



ITS ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

BULLY FOR US

In his book 'Spit and Polish', Barry Ronge complained no one warned him that being commissioned to write a column is like being forced into a shotgun marriage to an unforgiving and demanding spouse. Every Thursday (in my case) there your dominating partner lurks, skulking in the blank whiteness of an empty sheet of paper, challenging you to produce the goods, silently ridiculing you, willing you to fail. Ok, the image is slightly archaic cos that was in the days when everything came on a hard copy but computerisation didn't put an end to the marital war. Your evil partner now lies mocking you from behind the monitor screen, which is just as empty, white and uninviting as the paper but you can't let them triumph.

As Ronge says, the drive to put one over on them reduces you to that of a topic kleptomaniac, filching phrases from conversations, stealing items of interest and eavesdropping shamelessly to snitch comments from unsuspecting diners, or people behind you in a supermarket queue. Once he even sent himself an SMS containing the words he heard a girl from a women's magazine say at a movie preview. She said "if its got wheels or testicles its going to cause a woman trouble" and he felt sure he could make something of it. Each and every day there is always one snippet of information or comment that takes your fancy and compels you to write, if only just to show your other half that their bullying tactics didn't work and once again they failed to psyche you out!

That message about the testicles and wheels and the image of a loveless marriage to a ruthless, dominating spouse got me thinking about strength and power. I have people coming up to me sometimes asking me to cover certain issues as if I was a topic disc jockey and the column was a phone-in request show. And there is one recurring theme, tune which I get asked to play, and that is people in the workplace abusing power and bullying. It's such a major issue that internationally organizations are increasingly taking more notice of it. Its effect on individuals and organisations is massive - it can make the victims' lives a misery and can create an unpleasant working environment for all parties witnessing the bullying behaviour.

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And make no mistake it costs you - With an estimated annual cost to the UK economy of £1.3 billion (15 billion Pula) in sick pay, staff turnover and loss of production, it's not something you can ignore.

But what caught my interest this week was not bullying in the typical 'Boss giving subordinate a hard time' scenario but wondering if bullies are attracted to specific industries or organisational departments and how widespread bullying is. Moreover, do we even recognise and condemn it or is it something that is so commonplace that we have grown to accept it as the norm?

Lets take consumer bullying as an example. We hear much about consumer rights and purchasing power but in many instances the jackboot is firmly on the other foot. Don't believe me? Consider the sometimes power imbalance between companies and customers. Some companies have become so large and powerful they can totally ignore the clear wishes of customers and just crush them into submission such as the uproar years ago when commercials were first introduced into movie theatres. "People booed loudly for almost a year and exhibitors ignored them," says analyst Ray Conlogue. 'Finally, everyone gave up.' I think this serves as a metaphor for how the marketplace now functions: by bullying the customer.

And Conlogue points out that it's still happening today. "Just try getting Home Depot to put you through to the paint department without making you listen to several minutes of their self-promoting jingles first." There are countless examples where one is forced to take it or leave it, especially true when there is a monopoly – telephone, water power. It's said you can't argue with city hall but you've got even less chance with the utility companies because they've got us all by the short and curlies.

And that stranglehold is the same as the one at work - because there are so few jobs out there, victims have to put up and shut up just to stay in employment. Also because bullying is often so subtle it is very difficult to prove and when the subordinate raises the issue it looks like nitpicking and a personal vendetta.

And what about on your way to work when a bigger vehicle – usually a taxi - just forces you out of the way. Wet Wet Wet got it wrong – it's not love that is all around but bullying in some shape, size or form. The verbal harassment, physical assault or coercion which we normally associate with the school playground and the workplace is actually found in pretty much every aspect of our lives.

There are bullies in the boardrooms, bullies who are university presidents, politicians, pastors, priests, rabbis and clerics and of course preachers from that new religion - advertising. There is bullying that occurs in electronic space, called Cyberbullying, there is military bullying, political bullying and the southern Africa speciality, road bullying – the domain of taxis. If whatever you have is bigger and stronger you can use it to your advantage. That's the essence of bullying.

And it thrives because it works. The use of bullying tactics is routinely enacted in both the public and private sector. Bullying has achieved results in the sense of increasing profit, domination of markets and maintaining positions of power. . So bullying has clear benefits and one of the things we need to do to eradicate such tactics is to diminish those benefits. But as a society, this is going to be difficult to deal with, because bullying is so firmly embedded in our culture.

So I am questioning that if people want to write about it, talk about it and I see so much of it whether or not this bullying thing is innate human nature or just becoming more of a social issue? The majority of bullying is a learned behavior, much of which occurs when growing up. As a child we see that bullying tactics work to get a result at home and at school. A lot of children, when asked about bullying, have even said that it's also fun -- a form of entertainment where bystanders become the audience, egging on the bully and enjoying the spectacle

Schoolchildren can be sadistic little savages but as adults we ought to know better. By becoming more empowered as consumers we can stop commercial bullying. With a stronger approach to law enforcement we can stop taxis being a law unto themselves. And with collaboration between employers and employee representatives and a commitment to changing the bullying culture I believe we can confidently address its pervasive nature and attain the benefits of a positive working environment. We can break the pattern. All it takes is to say 'No more - enough is enough. Or as the Twisted Sister so succinctly song put it 'We're not gonna take it anymore'!

