



POWER DRESSING – WHAT THE FASHIONABLE OFFICE BULLY IS WEARING THIS SEASON!

For a textbook example of a bullying boss in action take yourself off to the movies and catch *The Devil Wears Prada!* The boss from hell in question is Miranda Priestly, the fashionable and often furious editor in chief of *Runway* magazine, who needs a new assistant. Untrendy and always even-tempered journalism major Andy answers the ad, and while she's "all wrong" for the job, she somehow gets it... and of course, acs it. Along the way, she loses herself but gains a fab new wardrobe, makes a journey of self-enlightenment and self improvement and goes on to live happily ever after.

Played perfectly by Meryl Streep, Miranda is a bitch boss par excellence, cold, calculating, narcissistic and scathing in her put-downs. And worryingly I couldn't help but see some similarity in how she was portrayed and the behaviour of some managers in corporate Botswana. The idea of being bullied by your boss or just completely disregarded as in the movie is not a new phenomenon and probably more common than you think.

This week I spent an emotional hour with a senior female manager who had been subjected to the worst psychological abuse imaginable in the workplace. Her manager an egocentric, volatile and emotionally immature expatriate (not that that's important but it does add some fuel to the emotional fire for the xenophobes) had on a number of occasions verbally abused her (even going so far as calling her evil), told her to pack her bags and go, and on too many occasions reduced her to tears. One critical incident is too atrocious and abusive of power to even mention – a complete violation of rights. Suffice to say, Boss was not Mr Nice Guy.

After numerous complaints to HR (often times a toothless kitten and just so in this case) this lady raised a formal grievance and decided to fight for her rights. It took the company nearly a quarter of a year to deal with the complaint (it's complex putting a manager on the spot and can't just be dealt with 'like that', akere). In addition no one was standing beside her to testify as it was just too risky to go up against the bully boss. How many times as a child did you stand idly by while the bully picked on someone else, and you thanked your lucky stars it wasn't you who was the focus of their attention? You can see where this is going, can't you? Little was or could be done.

The perpetrator walked free with a wrap on the knuckles and some mutterings from the powers-that-be about the need for anger management classes for managers!

For the victim it's another story. Months after the fact I am left counselling a highly educated, once confident career woman who has lost self respect, confidence, loyalty and is prone to periods of depression. Everyday she experiences anxiety attacks as she is forced to face her abuser. And all this from a company that seemingly espouses integrity as a corporate value! So where was the integrity in this scenario? Where were the work colleagues who had observed the abuse and could stand beside her as witness? I think their actions or lack thereof tells you more about the company than it does about its staff. You see if the environment is not conducive to empowerment and rights and every time you raise your head you get shot at, then you learn, rather quickly, to keep your head down.

Harry Levinson, Ph.D., the Dean of Organizational Psychologists and Head of the Levinson Institute in Waltham, Massachusetts says 40 years of consulting have given him some idea of what management bullies do and why. 'They over-control, micromanage, and display contempt for others, usually by repeated verbal abuse and sheer exploitation. They constantly put others down with snide remarks or harsh, repetitive, and unfair criticism. They don't just differ with you, they differ with you contemptuously; they question your adequacy and your commitment. They humiliate you in front of others.' Our abuser in this instance is a model one.

Successful corporate bullies create problems, but they are competent. Often they are very bright workers. And therein lies the problem says Laurence Stybel, Ph.D. "They make a significant contribution to the company as workers. They get promoted because of their technical expertise. Then they wind up supervising others, and spew on people in support functions, or competitors, perhaps even their own bosses." The typical successful bully thinks, "They won't do anything to me--I'm the best they've got," Stybel says.

Sadly we see this far too often. If you achieve results an organisation will forgive your volatile nature, disregard for people's rights and rudeness, trading this off against corporate profits. So why bother to teach management skills? If good management is not considered essential in the journey to corporate wealth rather let's teach the principle of the shortest distance to achieve your goal. What is the sense of insisting on a modus operandi of behaviour if others have carte blanche to disregard it and abuse at their will?

According to Jay MacDonald once a bully has targeted you, he or she, since bullying is an equal-opportunity trait - rarely moves on voluntarily. It's up to you to shake them off. Unfortunately, it's the bully that usually wins. (Data sourced from the Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute indicates that 70 percent of targets lose their jobs once they've been targeted; of that, 31 percent leave voluntarily for health reasons and 37 percent are constructively discharged.) And sure as the bully has a small member, that's just what this lady intends to do. She will resign this month. She can't take it anymore. She has no quality of work life.

The Devil doesn't necessarily wear Prada but is often dressed in corporate clothes which conceal an emotionally retarded being who never evolved from bullying at school and views the office as their new stomping ground. These people discovered early that they could maximise their share of what they wanted by being aggressive and because power is the chief perk in most companies, they will try and claim the lion's share the only way they know how.

A little knowledge is a dangerous thing but a little power can be even worse, bringing out the bully in almost any low life and allowing them free reign to abuse their position. And because this is real life, unfortunately unlike Andy their victims don't always live happily ever after.

