursing Officers (CNO) revealed that almost 40% had left a position within the 5 years before the survey, and of those who left, 77% did so voluntarily.<sup>36</sup> Conflict with the CEO was stated by 26% of respondents.<sup>36</sup> Job satisfaction was high, yet 61% stated that they intended to leave their current position within 5 years.<sup>36</sup> Regardless of the reason, that statistic should spur prompt efforts toward ensuring professional, supportive, and collaborative workplaces. Bullying in the c-suite should not have to be the reason a successful CNO leaves a meaningful, gratifying job.

What to do if you are the victim of workplace bullying:

1. Take a deep breath and remember that this is about the bully's behavior, not yours.
2. Take notes. It is exhausting to be the victim, but stay vigilant. Document dates, times, and any witnesses. Describe behaviors that made you feel bullied. Keep your e-mail and, better yet, send a copy to your personal e-mail address. Note: Ensure that you are not violating company policy by forwarding e-mails. If that is the case, print a hard copy for your records.
3. Stand up for yourself. The bully wants you to play the victim. Remember the strengths and expertise that propelled you to your current position. Stick to the facts

- and stay strong. If you can't talk with your bully immediately, remain calm and re-schedule. Invite a third party to join you if the meeting has the potential to become tense or negative.
4. Talk to someone. Go to HR and if necessary, go to someone above HR. If the HR liaison also reports to the bully, then keep escalating. Talk to your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) professional, or your pastor/priest. If the resource is available, consider an executive coach. Many organizations also have whistleblower hotlines.
  5. Practice self-care. Recognize that you can only control what you say and do; you can't control others. Give others reasons to regard you as awesome. Model positive leadership and never lower yourself to your bully's level.
  6. Have a "Plan B." No job is worth the damage done to your self-worth. Save money in case you have a brief period of unemployment, and quietly use your network to seek a new position. Stay in touch with former colleagues so that you have adequate references when you apply for something new.
  7. Pray. Even if you are not religious, send a message out to the universe that you need help.
  8. Believe in yourself. Hard work got you this far. Keep your chin up, put a smile on your face, and do not give up.

### **Conclusion of Case Study**

Approximately one year after Ann's decision to seek another career opportunity, she was contacted by a prestigious national recruitment firm. Ann was recruited to a c-suite position within a large healthcare organization where she feels like a valued member of the team and is

treated with respect by the CEO. In summary, nurse leaders are not immune from bullying; the behavior can be especially damaging if it is permitted to persist. Early recognition, intervention and organizational introspection may alleviate this pervasive trend in the everchanging, modern landscape of health care delivery.



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