The Impact of Bullying on Individual and Organizational Performance

Matthew Goodwin
St. John Fisher College

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Matthew Goodwin

St. John Fisher College
The Impact of Bullying on Individual and Organizational Performance

Matthew Goodwin

St. John Fisher College
Master Signature Page

Dr. Seth Silver, Advisor

Dr. Timothy Franz, Faculty Reader

Diane Wiley, SPHR, Reader

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Abstract

The Impact of Bullying on Individual and Organizational Performance

This study set out to determine the effects that bullying in the workplace has on individual victims and the organizations where they work. The literature review presents the current research and determines where there are gaps. A qualitative study establishes the effects of bullying on individuals and organizations. Several participants provided details of bullying events and how these events impacted their performance. Conclusions were based both on the review of relevant literature as well as the experiences of the participants.
The impact of berating and belittling on individual and organizational performance

Chapter 1

Overview

Several studies over the years have found that bullying in the workplace is a common occurrence that is often ignored, and even tolerated in organizations (Comer & Vega, 2005, Ashforth, 1994). However, allowing this type of behavior can not only have detrimental effects on the individual being victimized, or bullied; but it can also have a negative impact on the organization overall.

During the 1990’s, bullying became a headline in the business world when Al Dunlap, nicknamed “Chainsaw Al” was hired, and ultimately fired, as Chief Executive Officer of Sunbeam (Byrne, 1999). Dunlap began his reign at Sunbeam by berating the current executive team and stating, “You guys are responsible for the demise of Sunbeam! I’m here to tell you that things have changed. The old Sunbeam is over today. It’s over!” (Byrne, 1999). Sunbeam ultimately experienced high turnover of upper level management, and lost over $898 million. While stock peaked under Dunlap at $53 per share, it ultimately dropped to under $6 per share during his tenure. Dunlap was ultimately fired by Sunbeam’s board of directors, due to the organization’s performance, which was attributed in large part to his bullying management style (Byrne, 1999).

While researchers cannot agree on the scope of the definition of workplace bullying, for the purpose of this study bullying is defined as “offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behavior, an abuse or misuse of power through means intended to undermine, humiliate,
denigrate or injure the recipient” (Faby & Seward, 2003, p. 16). The fact that this definition does not imply reoccurrence or frequency of bullying behaviors is intentional, as the effects of frequency of bullying will be addressed in this study. Several definitions include frequency of the behavior as an essential aspect of bullying, including Leyman, (as cited by Casimir, Djurkovic, & McCormack, 2004), who states that it must happen “at least once a week... (over) at least 6 months” (p. 470) in order to be considered bullying. However, this researcher finds that an act does not have to occur frequently in order to have negative consequences for the individual or organization—though frequency of bullying may be found to affect the level of the effects of this behavior.

**Problem Statement**

There is currently a lack of research that ties the actual effect that bullying has on individuals with how those consequences affect the organization’s performance. While several studies (Ashforth, 1994, Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003) acknowledge that bullying can have an effect on individual performance, the relationship that bullying creates with organizational performance has not been substantiated. Many organizations turn a blind eye to this behavior for various reasons, but ultimately allow it to happen because the detrimental effects of bullying for the organization are not known to management.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to determine the direct impact of bullying behavior on individuals, and how these effects, both short and long-term, in turn, impact the respective organization. This study first reviews the current research to see what we already know, and where there are gaps. Following, qualitative interviews were conducted in order to determine
the detailed effects on individuals, including their thoughts, feelings and actions after bullying events, and how this affected their performance, and ultimately, their organization’s performance.

Bullying can occur at all levels of an organization, and negative consequences can occur whether it is the CEO, like Dunlap, or even front level supervisors doing the bullying. The purpose of this study is, in effect, to determine the impact of berating and belittling at any level of an organization on individual performance and the consequences of this on organizational performance.

Conceptual Framework

Current research (Ashforth, 1994) suggests that the immediate impact of bullying may cause compliance to the supervisor’s requests due to fear of further belittlement, particularly “on tasks that are easily observed or verified” (p. 767). However, also according to Ashforth (1994), “belittling subordinates...may create fear and anxiety and threaten the maintenance of self and social-esteem” (page 67). This can lead to “bending or breaking the rules, criticizing people, reducing productivity, acting against someone’s wishes, arguing, and acting angrily toward others or toward things” (Ashforth, 1994, p. 68). While berating employees may “induce defensive conformity to the tyrant’s wishes, particularly on tasks that are easily observed” (Ashforth, p. 69, 1994), it also may “reduce subordinates intrinsic motivation and receptiveness to the tyrant’s edicts” (p. 69).

Unfortunately, bullying is often overlooked in the workplace. Often, the workplace bully is a valued, contributing member of the organization, which leads to the company’s turning the other cheek to the incidences of berating. “When the bully is valuable to the organization, anti-
bullying protocol may fall by the wayside as the target becomes a scapegoat” (Comer & Vega, 2005, p. 108). When berating is overlooked, bullies continue this pattern of behavior because the silence reinforces their means of reaching their goals. Ultimately, it is not only the berated individual who pays the price of this behavior, but also the organization where this behavior occurs.

Significance of Study

This study is important because it will show business leaders the effects of employing individuals who berate employees (bullying bosses) on the individuals who are bullied and on the organization where the bullying takes place. Because this kind of behavior still occurs in the workplace, it continues to have a negative effect on the workforce. Organizations will benefit from this study because it will provide them with research showing the effects of bullying on their employees and how that in turn effects the organization. Employees will benefit because by understanding the scope of the problem, they should be better equipped to deal with or avoid bullying behavior. This will help minimize the psychological impact on employees that berating creates. Additionally, the company’s stakeholders (customers, stockholders, etc.) can potentially benefit as well. If the company can avoid losing money (due to turnover, attendance issues, lowered motivation, etc.) from bullying bosses, then ultimately the company will perform better and potentially keep the costs down for its product or service.

Research Questions

1. What is workplace bullying, and what are some of its causes?

2. What is the short-term impact of supervisors berating employees on individual performance?
3. What is the long-term impact of supervisors berating employees on individual performance?

4. Does the frequency of bullying events affect the consequences of the bullying behavior on the victim?

5. How does the impact of bullying bosses affect organizational performance?

6. Do constructive performance feedback, and positive feedback have an impact on individual performance?

**Definition of Key Terms**

1. **Bullying**: "Offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behavior, an abuse or misuse of power through means intended to undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient" (Faby, et al., 2003, p. 16).

2. **Supervisor**: An individual in an organization who has "positional power" over other individuals within the organization. "Positional power...implies that they have formal authority, control over rewards, and control over punishments" (Casimir, et al., 2004, p. 473).

3. **Victim**: In relation to bullying, one who is on the receiving end of a behavior that the individual "perceives...as being unjust or hostile" (Djurkovic, McCormack and Casimir, 2005, p. 441)

4. **State self-esteem**: "Momentary changes in a person’s level of self-esteem in response to some situational stimulus" (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991, as cited by Burton & Hoobler, 2006, p.341)
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Bullying and Power

While it is important to note that bullying can occur between individuals of the same work status (such as co-workers of equal rank) (Casimir, et al. 2004, p. 472), this study will focus on examining the effects of bullying occurring by a supervisor or other person in a hierarchical position of power over the victim. While it can be stated that “those in lower-power positions...are more vulnerable to being the target of hostile behaviors than those in higher power positions” (Jagatic & Keashly, 2003, p. 48), the focus on supervisor-subordinate behavior in this study is also due to the assumption that the behaviors of one in a position of power are more likely to have a greater impact on an individual than that of an equal. In fact, McCarthy (1996) and Sheehan (1996) go so far as to define bullying in terms of power, stating that “bullying exists when someone establishes power over another and is perceived to exploit this power difference” (Casimir, et al, 2004, p. 469).

Q1: What is workplace bullying, and what are some of its causes?

There are several factors that can cause a supervisor or manager to berate, or bully, his or her employees. Larson (1989) found that supervisors tend to become more likely to use berating techniques to offer feedback when a problem builds up over time without providing continuous feedback to reverse the problem. Failure to provide immediate feedback “includes not only a gradual increase in the perceived severity of the problem, it also is likely to include a gradual increase in the emotionality response of the supervisor. The end result is that when feedback is finally given, it is likely to be more negative and more destructive (i.e., accusatory, sarcastic)
than it would have been had it been given earlier” (Larson, 1989, p. 411). These supervisors would be much better off providing feedback as early as possible, before they allow the problem to build up and they become more emotional. Individuals “are more motivated to use negative feedback that is delivered tactfully and constructively to improve their performance than negative feedback is delivered in a less considerate manner” (Rutkowski & Steelman, 2004, p. 14).

When a supervisor is him or herself a victim of bullying from a ranking member of the organization, he or she may in turn utilize this behavior on his or her subordinates. According to Ashforth (1994), being berated can lead to “bending or breaking the rules, criticizing people… acting against someone’s wishes, arguing, and acting angrily toward others or toward things” (p. 68). When the victim of bullying behavior supervises other employees, those consequences (such as criticizing or acting angrily towards others) can fall on the shoulders of that individual’s subordinates. Hoobler & Brass (2006) define this passed-down behavior as “displaced aggression,” or “the redirection of a [person’s] harm doing behavior from a primary to a secondary target or victim” (Brass, et al, 2006, p. 1125). Instead of directing their berating back on the individual who has bullied them, they “turn their displaced aggression toward organizational members over whom they have control—their subordinates” (Brass, et al, 2006, p. 1126).

Similarly, a supervisor can also become a bully when he or she is under intense pressure to perform, even if that pressure does not come in the form of bullying. According to Lynch & O’Moore (2007), “managers who perceive themselves as powerless in undertaking their tasks may resort to bullying behavior and use whatever power they can to regain control” (p. 100).
There is limited and conflicting literature on whether or not intent to harm plays a part in whether or not an employee is negatively affected by bullying behaviors. Keashly (2001, as cited by Jagatic, et. al, 2003) "found that intent did not figure prominently in (victims') experience of feeling abused" (p.46). That is to say, victims of bullying behavior did not take into account the aggressor's intent—they felt bullied, and therefore experienced the effects of bullying, regardless of intent. However, Keashly and Rogers (2001) also "found that those incidents in which the actor was perceived as intending harm were evaluated as more threatening, and therefore more hostile, than those where no intention was perceived" (Jagatic, et. al, 2003, p. 46-57). Additionally, Nickel (1972) "found that retaliation was more strongly related to perceptions of the aggressive intent of another person than to the actual frustration inflicted by the other" (Brass, et. al, 2006, p. 1126). Nickel's findings show that intent is indeed an important factor in how an individual perceives and reacts to this behavior. Casimir, et. al (2005) went so far to note that "the perceptions of victims are a cornerstone of bullying research because people react according to their perceptions" (p. 456). Therefore, the victim's perception of the intent of the bully, whether accurate or not, may have a large impact on the consequences for the victim. Brass & Hoobler (2006) went so far as to define abusive supervision as "subordinates' perceptions of the extent to which their supervisors engage in...hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors" (p. 1125). The inclusion of the word "perceptions" in this definition shows the importance of the way that a target reacts to berating (mentally) on whether it is considered bullying.

Organizations often turn a blind eye to berating behaviors when the bully is a valued, contributing member to the organization. According to Comer & Vega (2005) "when the bully is valuable to the organization, anti-bullying protocol may fall by the wayside as the target
becomes a scapegoat” (p. 108). This reinforces the bully’s behaviors, which can lead to the bully feeling that he or she is entitled to treat others in this manner, and potentially continuing this behavior under the pretense that he or she is achieving results by berating his or her subordinates (more on the results of bullying behavior under the heading *Impact of berating on individual performance*, below). Research (Jagatic, et al. 2003) shows that repeated bullying can only occur in organizations that tolerate such behavior. Brodsky (1976, as cited by Jagatic, et al., 2003) “suggests that harassment at work cannot occur without the direct or indirect agreement of management” (p. 51). According to Anderson & Pearson (1999, as cited by Jagatic, et al. 2003), this can, in fact, create a culture of “incivility spirals that affect other employees...causing employees to believe that the organization itself disrespects its employees” (p. 51). Allowing this behavior sends the message to employees that they too, may become the victim of a bully with little or no recourse.

*Impact of berating on individual performance*

One reason that bullying behaviors occur so frequently in today’s organizations may he that company leaders feel that this behavior achieves real or perceived performance results for the individual, and in turn the organization. Its immediate impact may cause compliance to the supervisor’s requests due to fear of further belittlement, or “induce defensive conformity to the tyrant’s wishes, particularly on tasks that are easily observed or verified” (Ashforth, 1994, p. 767). Berated individuals then comply with their supervisor’s instructions in order to avoid a future bullying incident. However, there are both immediate and long-term negative consequences for the victim as well as the organization.
Bullying has several very serious professional and personal effects on individuals, which in turn can have a severe impact on the performance of the victim. Einarsen & Hellesoy (1998) found that “victims of bullying generally report lowered well-being and lowered job satisfaction, as well as a number of stress symptoms including low self-esteem, sleep problems, anxiety, concentration difficulties, chronic fatigue, anger, depression and various somatic problems” (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003, p. 128). The inability to concentrate alone “may itself increase the chance of making mistakes, thereby increasing the possibility of reduced output quality and (the) likelihood of accident” (Cooper, Einarsen, & Hoel, 2003, p. 150). This reduced performance is in line with Ashforth (1994), who found that bullying may “reduce subordinates’ intrinsic motivation and receptiveness to the tyrant’s edicts” (p. 69). In fact, Professor Cary Cooper of the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST), who is “a leading expert on occupational stress...has suggested that one-third to half of work related stress may be caused by bullying at work” (Porteous, 2002, p. 79).

Burton and Hoobler (2006) studied the impact that abusive supervision can have on a victim’s self esteem. This study found that “employees who experienced an episode of abusive supervision were lower in state self-esteem than those who did not experience this type of mistreatment” (p.352). They define state self-esteem as “momentary changes in a person’s level of self-esteem in response to some situational stimulus” (Heatherton and Polivy, 1991, as cited by Burton, et al, 2006, p.341). Judge and Bono (2001) found that “People with high self-worth are more satisfied with their jobs and simply perform better” (as cited by Burton, et. al, 2006, p. 352). The link with self-esteem and performance is monumental in determining whether berating has a negative impact in employee performance. More specifically, “because workers who have high self-esteem tend to rise to the challenges organizations present and to seek out loftier goals,
it follows that abusive supervisors may be stifling the productivity of their subordinates... and damaging the effectiveness of organizations in the process” (Burton, et. al, 2006, p. 353)

A common, initial reaction that individuals tend to employ when bullied is avoidance (Casimir, et al., 2005, p. 455). According to Casimir, et. al, (2004), “even if those of higher rank treat people of lower status poorly, victims may choose to not retaliate because inaction is thought to be the best means of protecting their self-interests (Aquino, 2000, Aquino, Grover, Bradfield & Allen, 1999)” (p. 473). Victims may avoid the situation, particularly at the initial levels, in order to maintain their perception of the goals and status which they hope to achieve within the organization. “Avoidance can come in the form of “transferring to another work group... (or) sick leave,” (Zapf et. al, 1996, as cited by Casimir, et al, 2005, p. 452) and “the final possible avoidance reaction is to leave the organization” (Zapf & Gross, 2001, as cited by Casimir, et al., 2005, p. 452). “Avoidance is used often by victims when they feel unable to defend themselves (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001) and is one of the most common ways for people to deal with stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991),” Casimir, et al., 2005, p. 453). The level of bullying may also have an impact on whether a victim employs avoidance as a coping mechanism. Brass, et. al, (2006) found that “the more abusive subordinates perceived their bosses to be, the less likely they were to confront them” (p. 1129). This would show that a victim may be more likely to confront the bully if the incident was a milder, isolated event, and more likely to employ avoidance techniques if bullying is a harsh pattern. Each of these avoidance behaviors can have a negative effect on the victim, financially or emotionally.

Bullying in the workplace can also have unfortunate effects on a victim’s home life. Individuals can “transmit their displaced aggression toward their family members via increased arguing (Paykel, et al., 1969), negative mood states (Jones & Fletcher, 1993), and conflictual
interactions (Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981)” (Brass, et. al, 2006, p. 1127). Individuals spend so much time at work, and if that time is spent participating in negative interactions, that the workplace can become “emotional training grounds for negative home encounters” (p. 1131). This can create a cycle of negativity if the victim then brings the negativity back into the workplace. Also according to Brass & Hoobler (2006), “workplace abuse may be spawning negative interpersonal relations in the home, which in turn may be contributing to a negative, downward spiral or relationships in both spheres (Anderson & Pearson, 1999)” (p. 1131). Indeed, according to Hammer, Neal, and Perrin (2004), “the relationship between work and family is dynamic and reciprocal. Not only do factors in the work sphere influence family life, but family matters also have strong effects on work life (e.g., Crouter, 1984; Near, Rice & Hunt, 1980)” (p. 80). If workplace bullying is affecting an individual’s home life, then that negative home life can also come back and impact the employee’s performance in the future.

The frequency of the bullying behavior can also affect the impact that it has on the individual. It would make sense that a one-time event may not have as severe consequences as a pattern of berating. According to Casimir, et al (2005), victims “generally seek formal help (e.g., report it to Personnel) only after other reactions (e.g., ignoring or confronting the offender) have proven to be ineffective” (p. 452). The overall effects of bullying do not end when the berating event is over; the consequences occur after the victim has time to internalize what has occurred, therefore making repeated events build upon each other and magnifying the negative effects. According to Brass, et. al (2006), “the cognitive interpretation of the intention of actors occurs after the event” (p. 1127). More specifically, according to Burton, et.al (2006), “individuals are much more likely to remember negative interactions with their supervisors and recall these negative events with intense emotion (Dashorough and Ashkanasy, 2003)” (p. 342). It is these
"patterns of negative interaction (that) can be dangerous in that they threaten to damage organizations, careers, and people (Masuch, 1985)" (Burton, et. al, 2006, p. 340). If the berating is seen as a onetime event, a study by Fox and Stallworth (2006) found that "an offer of an apology has the potential to resolve workplace harassment disputes involving bullying" (p. 82). It is unlikely that a victim of bullying would be willing to accept the apology if there is a pattern of abuse and they don't feel that the apology is genuine.

It is clear that bullying can have negative consequences for the victims, all which affect an individual's performance. The effects of bullying on an individual can be devastating. A Danish study (Mikkelsen, 2001b) found that "bullying had damaged (victims') personality and their mental and physical health" (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003, p. 133). Additionally, "most of these victims perceived their exposure to bullying at work as being the worst thing that had ever happened to them" (Einarsen, et al., 2003, p. 133).

The impact of berating on organization performance

If the consequences of bullying on individuals are not enough for an organization to start cracking down on this behavior, then it is important for organizations to recognize the negative implications that this behavior has on the firm's effectiveness overall. If bullying behavior is tolerated by management, then the effects on the individual victims will eventually impact the performance of the organization overall in several ways. According to Daniels and Harris (2000), "a relatively small impact at the individual level may have a substantial aggregated or cumulative effect within the organization when all behaviors/performance measures are taken into consideration" (Cooper, et. al, 2003, p. 157).
The first of the avoidance techniques employed by victims of bullying as stated above is seeking a transfer. Transfers can affect organizational performance because they "can be costly as they may encompass replacement costs as well as extra training costs for two or more individuals" (Cooper, et al., 2003, p. 153). Not only does the transferred victim need to be trained in his or her new role, but the vacated job also needs to be staffed. This can result in recruiting costs, and if this position is also filled internally, than their position will also need to be staffed.

Another effect that bullying can have on an organization is absenteeism. Because both health issues and avoidance tactics can be attributed to abusive supervisors, consequentially, employees may in turn call in to work or take extensive sick leave based on either their health, or in attempt to avoid the berating individual all together. There are several consequences for an organization that are caused by excessive absenteeism. Not only is the productivity of the absent employee (victim) lost, but also, according to Cooper, et al. (2003), "pressure is likely to mount on their co-workers with more people possibly reaching breaking point, with increased tension among co-workers as a result, possibly reducing productivity, and inflating sickness absence as well as turnover rates" p. 151). Similar to turnover, absences create hidden costs in addition to the obvious loss of productivity and sick pay for the absent employee. Organizations can also find an "increased burden on attending staff (which) can lead to increased stress and further absences" (Howarth, 2005, p. 3), as well as "disruption to work (which) affects levels of efficiency and customer service" (p. 3).

Another effect on individuals which in turn impacts organizational performance is turnover, which again relates to both avoidance techniques and the health effects of abusive supervision. Bullying can have "both direct and indirect impacts on the victim’s intention to
leave the job. This intention to leave may be due to the bullying itself and/or the (predominately physical) symptoms suffered as a result of the bullying” (Casimir, et al., 2004, p. 488). Employee turnover impacts an organization due to “recruitment costs (advertising and selection), as well as the cost of training and development” (Cooper, et al., p. 154). Additionally, the productivity of the organization can suffer if a replacement is not found until after the victim leaves the organization (which can cause a great deal of stress towards other employees in the same manner as absenteeism as noted above). In addition to the obvious costs of turnover that include “separation costs, replacement costs and training costs” (Adidam, 2006, p. 137), turnover can also create costs due to “customer service disruption, emotional costs, loss of morale, loss of experience, burnout and absenteeism among remaining employees” (p. 138).

While the impact on individuals who are berated or belittled by another person in a position of power within an organization ultimately affects the organization, other individuals who witness the bullying events can also be affected, which also can have a negative impact on the organization. Hoel and Cooper (2000a) found that the most frequent response of bullied employees was “discussing the problem with colleagues” (Cooper, et. al, 2003, p. 151). While this may affect those witnesses, bullying often can take place in front of others, and, according to Vartia (2001), “bystanders have...been found to report symptoms of generalized stress due to bullying” (Casimir, et. al, 2004, p. 488). Additionally, as team-work is becoming more and more common within organizations, attendance or other performance-depleting effects of bullying can impair the outcome of the team's objectives, whether that is by other members picking up the slack of the bullied member, or this may affect the “social interaction within the team (Johns, 1997), and therefore, the overall productivity of the team” (Cooper, et. al, 2003, p. 152).
The United States does not have any laws that specifically prohibit workplace bullying. "Federal courts have not yet extended the hostile workplace doctrine to prohibit workplace bullying conduct based on characteristics other than sex, race, national origin, etc." (Daniel, 2006). In the United Kingdom, the government recognizes and attempts to address the workplace bullying problem. In fact, "the London Chamber of Commerce says in a recent report that bullies at work cost UK industry £2 billion each year. Around 19 million days are lost because of abuse, which also results in accidents and mistakes, increased sick leave and lost productivity." (Porteous, 2002, p. 77). The UK even goes so far as to cover bullying at work in its labor laws: "Employers have a statutory duty under sections 2(1) of the Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 to ensure, so far, as is reasonably practicable, that their workplaces are safe and healthy, this includes employees' mental health" (Porteous, 2002, p. 79). Additionally, employees in the UK "may bring an unfair dismissal claim where he or she has been dismissed for a reason connected with being bullied or where the person has resigned, claiming constructive dismissal following bullying" (Faby, et. al, 2003, p. 16). This is important to note, because without anybody mandating that the bullying end in U.S. companies, the importance of management in organizations understanding the impact that this behavior has on their organizations remains that much more important—leadership must be aware of these effects, and in turn, take responsibility for fixing the problem within their organizations.
Chapter 3

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was utilized in this study in order to obtain detailed information from participants regarding the effects of berating on individuals and those individuals' thoughts on how the bullying impacted the organization. The qualitative interview data provided for a detailed account of the bullying experiences, and uncovered individuals' reflections and feelings on their experiences. There was a specific focus on how these individuals' behaviors were affected by bullying events. A qualitative method of study was chosen for this study because qualitative data "provides readers with a fuller understanding of the experiences of our respondents" (Weiss, 1994, p. 3). This is important in terms of bullying so as to understand what the respondents believe is considered bullying, and to understand the emotions that are felt from the bullying event, even after time passes. It also provides details as to how individual's performance was affected.

Sample

A convenience sample of eight acquaintances and referrals participated in this study. Individuals were chosen based on their experience being bullied. Also the bullying event must have taken place at least six months ago in order for long-term effects to be established. Five males and three females were interviewed. All identifying characteristics were changed in order to protect confidentiality, as established in the Informed Consent form (Appendix B). Participant profiles were left out of the study, also to protect confidentiality. All participants work in professional positions.
Design

Eleven interview questions (plus follow-ups, when necessary) were asked of the eight participants in the study. Each semi-structured interview lasted between thirty and forty minutes, and took place either in person or over the telephone, depending on the geographic location of the participant in relation to the researcher.

Measures

Participants were asked a series of questions regarding the bullying event and the supervisor/bully, their organization where the bullying took place, their intentions to perform well, and intentions to leave their job (or if they've already left). These questions provided details on how the bullying impacted the individual and, in turn, the organization. The interview questions are located in Appendix A.

Confidentiality and Security of Data

All participants were required to sign an Informed Consent form (Appendix B) in order to participate in this study. The Informed Consent addressed confidentiality and assured the participant that their participation and answers are held in strict confidence, and no effort was made to link their responses to their name. Names have been changed to protect confidentiality, and no reference will be made linking an individual to their name or profession. It also assures that participation is voluntary and participants may pull out of the study at any time. Participants were informed that there are no risks foreseen in participation. There are also no foreseen benefits to participation.
Additionally, all response data will be kept in a secure location in the researcher's home for a period of one year, at which time the data will be destroyed.
Chapter 4

Note to reader: Chapter 4 contains harsh language that may be deemed inappropriate to the reader. The quotes from participants were included in this study because eliminating this language would suppress the emotion of the participants, and the emotion of the bullying events being described.

Research Findings

The Bullying Event

Frank: (Bullying event: 2003) Frank was repeatedly bullied by his supervisor; however the event on which he focused on particularly involved his boss accusing him of not knowing the information required in order to do his job, despite the fact that the knowledge was not an essential part of his job duties. Frank’s boss approached him one day and asked, “did you not know about this new feature in the software?” in an intimidating fashion, in front of several other employees. When Frank stated “no, I was not made aware of that”, his boss responded “you’re the fucking director of sales! How the fuck can you not know that?” Frank feels that his boss approached the situation completely unreasonably. This conversation could have taken place in a mutually respectable manner, and in private. In addition to belittling Frank, his boss chose to do so in front of Frank’s co-workers, which was greater cause for embarrassment (Interviewed 2/24/08).

Jennifer: (Bullying event: 2005) Jennifer was the victim of repeated bullying in an organization at which she worked. In one instance, Jennifer was in a meeting with her boss and six co-workers. Jennifer had given a note that she had scribbled quickly to her boss, who read it and asked, in front of everybody, “what are you, illiterate?” Jennifer felt embarrassed and belittled that her supervisor had questioned her intelligence in front of her co-workers. Jennifer
responded to her boss, “I do not appreciate being called illiterate, thank you” (Interviewed 2/24/08).

Mary: (Bullying event: 2001) Mary was berated by her boss after only three weeks on the job, which was her first job out of college. Mary’s boss told her that she’s doing everything all wrong, and questioned what she was even doing in the industry! Mary had been assigned a mentor when she started in this position, and her mentor worked very hard to try to convince Mary that she was doing a good job and that she should stay. Unfortunately, this mentor had no credibility with Mary, because she was vying for a big promotion, and her previous two mentees had quit the job! Mary felt that her mentor was only trying to make her stay in the job to make herself look better, since everybody that she has mentored has quit (Interviewed 2/21/08).

Jeffrey: (Bullying event: 2005) Jeffrey’s boss made it a point to belittle all employees, not just Jeffrey. He questioned Jeffrey’s dedication to perform his job on a daily basis; despite asking Jeffrey to perform unethical tasks. He would fly off on insane rants. In fact, after one such rant, Jeffrey said to his boss “you’re fucking insane!”; his boss stepped back and responded, “thank you, somebody should have told me this a long time ago.” Of course, that didn’t prevent future rants and bullying from occurring in the future (Interviewed 2/24/08)!

Michael: (Bullying event: 2005) Michael is another victim of repeated bullying. In one instance, he was criticized for fixing a member of upper-management’s computer. When he was being rebuked for actually fixing the computer, he unknowingly (if at all) rolled his eyes at the supervisor. When the manager responded “don’t you roll your eyes at me, get the fuck out of my office”. Michael stared at the executive until he said again, “get the fuck out of my office”, each
time raising the volume of his voice. The participant responded “I’m not some asshole you can talk to like that”, and the executive again shouted “get the fuck out!” (Interviewed 2/23/08).

Paul: (Bullying event: 2007) Paul felt that he was the victim of constant bullying for a period of two years and four months. The worst occasion occurred when he had taken a vacation over Christmas week. His supervisor called him on the Monday of vacation to yell at him because he had “done something bad”. Paul’s supervisor said to him, “you’re going to have to fix it when you come back!” Since that was Monday, he had that incident hanging over his head over his entire vacation (Interviewed 3/2/08).

Teri: (Bullying event: 2005) Teri was also a victim of repeated bullying; it was just the way her supervisor was. When she told her supervisor that she didn’t think that this was the job for her, she said, “Good, I’m glad that you came to that conclusion”. Instead of letting Teri find herself another job within the company, her supervisor called her into her office one day with Human Resources. She said, “We have a job for you,” without giving her any input. It was a demotion and “they took dollars from me”, but of course they told her that it was not a demotion. “I didn’t have any write-ups, no discipline. What did I do to deserve that?” (Interviewed 3/3/08).

Tom: (Bullying event: 2004) Tom’s supervisor was a bully in that he would often threaten Tom with demotions; not as a consequence of performance, but because his supervisor had ulterior motives that were not in line with the company’s goals, and Tom tried to speak to his supervisor in terms of what’s best for the company. The supervisor did not fair well in a leadership assessment, and his goal was to get back into a position of leadership in the company. He would get himself back into that position no matter what it took; and he told Tom, “you can either help me, or get out of my way” (Interviewed 3/5/08).
**Q2: What is the short-term impact of supervisors berating employees on individual performance?**

The subjects were mixed on how they were impacted immediately after the bullying event. Most made attempts to improve on some things directly after; others made no attempts at pleasing their boss.

Frank was in fact motivated to perform, but only in order to avoid future bullying. Frank stated “I was motivated to avoid a similar scene in the future, because it’s embarrassing when it happens in front of six people”.

Jennifer also made steps to increase her performance after the bullying event. In terms of the misspelled word incident, Jennifer explains that “I have made it a point never to send him something that was not spell checked”. This is a reaction to the bullying which improved Jennifer’s performance, in terms of spelling things correctly in an industry where spelling is not an essential function of the job.

Mary made attempts at increasing her performance as well. “I tried very hard. I worked long hours, and I worked directly with my mentor who continued to tell me that I was very skilled in this area”.

Michael stated that after each bullying event, his initial reaction would be to avoid future situations. “I’d try harder. I’d double and triple check my work, but there was never any room for improvement”. Paul continued to “attempt to do what was asked” by this individual.

Jeffrey, on the other hand, made no attempts at improving his performance at any level. “Just the opposite”, Jeffrey explained to this researcher, “my performance went right down the drain and I did not care. In fact, I perpetuated it”.
In the short-term, Teri did not attempt to improve her performance, either. “I avoided her like the plague, I hated seeing her. I got into trouble for avoiding her e-mails! I would dread them. I wouldn’t invite her to meetings—anything to avoid seeing her”.

**Q3: What is the long-term impact of supervisors berating employees on individual performance?**

Michael feels that the bullying decreased his motivation to perform in the long run within the organization where the bullying took place, despite his initial efforts to “double and triple check” his work immediately following the bullying events. Michael explained, “Clearly, it has changed my work ethic. Maybe I won’t work the extra hours...without a shadow of a doubt, this has made me less of what I can be. I won’t go the extra mile for this company”.

Similarly, Jennifer stated that “I have been completely unmotivated to work. Knowing that no matter what you do, you will never be recognized that you did a good job—only if there are problems will you be noticed. I do what is expected of me. Unfortunately I did go above and beyond at one point and this was not recognized”. A far cry from the immediate reaction of going so far as to spell check notes to her boss!

Teri says about her manager, “I think that she thought that her behavior was meant to motivate me. But really, it did the exact opposite”. Tom stated that “I was not motivated to perform at all. I did not go above and beyond, their was absolutely no loyalty to this person”.

Jeffrey continued to not make any attempts at improving his performance over time. “It became ‘do enough not to be fired’, or not even that”. Mary felt that her boss was trying to push her into quitting, but “I didn’t want to quit because I didn’t want to make her happy”.

Paul continued to perform at the highest level that he could. “I shouldn’t have, but I did. Some people were so turned off that they stopped going the extra mile. They would turn off their phones at 5:00 and walk out the door”.
Q4: Does the frequency of bullying events affect the consequences of the bullying behavior on the victim?

The majority of respondents in this study were the victims of multiple bullying events, not one single incident. It is a common consensus that the negative consequences of the bullying were due to repeated events over time, as opposed to one single event.

Jeffrey stated that “it was not one incident at any time that really affected me, it was the accumulation of that type of environment that wore me down” and Frank called bullying “a symptom of the culture of the place”. Jennifer stated that while she was with this company, she suffered “two long years of abuse”. Teri feels that “the year that I spent with her destroyed me”.

Mary actually described her company as “very negative, nobody ever smiled. Everyone was bitching all of the time. I felt uncomfortable, like I didn’t fit in”. Michael still works with the berating individual to this day, and says that “he has not changed. I hear that he’s trying to change, but my perception is the same—he’s good until he’s bad. I don’t see it stopping”.

Paul was also the victim of years of bullying. He said “there were so many incidents. He kept pushing, and pushing”. Tom was a repeat victim, as it was his boss’ motives that inspired the bullying to begin with.

Emotional distress

All of the respondents reported feeling emotional distress over the bullying, and to this day most harbor ill-will towards the individual who bullied them. These feelings brought out some harsh words about the bullies.

Jeffrey has absolutely nothing positive to say about the individual who bullied him in the workplace. “I grew to detest him, and still do to this day. Whenever the idea of karma comes up, I imagine him being raped by a herd of syphilitic rhinos and still being owed worse. I cannot
think of another individual to whom I have worse feelings towards”. Frank did not hold anything back either—“I’d punch him in the face if I ran into him on the street”. Mary’s reaction is tame in comparison: “She was a bitch. She really was”.

Jennifer said of her bully, “it is hard to respect him. I hope that when I am managing people that I will not ever treat them the way that myself and fellow team members have been treated”.

Teri also has harsh feelings towards her bully. She told this researcher, “that’s the closest I’ve ever come to plotting somebody’s murder. I would never do that of course, but I’ve never felt that way about someone, ever”. Paul says that “I think that I suppressed most of the bad memories”.

Michael, who still works with his bully, said, “It is very difficult for me to hold a grudge. I can’t stand to be upset with somebody, or when somebody is upset with me. But the damage is done”.

Q5: How does the impact of bullying bosses affect organizational performance

Sabotage

As was described above, it is clear that bullying can initially cause employees to strive to make improvements in the initial stages after a bullying event, primarily to avoid future incidences, and that in the long term employees will not be motivated to perform for the particular supervisor who bullied, or the company where the bullying took place. It is clear that this can ultimately affect the performance of the company if its individuals are not performing up to their higher standards. Additionally, many participants took additional steps that can ultimately have a negative impact on the performance of the organization.
Frank took it upon himself to look for other flaws in the organization as a result of being bullied in the workplace. What he found, and his subsequent actions, certainly could have made a negative impact on the organization. This company was actually using Microsoft's college software, instead of the business version, because the college version was cheaper! One step that Frank took was to make copies of the company's computer licenses. According to Frank, "this way, if they screwed me, I could call Microsoft and tell them that this company was abusing licenses".

Jeffrey also took steps at harming his organization. "While I wouldn't say that I sabotaged a specific project, but I would say that my subsequent work sabotaged the business as a whole. I would take 'vacations' during work hours quite frequently after the bullying events, including getting drunk at work or during work hours. Looking back, I may have been a little extreme in my reactions. I did as little as possible, questioned him as often as possible and encouraged confrontations. I used company materials for my own private work, including stamps, paper, and other office supplies".

Teri's actions also impacted her organization by putting through a price increase that she knew her boss did not want to go through. "I was hurt and humiliated by her; so I said to the rep "fuck her" and I put it through. I signed my own death warrant". She also took out her anger on customers. "I would try not to give it to the customer, but the anger had to come out somewhere. Of course, I hate being like that, so I would apologize".

Tom's boss would often ask him for data that he could enter into spreadsheets in order to create graphs and pivot tables for presentations to his superiors. Tom provided his boss with numbers that had nothing to do with anything—he just made things up and gave that to his supervisor. His supervisor never caught on; and would often present information that did not
mean anything whatsoever in meetings. Also, Tom left the company at a time when his group was working on a big project. After Tom left, the project started failing, and the company decided that it would be abandoned. Tom said "I had to take a parting shot at him". Tom took an ad out in the local newspaper that said "(Name), great job with the (name of failed project)", and Tom signed it with his nickname so his boss would know it was him, if he saw it. Someone in the organization saw the ad in the paper, made copies, and hung it up all over the office.

**Turnover**

Many of the subjects in this research either left their organization due to the bullying, or at the very minimum made attempts to leave.

Michael went so far as to tell his immediate supervisor (not the executive who belittled him) that he was quitting. He first went to another executive, of equal rank to the bully, and explained the incident to him. Michael stated, "I can't take this anymore. I can't work under these conditions." This executive empathetically explained to the employee that he understood, and that he hopes he reconsider, but there was nothing he could do. Michael then went to the Director of Human Resources, who told him that if he left the company, they would not fight his unemployment claim. After leaving human resources, he went directly to his direct supervisor and told him he was quitting. During this conversation, while his supervisor begged him to reconsider, the bullying executive called him to his office. He tried to ignore the executive, but finally agreed to talk to him. The bully was apologetic; as though he knew what he had done was wrong. Michael says about him: "It's like a dog who bites you, then pees after seeing the outcome—he knows he has made a terrible mistake. But it will happen again." Michael remains with the company to this day.
Teri remains with the company where the bullying occurred, but was able to transfer out of the department (which resulted in a pay decrease). Paul stated “I personally didn’t look (for another job), but everybody else did. Half of that department had one foot out of the door”.

Due to the bullying “culture”, Frank began to look for another job despite the poor economy and high unemployment rate in the city that he lived in at that time. Because he wasn’t sure how long that he could stand working with this bully, he also began researching unemployment insurance. “From that time forward, I always covered myself for an unemployment case. I was always making a case to collect—I became much more concerned with a paper trail. I had my marching orders.” Frank was able to find a job and left the company on his own terms.

Jeffrey was not so lucky. He explained “the overall atmosphere became so bad that I ended up quitting without even having another job lined up”. He was finally able to get another job, but not before the stressful task of looking for work without an income.

Jennifer was able to find a job and resign from the organization where she was bullied “about one year from the first time it happened. That was about all that I could take”. Despite being “encouraged to quit” Mary did not want to quit because “that would make her (the bully) happy”. However, she feels that she was “forced out” after two years with the organization. Tom decided to take an early-retirement package when it was offered—“I just couldn’t take him anymore”.

Absenteeism

Surprisingly, other than Jeffrey’s “vacations during work hours” (see section on Sabotage), only Tom reported missing any work time as a result of the bullying events. Tom
stated “I wouldn’t show up for work, just to mess with him. He’d have no idea that I wasn’t there, and would look around for me”.

Q6: Do constructive performance feedback, and positive feedback have an impact on individual performance?

Constructive performance feedback

Many of the subjects have received constructive negative performance feedback from supervisors other than the bullies that they described in this study. Most took that feedback and attempted to make improvements, while maintaining a sense of respect for the supervisor who gave the feedback.

Jeffrey stated on this topic, “I have received constructive negative feedback, and in fact have sought it. Even with my prior experiences, I believe this is necessary to learn and grow into and with a job. I have found it almost as frustrating to receive no feedback whatsoever. When this is given without petty berating and irrational attacks, I certainly do aim to improve my performance”.

Jennifer said “no matter what you do, there is always something that you can improve on”. Frank says that when he is approached in a reasonable manner regarding performance feedback, he’ll say “yes, I agree that I have to work on this area and will make an effort to do so”. Mary explained that when feedback is constructive, it can be inspiring to take that information and “want to do better. Wow, I actually want to do a good job!”

Tom appreciated other supervisors that would have a two-way conversation when providing negative feedback. Tom stated, “yeah, I would say, ‘I don’t agree with that because...’ or ‘I see your point and I can work on that’, and these would result in open discussion. With the bully, it was my way or the highway”.
Paul said of a supervisor whom he has great respect for, "he would let you know in fair way. He would say, "Paul, you need to work on..."", whatever it was. He was fair in coaching, and he didn't sugarcoat anything. I worked harder for him than anybody else that I have ever worked for".

Teri has also received constructive negative performance feedback. She said "negative feedback always hurts because it's hard hearing that you are not perfect, but you need to learn from it. When you get it constructively, you think 'oh, I need to take a look at this, it's worth working on'. When you hear it from an asshole, you think 'she's an asshole'".

Positive performance feedback

Most of the participants of this study have also received positive performance feedback. For purposes of comparisons, these individuals were asked how positive feedback motivated their performance.

When Mary left the organization where she was bullied, she immediately noticed the difference within herself. "I volunteer more, and not just within my department but in other areas of the organization. I couldn't believe how I went from so bad to so good!" Jennifer found that "when I receive this feedback, I am definitely more motivated to work and go beyond my responsibilities". Similar to Mary and Jennifer, Frank finds his motivation increases as well when offered positive feedback. "I will go above and beyond for my supervisor who provides positive feedback. Before, I would just avoid my boss. I wasn't trying to make him happy; I was just trying to avoid being yelled at. Now I want to make my boss happy".

The same supervisor that gave Paul negative performance feedback also gave him positive performance feedback. Paul says of him, "it was totally different. I felt like I had to do whatever I could for him; he was incredible".
Jeffrey has also received positive feedback, and it has meant a world of difference for his career versus the organization which employed the bully. "I regret ever having left the office where I got along with all of my bosses. Given my experiences, my potential relationship with my boss has become a major factor for me in determining whether to take, or stay on at a job. Although, it is difficult to determine, as people are usually not crazy assholes at interviews, and current employees are not exactly forthcoming to strangers. And yes, I have tried talking to them. Another contrast is that I did go above and beyond in the job that I got along with my supervisors; in fact I received an award, including money, for doing so. I was quickly advancing along and leaving for a 'promotion' was a big mistake. I actually enjoyed going in to work and truly felt a part of the office, as if its successes and failures were mine as well. I never felt that way about this other place, and in fact relished in the failures".

Teri says of a supervisor that gave her positive feedback, "I would follow him anywhere. I want somebody who cares about the people. The bully cared about the dollars. I can tolerate a lot if I have that caring".
Discussion and Implications

Q2: What is the short-term impact of supervisors berating employees on individual performance?

This study finds that while it is different for each individual, bullying can in fact have a positive impact on an individual's performance in the short term. Several respondents made an initial attempt, directly after the bullying event, to fix the behavior that triggered the bully to berate the individual. This is seen primarily as an avoidance technique—the individuals wished to avoid similar events in the future, so they made an attempt to correct their performance following the event.

Jennifer took the time to spell check every note that would be seen by her boss after he called her "illiterate" in front of a group of employees. She did this regardless of the importance of the note, in order to avoid a similar situation, despite the fact that spelling was not an essential function of her job. Mary worked extra hours and worked closely with her mentor, to show her boss that she was making attempts to correct any issues; in order to avoid a similar bullying situation. Frank also tried to make himself aware of the details in his company as a result of not being aware of a change in the software. He learned that he was responsible for knowing these things, even if nobody brought it to his attention. Michael double and triple checked his work—never finding errors but taking the time to do it in order to avoid the wrath of the executive who belittled him.

Jeffrey and Teri did not make these attempts at improving. This can be attributed to a sense of desperation—that no matter how hard they work, they will be called out for any minor
detail. The sense of this researcher is that this is due to the repeated nature of the bullying, which is addressed below.

This study’s finding that the short-term positive impact of bullying is supported by Ashforth’s (1994) statement that bullying causes compliance in the short-term, particularly “on tasks that can be easily observed or verified” (p. 767). This can also be attributed to the desire to avoid similar situations. As stated by Casimir, et. al (2005), avoidance is used often by victims when they feel unable to defend themselves (Hogh & Dofradottir, 2001) and is one of the most common ways for people to deal with stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1991)” (p. 453). The desire to avoid similar discomfort is supported by this research.

Q3: What is the long-term impact of supervisors berating employees on individual performance?

This study finds that over time, bullying has a negative impact on the victim’s performance. Only one of the individuals interviewed for this study (Paul) was motivated to perform well in the long term.

All of the others saw decreases in their performance over time—they were not motivated to do a good job for the bully because it didn’t matter; they could see that they were subject to this abuse regardless of how hard they tried. These individuals would not go the extra mile for the individual who berated them. Even Paul stated that he was motivated to perform at a higher level for a supervisor that offered constructive negative feedback (see the discussion on feedback, below) as opposed to his bullying boss. As Teri mentioned, bullies may believe that their negative behavior motivates people to perform, as is seen in the short term (see above). However, what these individuals do not see is the long-term performance of these individuals, and if they do, they feel that berating them again will increase their performance. It appears that they don’t see that the lowered performance is ultimately due to these incidences of berating and
bullying. Several subjects mentioned that they would do enough to not get fired, and nothing else.

Additionally, it was found that bullying causes emotional distress, which affects self-esteem, which impacts victim's performance within the organization.

Several of the participants in this study made extremely harsh comments about the individual who bullied them, even when the event happened several years ago. This shows that despite having moved on, the bully can affect these people for years to come. It is striking to consider how harsh the feelings must have been at the time that they were working for the bully. This finding coincides with Burton, et. al (2006), who found that “because workers who have high self-esteem tend to rise to the challenges organizations present and to seek out loftier goals, it follows that abusive supervisors may be stifling the productivity of their subordinates” (p. 353).

Q4: Does the frequency of bullying events affect the consequences of the bullying behavior on the victim?

All of the participants in this study were the victims of repeated bullying, not a single event. This result was not by design; anybody that stated that they have been bullied in the past was interviewed for this study. Perhaps a one-time event does not affect people enough to be considered “bullying”—this would be better addressed in a quantitative study on this topic (see the “Future Research” section in this study for further discussion on this topic).

While a quantitative study would provide a more definitive answer to this question, this researcher finds that the repeated bullying events did in fact heighten the impact of the bullying behavior on the participants of this study. All of the participants mentioned that they were the victim of multiple bullying events; and even that bullying was, as Frank stated, “a symptom of
the culture of the place". Teri went so far as to state that "the year that I spent with her destroyed me". It is difficult to believe that she would have felt this strongly about her manager had this only been a one-time event.

As Burton, et al. (2006) point out, it is "patterns of negative interaction (that) can be dangerous in that they threaten to damage organizations, careers, and people (Masuch, 1985)" (p. 340). This researcher finds that the frequency of the bullying event does, indeed, negatively impact victims' performance.

**Q5: Does the impact of bullying bosses affect organizational performance?**

There are several parts to this question which will be addressed below. However, overall, this researcher finds that yes—bullying bosses do have a negative impact on organizational performance.

**Sabotage**

One instance in which bullying can have a negative impact on an organization is when a victim actually takes steps that will harm or sabotage the organization based on the fact that they were bullied by the individual that they report to (or at least has some hierarchical authority over the victim).

One example of this is Teri, who put through a cost increase that she knew that her bullying supervisor did not wish to go through. Obviously her boss had specific reasons why she did not want the price increase to go through, and Teri ignored her wishes completely out of spite. While this study cannot measure the impact that this increase had on the organization, it can be presumed that her supervisor had legitimate reasons for her instructions, and Teri compromised those reasons because of the way that she was treated.
Another example is Frank, who started copying computer licenses when his boss began to bully him. While his company was making an unethical and illegal decision by using college software for business purposes, this could have created severe consequences for the organization had Frank contacted Microsoft. Luckily for the organization, Frank got out before resorting to hurting the company. This example shows the lack of loyalty that can be created when bosses bully employees. This could have impacted the company financially (via fines and/or a lawsuit) and impacted the company’s reputation in the industry and community.

In the case of Tom, providing his boss with bogus numbers for his presentations may have led others to doubt the capabilities of his supervisor, since he actually presented this information. It certainly didn’t help the company to have this information presented which had no accurate value whatsoever. Also, the newspaper ad that ended up hung up all over the office also may have made an impact on his supervisor’s ability to lead his team, and his credibility.

Jeffrey’s reaction to being bullied most certainly did stifle his organization’s performance. His unauthorized “vacations” (leaving work without letting anybody know, and getting drunk while at work/during work hours) impacted the organization because he was paid straight time for not producing any work. This time away from producing real work cost the company days of pay, at the very minimum. Even when Jeffrey was present at work, he did as little as possible, which also resulted in Jeffrey’s being paid without adding value to the organization. Because he also “questioned him as often as possible and encouraged confrontations”, Jeffrey also created an environment which was not conducive to productivity. Further, recall that Jeffrey pilfered office supplies, which certainly had a financial impact on the organization as well.
Absenteeism

Absenteeism is another effect that bullying can have on an organization’s performance. This study found very little substantiation that bullying led to absenteeism (only two of eight participants, Jeffrey and Tom, missed work due to bullying); this could be addressed more specifically in a quantitative study (see the “Future Research” section in this study for further discussion on this topic).

Turnover

This study found that bullying does affect an organization’s turnover. Of the eight participants in this study, five left the organization, one transferred to another department and only two stayed (one of those two was Paul, whose bullying supervisor left the position so Paul no longer reports to him). Of the five that left the organization, four attributed leaving to the bully; and the individual who transferred also attributed that to the bully.

Turnover can affect an organization’s performance due to “separation costs, replacement costs and training costs” (Adidam, 2006, p. 137), as well as “customer service disruption, emotional costs, loss of morale, loss of experience, burnout and absenteeism among remaining employees” (p. 138).

Impact of individual performance on the organization

In addition to sabotage, absenteeism, and turnover, it is important to note that an individual victim’s lowered motivation to perform can also impact the organization’s performance.

The majority of the subjects in this study reported a lowered motivation to perform while working for a bully. An organization that employs poor performers, regardless of the reason for the performance, is bound to be impacted negatively by the performance. This is particularly so
if the bully does not single out one individual, as is often the case, but bullies several individuals within the organization. The company’s performance is then impacted by multiple individuals who are not motivated to perform to their full potential. This most certainly has an impact on the organization’s performance. This is in line with Daniels and Harris (2000), who found that “a relatively small impact at the individual level may have a substantial aggregated or cumulative effect within the organization when all behaviors/performance measures are taken into consideration” (Cooper, et. al, 2003, p. 157).

Q6: Do constructive performance feedback, and positive feedback have an impact on individual performance?

This study finds that negative performance feedback impacts an individual’s, and in turn, an organization’s performance, however in a positive direction. Every participant in this study stated that they have received constructive negative performance feedback, and each of them took steps to improve their performance following this feedback. As Jennifer stated, “no matter what you do, there is always something that you can improve on”.

Jeffrey, who reacted to being bullied in a destructive fashion, went so far to seek constructive feedback on his performance in organizations that fostered respect in their employees. He said that “I believe that this is necessary to learn and grow into and with a job...when this is given without petty berating and irrational attacks, I certainly do aim to improve my performance”.

This contrast between constructive negative feedback and bullying suggests that the participants in this study are not unreasonable employees who have intent to harm their organizations. Rather, these individuals are a product of being bullied, and all of the negative behavior seems to have emerged because of their experiences.
In fact, each of the participants in this study has also received positive performance feedback as well. The reactions to positive feedback are as pronounced as they are to bullying—except that it actually increases motivation to perform.

Mary couldn't believe how she "went from so bad, to so good", and found herself going above and beyond for her organization, volunteering for as much as she could handle. Frank went from a situation where "I wasn’t trying to make him happy, I was just trying to avoid being yelled at" to a situation in which "now I want to make my boss happy". Paul had a similar situation with a supervisor that gave positive feedback—"I felt like I had to do whatever I could for him; he was incredible". Jeffrey not only went above and beyond for an individual who offered positive feedback, but won a financial reward for doing so. Teri's sentiments towards a supervisor who gave positive feedback are familiar as well—"I would follow him anywhere".

This information makes it clear that respectfully pointing out gaps in performance and providing positive feedback can go to great lengths in employing positive employees that want to do well and perform at a high level for their organization.

*Implications and advice for Organizations*

The results of this study should come as no surprise for managers. Despite the evidence as to the impact, however, bullying is still prevalent in organizations today. It is clear that bullying has no positive contributions—the immediate conformity is soon replaced with poor motivation, turnover, and even deliberate attempts to harm the organization. This can affect the bottom line of the organization, as many of these consequences ultimately make a financial impact. Organizations need to review their management teams and determine if bullying is occurring within their organizations; and if it is occurring, steps need to be made in order to remedy the situation. Because there are no laws governing bullying in organizations today, there
is nobody telling organizations that they need to put an end to it. However, when made aware of
the impact that bullying can have on an organization, it is clear that it makes business sense to
put an end to this practice.

Implications and advice for HRD practitioners

Because bullies at work impact the performance of organizations, then it is clear that they
can stifle the outcome of Human Resource Development (HRD) efforts. It is clear that victims
of bullying do not have the motivation to perform, much less develop or grow themselves within
the organization. HRD practitioners can create programs to educate both management and front
line employees about bullying, how to prevent it, and what to can be done when it is found to be
taking place.

Given that bullying has a negative impact on organizational performance, HRD
practitioners can take the lead in preventing this behavior within the organization. Once the
problem is identified, steps should be taken to remedy the problem. Bullies should be made
aware that their actions will not be tolerated, and they should be given an opportunity to correct
the problem. Companies can offer management training that can focus on proper treatment of
individuals. Also, encouraging development of Emotional Intelligence can also be a step
towards putting an end to bullying. Emotional Intelligence can be defined as “an ability to
recognize the meaning of emotions and their relationships, and to reason and solve problems on
the basis of them” (Vitello-Cicciu, 2003, p. 30).

Advice for victims

When confronted with a bullying boss, individuals cannot afford to sit back and let
themselves become victim to repeated attacks. The first step to be taken should be to confront
the boss as delicately as possible. Because the attacks may be a result of the pressure that the
supervisor is facing (including the possibility that he or she is being bullied), the supervisor may not realize that he or she is bullying, or the impact of these actions on the subordinates. If this is not an option, or if the bullying continues, the next step that should be taken is to inform Human Resources of the problem. HR should be in a position to address these problems in the workplace.

When all else fails, individuals should take steps to leave the organization. If the company does not value its employees enough to remedy the situation, then this is not an organization where an individual should remain employed. The psychological effects of bullying on individuals are too great to continue to put up with for long periods of time.

Another piece of advice that can be taken when leaving an organization and starting with a new one is communicating with current employees. Try to find people who are employed in the organization, and even the department that you are considering, and attempt to get a feel for the culture and the general relationships within the organization or department. This may help one get a feel for the supervisors, as well help to learn about management styles. Communicating beforehand may help to ensure that you do not find yourself in yet another bullying organization.

Recommendations for further research

This study set out of determine the impact that berating and belittling has on individuals, and in turn, the organizations where those individuals are employed. Qualitative data was compiled which showed that bullies can have a negative impact on individuals and organizations. However, a quantitative study would also be beneficial in determining the scope of the findings in this research. This study gathered data on eight participants; a quantitative study could be used to determine whether the impact of these findings is widespread. For example, this study
was unable to compare the performance of individuals who have never been bullied to those who have, and was unable to find any data on whether the frequency of bullying events may impact individuals. Also, while this study looked at absenteeism and turnover based on bullying, quantitative data could be used to better understand the scope and provide scientific data on whether bullying does in fact increase absenteeism (which was not substantiated in this study) and turnover (which was found in this study).

Additionally, it would be beneficial to look at organizations where bullying runs rampant, as this may have an effect on the reputation in the communities where they operate as well as the industry to which they belong. This study did not encompass the effects that bullying has on morale within an organization. While the results suggest that bullying certainly did affect the morale of the victims, it would be beneficial to determine more precisely the effects on the morale of an organization that tolerates bullying, and the impact that has on the company's performance.

Conclusion

This study has found that bullying employees negatively affects the performance of individuals who are bullied, and, ultimately leads poor performance within the organizations at which the victims work. As determined in this study, it is absolutely essential that managers not shy away from providing negative performance feedback; only that managers provide this feedback while continuing to show respect for their employees. Most people will agree that employees at times need to be made aware when they are performing below the level required in their position. However, the way that a supervisor provides this feedback will determine whether this has a positive or negative impact on the individuals. Additionally, it is equally important to
provide employees with positive feedback when they perform at a high level, because this can also inspire these individuals to strive to perform even better.

It was found that bullying employees can damage victims to the point where they are not adding value to the organization. The immediate effects may confirm to the bully that their behavior is working and that the employee is increasing his or her performance. However, over time, the bullying can have devastating effects on the organization. Perhaps the most shocking finding of this research is the intentional destruction displayed towards the organizations where the bullying took place.

The spirit of this study was captured by Hornstein (1996), who stated that "the fundamental requirements of human relationships are not suspended at organizations’ front doors, nor are they adaptable to organizational crises, employee rank, or the designs and desires of those in powerful posts. Brutal bosses harm communities both at work and beyond by robbing citizens and institutions of their dignity and productivity. These costs cannot be tolerated" (p. 149).
Bullying Bosses

References


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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1.) Tell me about the last time a supervisor or other person of power berated or belittled you? Who (position)? What triggered the event? What was said? How did you respond? Immediately following the incident, did you change your behavior in any way? How?

2.) How did this incident affect your perception of this individual? Did this incident affect your perception of the organization as a whole? Why or why not? Was this the first incident of this kind with this individual?

3.) How long ago did this occur? Do you still work with this person? What is your perception of this person today? How has it changed?

4.) Did you attempt to improve your performance after this incident? Why or why not? Did you make a long-term attempt to improve your performance after this incident?

5.) Are there any incidences where you acted in a negative/destructive way based on a berating incident? Please explain.

6.) After this episode, were you motivated to do or not do what the individual wanted? Were/are you influenced by the potential repercussions of a similar incident occurring in the future?

7.) Did you take any actions (eg: look for another job, sabotage a project, etc.) after this incident occurred? Would you accept a position at another company based specifically on this incident? Did you ever call in sick or take any time off based upon the bullying (whether actually health related or as an avoidance method)?

8.) How will this incident affect your perceptions of the company in the future? Would you recommend the company to a friend or family member seeking employment?

9.) Would you go above and beyond for this individual in the future? Explain why or why not?

10.) Do you/have you had a supervisor who offered positive performance feedback? At the same company as other or different? Can you contrast the effect of the supervisor who offered positive feedback with the one who berated you?

11.) Have you received constructive negative performance feedback in the past? If so, did you react to that feedback differently than berating feedback? Did you improve your performance? How does this feedback affect your perception of the supervisor providing it?
Appendix B
St. John Fisher College

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of study: The Impact of Berating Employees on Individual and Organizational Performance

Name(s) of researcher(s): Matthew Goodwin  Phone for further information: (585) 295-3502

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Seth Silver

Purpose of study: You are invited to participate in a research study entitled The Impact of Berating Employees on Individual and Organizational Performance. The purpose of this study is to determine whether supervisors using berating and belittling language and tone in providing performance feedback has a negative effect on individual’s overall work performance and a negative impact on the organization as a whole. If you agree to participate, you will be one of ten (10) participants interviewed for this research.

Approval of study: This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Place of study: _____St. John Fisher College___________ Length of participation: 30-40 minutes

Risks and benefits: The expected risks and benefits of participation in this study are explained below:

We do not foresee any risks as a result in participating in this study that you would not be subject to on any given day. Every effort will be taken to ensure complete confidentiality of your participation and answers to any questions. There may not be any benefits to you as an individual as a result of participation, however your answers will help determine the overall effects on individuals of supervisors belittling employees.

Method for protecting confidentiality/privacy:

All information in this study will remain confidential. Your participation and answers will be held in strict confidence, and no effort will be made to link your responses to interview questions with your name. All notes and records will be held in strict confidence. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may pull out at any time.

Your rights: As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you.

5. Be informed of the results of the study.

I have read the above, received a copy of this form, and I agree to participate in the above-named study.

Print name (Participant): ______________________________

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ______________________________

Print name (Investigator): ______________________________

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ______________________________

If you have any further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher listed above. If you experience emotional or physical discomfort due to participation in this study, please contact the Office of Academic Affairs at 385-8034 or the Wellness Center at 385-8280 for appropriate referrals.