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## Bullying in the Workplace: Coaching and Neuroscience

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### 50% of Workers are Bullied

With as many as 50% of workers having experienced workplace bullying, and legal cases brought by employees against organisations on the increase, bullying has become a key issue in large organisations. I have sometimes been asked to 'fix' bullies, and as a coach, I have taken the approach of enabling the bullies to fix themselves.

One thing I became aware of as I listened to these clients was that what they really wanted was to be liked and accepted. This is a universal place that everyone starts out from. The desire to be part of a tribe is in our genetic make-up, and protecting each other ensures the survival of the human race.

### Nature v Nurture

Sometimes people get turned away from this natural pathway through their life experiences. Take, for example, someone who grows up with parents or carers who are aggressive and even violent. That behaviour becomes the child's blueprint for communication. The lucky ones may meet role models outside of the home from whom they can absorb a more sympathetic way of communicating; others discover that replicating the intimidating environment of their own childhood, while providing a defence, also causes trouble at school and later at work, where they find it difficult to maintain positive relationships with others. The only method that succeeds for those people is to browbeat others into submission, something at which they become experts from an early age, and they use these skills as a protection from the confusion, criticism and misery that is the response to their entrenched behaviour... and so the situation spirals. My belief is that bullying is acquired rather than innate conduct, and the result of nurture rather than nature.

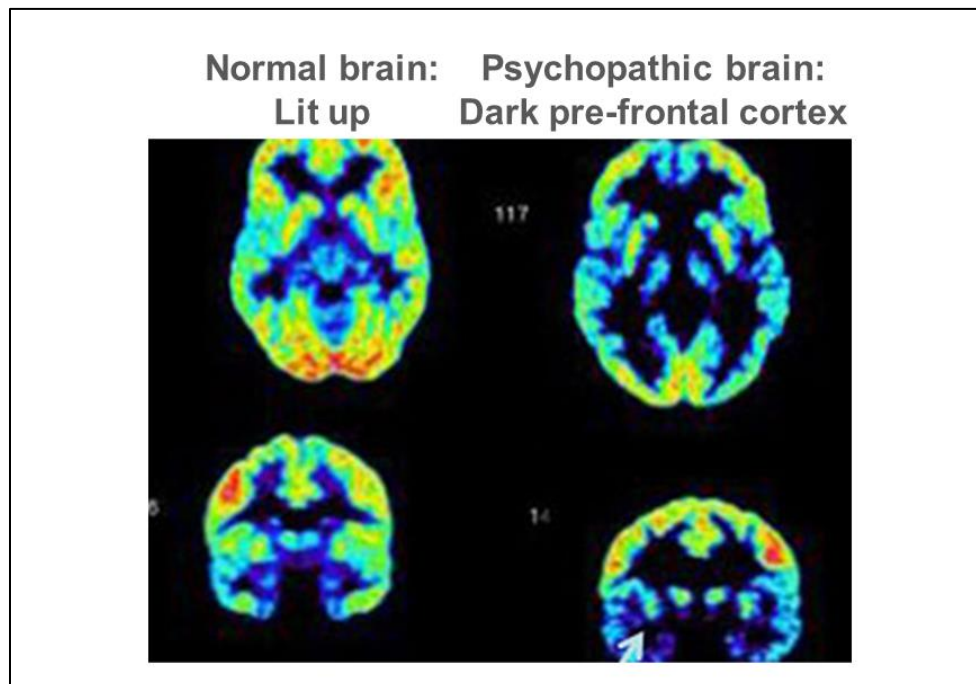
### Neuroscience and Bullying

This is borne out by research. Neuroscientist James Fallon studied the brains of psychopaths and discovered that there are three key ingredients common to the psychopathic killer:

1. Genetics: psychopaths carry one or more (there are ten) high risk violence related genes.
2. Loss of brain function in the pre-frontal cortex. This is the circuit which controls ethics, morality and impulse.
3. A history of childhood abuse.

## The Psychopathic Brain

The picture below shows a normal brain on the left hand side. You can see that a lot of the area is lit up. On the right hand side is the psychopathic brain. The pre-frontal cortex is dark.



This could be taken to suggest that such killers are not responsible for their crimes or have no control over their actions, but Fallon was unwilling to subscribe to that view. Having discovered that he was related to Lizzie Borden, the legendary killer who 'took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks', then dispatched her father in the same way, he examined the brains of his own family members. He was shocked to discover that the only brain exhibiting the psychopathic pattern was that of Fallon himself! Scans showed that his orbital cortex is inactive, as it is in many criminals. He also has all five major gene variants linked to aggression. So why, he asked himself, was he not a serial killer? He concluded that the third ingredient was lacking: his was a peaceful, happy childhood and he had never been exposed to any kind of abuse.

The results were further complicated by the reactions of his immediate family, who, to his astonishment, admitted that they were not surprised to learn he had a psychopathic brain, and had always noticed a 'standoffish part' to him, along with 'hot-headed' behaviour. One admitted to being 'scared of him' sometimes. On reflection, Fallon recognised that he did indeed have some uncaring characteristics and that something was wrong, and yet he also realised *that he was unable to care about it.*

What he asked himself, was that if he had the make-up and behaviour of a psychopath, then why was he not out killing people, nor feeling the urge to do so? He concluded that in the psychopathic brain, brutality is triggered by childhood abuse. If nothing activates the trigger, then the person grows up to be a normal member of society – except that his or her behaviour deviates in small ways from the norm, explaining the comments of Fallon's own family.

## The Psychopathic CEO

Various studies of CEOs have revealed that many have brains which exhibit the traits of psychopaths. Psychopathic bosses may seem lethal but they do not generally kill people! However, they sometimes take some hard business decisions, such as slashing jobs to increase profits, which many of us might find ourselves unable to do.

So even if the nature argument is true, and preponderance to certain behaviour is dictated by neural make up and genes, we can see that nurture makes all the difference. Can we assume then that learned behaviour can be reversed? In my experience this is possible and not always difficult. The bully must want to change, but I find that even a small exposure to coaching, particularly learning and practising the skills, is enough to create a desire to find out more about how to communicate in this way, simply because it feels better. A coaching skills course might not reform a psychopath, but for the average bullying manager it can be the key to a whole new leadership style.

## Coaching a bully at work

For example, I once trained a group of managers who disliked their boss, also a participant on the course, to such an extent that they would avoid sitting next to him when possible. He was a known bully at work. We did two days of coaching skills training, then they all went away to practise with each other and out in the field. A month later, when we reconvened, the bullying manager said, "I love this new way of communicating, but it feels awkward because it is not what people expect of me".

A member of his team, one of those who had avoided him during the first days of training, responded, "It may feel awkward to you, Fred, [name changed] but please go on doing it because to us it feels fantastic."

Six months later I heard that the onetime bully was now referred to in the organisation as "the kinder, gentler Fred".

## Neuroplasticity in the brain

I believe that bullying is a habit that can be reversed. Recent findings in neuroscience show that the brain has 'neuroplasticity' - it can be rewired through experience. New neural pathways can be formed and old ones de-conditioned through our choices and behaviour:

To achieve this type of change, our bully must be given the 'how to' skills, so that new neural pathways can be created to embed a new habit. By the 'how to' skills, I mean basic coaching techniques, like learning how to listen.

What we are usually doing when we say we are listening is interrupting, hi-jacking the conversation to talk about ourselves or giving advice. True listening means paying attention when other people talk, and prompting for more when they run dry. Other useful skills are asking questions and maintaining an open and inviting air through asking permission. (See articles on my website about The Five Levels of Listening, and Permission Protocol).

There are times when a manager will have to direct or give feedback in order to develop and teach reports. If the typical coaching skills of listening, questioning and permission skills have built a solid foundation to the relationship, the more directive elements will not have a jarring effect or reduce whatever trust has been established.

## Recognising the Bully at Work

So how do you recognise a workplace bully? Bullies who yell in the office, or take every opportunity to humiliate their staff, are easily identifiable. Unfortunately the most painful type of bullying tends to go underground, being expressed in small ways, often in private, and continuing over a long period of time. Someone on the receiving end may become physically ill at the thought of going to work and having to face this workplace equivalent of Chinese water torture, not knowing when or where to expect the next torment. This manipulative type of bully often has a Jekyll and Hyde nature, projecting bonhomie and charm to those he or she cannot get away with bullying. Victims can feel isolated because their experience is rarely shared or witnessed by colleagues.

During my time as a record company MD, I once had to deal regularly with a bully who was the manager of one of our groups. Whenever we were in contact he would be rude or shout at me, even in public. A male colleague once said, 'I don't know why you have a problem with him. He is always absolutely charming'. Fortunately I did not work for the bully, so was able to laugh it all off and, to be frank, I gave as good as I got. But I puzzled over his behaviour because it was potentially bad for business. I discovered that he showed similar levels of aggression towards all the women in his office but never to men. He was in fact an old fashioned misogynist and, in the 1970s, people at work could display their prejudices without restraint. This is not to imply that bullying is a male preserve; it is not gender specific and there are plenty of female bullies around, both the shouting kind and the manipulative ones.

## Bullying Techniques

A surreptitious way of bullying is by exclusion. I recall a contemporary sharing with me how she had started to be excluded from meetings and events, like lunches, by not being issued with an invitation. She wilted under the pressure and eventually resigned, a situation which would now be regarded as a clear case of constructive dismissal.

Other instances of covert bullying include overloading the victim with work, allotting menial tasks or denying requests for holiday dates, particularly compassionate leave. I recall one boss (fortunately I worked alongside her rather than as a report) refusing to allow a member of her staff time off to attend a family funeral.

Other manifestations of bullying in the workplace are constant criticism, a refusal to recognise achievements, or a denial of deserved promotion.

It is the ongoing nature of the bullying which wears people down and makes the experience so very painful. Each incident may be trivial in itself and may not constitute grounds for a complaint, but if you are feeling physically sick at the thought of facing work the next day, it is a possible indication that you are suffering at the hands of a bully.

## Coaching Up to the Bullying Boss

There remains the question of how to deal with a bullying managing when one is on the receiving end of the bullying, and not in a position to suggest that one's boss should create some new neural pathways.

In such situations 'coaching up' is a useful skill to develop. If you pride yourself on being a coaching style manager to your own reports, next time you are feeling critical of the way your own boss behaves, address that boss by imagining he or she is one of your own reports. As a coaching manager, you will speak kindly and with respect, and provide positive feedback on the behaviour you would like to see more of rather than dwelling too much on what your report is doing wrong. When did you last give your bosses any positive feedback about their performance? Praise the way you want them to behave, then they will know you want more of it and, in the way that all people do, they are more likely to behave that way in order to receive more praise. It is like giving dogs a biscuit when they jump through the right hoop.

### Coaching up: the bullying boss

#### Coach the boss

- Like one of your team members

#### Support

- Listen and show some empathy

#### Positive feedback

- Emphasise the way you like to be managed

## Mindfulness Techniques

A useful remedy when you find yourself in an unpleasant situation where you have no control, like being the target of a bully, is simply to recognise the strong emotions that the situation is arousing in you, but *without trying to change them*. Let them pass: '*Oh, I'm scared. Now I'm angry. She's still shouting. I feel it's not fair.*' Acknowledging one's emotions in this way, and allowing them to be experienced without denying or changing them, helps us to be able to function alongside them without being overwhelmed. This is based on the ancient Buddhist practice of Mindfulness:

## Mindfulness

### Notice emotions

- *“I’m angry” “I’m scared”*

### Don’t try to change them

- **Let them pass**

### Acknowledge them

- **Continue to function without being overwhelmed**

## Report the Bully

Finally, most organisations are running scared now in terms of workplace stress and bullying, because there is an increasing amount of legal help available from outside for unhappy employees. While I always advise legal action to be a last resort (in my experience it is usually only the lawyers who gain, while the employee is faced with the stress and potential negative effects on his or her career prospects as a result of a protracted legal case) there is no need for people to suffer in silence. HR departments should be qualified to help, or can bring in an external coach or advisor.

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## About the author



International speaker, writer and broadcaster Carol Wilson is Managing Director of Culture at Work and a Fellow of the Institute of Leadership & Management, the Professional Speaking Association and the Association for Coaching, where she is a member of the Global Advisory Panel. A cross-cultural expert, she designs and delivers programmes to create coaching cultures for corporate and public sector organisations worldwide and has won awards for coaching and writing. She is the author of *'Performance Coaching: A Complete Guide to Best Practice Coaching and Training'*, now in its third edition and featuring Forewords by Sir Richard Branson and Sir John Whitmore, and *'The Work and Life of David Grove: Clean Language and Emergent Knowledge'*. She has contributed to several other books and published over 60 articles including a monthly column in Training Journal.