

Bullying at work – a workshop held at the IQA 8 July 2003

For this Summer meeting, Val Thomas ran a workshop, putting her own and others' research into Bullying at Work in the broad framework of Dr Deming's thinking. The workshop considered at how data is gathered and used, the role of performance pay and reviews in creating fear-full workplaces and the ways that some enlightened employers have found to drive out fear.

The workshop aimed to put the phenomenon of bullying at work in the context of the Deming philosophy. People, psychology and motivation comprise one of the four tightly interlinked elements of Deming's System of Profound Knowledge. Individually these elements were valuable – but usually of only minor effectiveness. If utilised together as part of a tightly integrated system they are very powerful. Bullying, at first sight might seem to fit only in the psychology corner as a regrettable but well-localised 'people' issue. During the course of the day workshop participants would come to see that it is a system problem with systems solutions.

Val Thomas' interest in the subject had been sparked in the late 1980's when she met a young Singhalese woman, on unpaid leave from work, who had obviously been victimised by her boss. The situation had been so serious that the case had been taken to both the Race Equality Commission and the Equal Opportunities Commission, neither of which recognised what had been happening as either race or gender discrimination. This man treated all his secretaries like that! The circumstances were not quite like the victimisation cases that Val had been used to representing in the Union, either.

The problem was more complex than it appeared at first sight and she began to explore the questions of what bullying was and whether it could be defined in a way that was useful and reliable. Andrea Adams' book 'Bullying at Work – How to Confront and Overcome it'¹ was the first she read that tackled the subject.

Deming had noted the importance of operational definitions and the July workshop began by looking at some definitions of the problem and creating some others that were meaningful to the participants.

Definitions that emerged were:-

- *Any action by one body, individual or group to impose its actions or views on another for some ulterior motive*
- *A repeated behaviour that causes physical or psychological harm to an individual or group*
- *Persistent violation of the integrity, space or rights of one group/ individual by another*

In the process of creating the definitions, experiences were shared. Those who had not had direct experience had witnessed incidents that fitted the definitions. There were some shocks and surprises, and the outcome a shared understanding of the damaging behaviours. Hoping that people will simply change their ways will never be effective. There is a need for serious analytical thinking.

Point eight of Deming's fourteen points or obligations for managers is "*Drive out fear, so that everyone may work effectively for the company*" Ryan and Oestreich² had presented a model of a systems view of the way in which bullying at work can flourish. It involves nested layers: the culture and perceptions of

¹ Bullying at Work – How to Confront and Overcome it . Andrea Adams. Virago Press (1992)

² Driving Fear out of the Workplace – How to Overcome the Invisible Barriers to Quality, Productivity and Innovation Kathleen D. Ryan & Daniel K Oestreich. Jossey Bass Wiley (1991)

senior management; poorly managed personnel systems; ambiguous behaviour within the organisation; abrasive and abusive conduct on the surface.

The Health And Safety Executive's 'Reporting of Injuries Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations' (RIDDOR) nowadays include a responsibility on employers to report incidents of stress and psychological injury. If the data is to be used to effect improvement then it's important to map the incidents and pay as much attention to organisations whose numbers of reported incidents are low as those where the reported numbers are high. Paradoxically, high reporting of incidents of bullying are likely to indicate organisations that are undergoing change and where trust abounds.

The mapping could equally indicate management style, and the process of transition. To gain a good understanding it's important to probe beneath the surface, and not accept information at face value, in fact try for an 'appreciation for a system'³. Change happens by learning from open and flexible organisations.

Control appears central in a bullying culture and it might be seen as valuable, but the downside is severe. The workshop thought about the implications of 'real life' statements from those who had lived with it. The conclusion drawn was that where bullying prevails most people were more-or-less unhappy and levels of engagement in work are inevitably low. If fear is the inspiration, where's the room for intrinsic motivation? Communication is restricted and regarded with cynicism. Information is weakened by patterns of half-truths, concealment and deceit.

Usually only a small minority of people suffer from severe bullying at any one time, but the climate of fear affects everybody and all of the time. It's common for many people to be subjected to mild forms of bullying nearly all of the time. People say things to appease those at the top, concealing the truth if it's inconvenient or risky. The effect is to drastically degrade the organisation's capacity to change and improve. In the end a bullying culture threatens the survival of the organisation that tolerates it.

Since 1990 bullying at work has been named and recognised and there are useful resources available to support victims. The courts are beginning to award high sums against offending organisations. Tim Field's helpline, books and website are particularly useful.⁴

During the workshop, a number of examples from organisations that had deliberately created strategies for combating bullying were examined. For those in attendance, a few paradigms were shifted. People said they'd be looking out for the insidious ways that 'undermining' became bullying, that respect and dignity were at the root of improvement and that 'different' doesn't equal 'wrong'.

Such a brief summary cannot do justice to what was a rich, rewarding and enjoyable day. Dr D. might have been pleased, if unsurprised, that in the right surroundings with everyone keen to explore, share and learn, here indeed, we did "learn and have fun."

³ *Deming's System of Profound Knowledge*

⁴ <http://www.bullyonline.org>