

Leaders' Approach And The Bullies It Nurture: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract : Workplace bullying is considered to be hazardous for the well-being of the employees, and organizations. Despite its known vices, organizations often fail to curb it or even recognize it. Moreover, being seldom studied in the Indian organizations, a need to further explore the phenomenon is vital, in the relentlessly changing work environment and workforce. In light of the same, this paper aims to understand targets' perception of bullying in Indian organizations. A constructivist grounded theory approach was used to analyze the data, collected through in-depth interviews with 17 participants. The findings suggest that person-led organizations' or centralized organizations, nurture bullying behavior. The study informs on the approaches of the leaders in centralized organizations that empower the bullies. Further it states the types of bullies and the types of targets recognized. Unavailability of a system in organizations makes it difficult for the targets to raise voices. This findings of this paper imply that the leaders of such organizations should revisit their working styles to ensure harmonious environment.

Keywords : centralized organizations, grounded theory, leadership, qualitative study, workplace bullying

Date of Submission: 10-04-2018

Date of acceptance: 24-04-2018

I. Introduction

Workplace bullying, though being researched for more than two and a half decades, lacks a universal definition. However, from the various definitions available in the literature [1], [2], [3], [4] it can be explained as systematic negative, acts targeted toward one individual from one or more individuals for a prolonged period of time, which leaves an individual defenseless. Apart from health consequences, individuals often end up leaving jobs, as a result of bullying [5]. Although workplace bullying has been studied extensively across the globe, Indian researchers entered the field relatively late. These rare but important studies have acknowledged that awareness about the phenomenon is negligible, but its prevalence is high in organizations in India [6]. Further, the phenomenon of bullying may differ based on the country it is being studied in [7]. As, the literature of bullying in the Indian subcontinent is a nascent one, this paper aims to capture employee perception towards the said phenomenon. This paper explains the perception of self-perceived targets, who narrate the phenomenon with reference to person-led or centralized organizations.

II. Methodology

Research on workplace bullying has for long being led by the positivist researchers [8]. However, as the subjectivity of the phenomenon is getting attention of the scholars in the field, a paradigm shift towards anti-positivism can be noticed in the recent literature. Tracy et al. [9] advocates the use of inductive approach for phenomenon as complex as workplace bullying. Similar arguments are given by other researchers in the field [8]. Keeping the above in mind, in-depth interviews were conducted and constructivist grounded theory was applied to analyze the same [10], [11].

Participants were approached with a brief description of the study through personal contacts and LinkedIn. Interested participants were further sent an information sheet which explained the purpose of the study, along with the consent form. In total seventeen individuals from various industry settings were participated in the study. Of the seventeen participants, seven were female while ten were male.

The interviews were taken at the participants' choice of place to ensure their convenience and comfort. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim, by the first author. Participants were requested to provide as detailed narratives as possible about their experiences. No definition of workplace bullying was provided at any point. This was done to capture the interviewees own understanding of the concept and to enhance their narration of experiences by not drawing the boundaries through definition.

The written and recorded interviews were read thrice to understand participants' narratives of their experience. Memo writing [12] significantly enhanced the analysis process. As ascribed by Charmaz [12], multi-layered coding process was used. Further, constant comparison method, one of the key ingredients to the grounded theory approach, led to additional questions which were added after the fifth interview [11]. The codes were developed with the use of gerunds and in vivo codes. By the end of the analysis three categories emerged which are elaborated in the results section below.

III. Results

The results suggest that the leadership of an organization, plays a huge role in determining bullying behavior among employees. If not controlled by the main authoritative figure it is considered as a casual behavior. Other studies have voiced similar concerns regarding leadership and its influence on bullying [13], [14]. However, it still stays a matter of concern. The three categories emerging from the study represent the ecosystem of bullying in organizations, where central leadership exists, or, as put by participants, are person-led organizations.

1.1. Leader as Facilitator

Bullying may exist due to different reasons, however, the influence of the leader and his work style may influence its intensity and persistence. Fallouts of this study suggest that there may be occasions where the leader unintentionally creates an environment which may encourage inimicality. Three themes emerged, which, according to participants, played as facilitators for bullying behavior.

1.1.1. Open door approach

Of the seventeen participants, six talk about the open door culture in their organization. By which they mean having an approachable leader. However, unlike general perception [15], they consider it as a facilitator to a bullying environment. Interestingly, the participants' narratives suggest that open door culture gives an opportunity to the bullies to create their image in the mind of the leader. This also brings up the element of bully and targets positions and personalities. A bully at a higher position may get frequent opportunities to approach the leader, while despite being in an open culture a target at a lower position may hesitate or get less opportunities for the same. The following excerpt shall throw some light on this category.

“Our director is very open, but at my position I don't think I can go to him, I don't have any direct work with him. But this guy (perceived bully) he is at a position where it is ok to meet the director time and again. So the director knows him well, and even if I go I think I will only get in trouble”.

Leaders use open door policy to create an environment, where individuals can voice up their concerns, ideas, and suggestions and to establish trust between the employees and management. However, its limitations have been noted by scholars, (see [16], [17]). Open door policy may only work when an employee is confident enough that approaching and speaking up to their superiors and other top management employees shall not harm them in anyway – the perception of an unsafe environment was further found in this study as well. Moreover, as stated above, it was also found that the employees at lower levels keep their distance from the leaders. This could be due to the perception of authoritative environment in organizations which flow from the Indian traditionalism.

“we can't go to our senior and talk without work or to complain you see. It is not in our culture you see. Some people can, like him, but I cannot. I am not brought up like this.”

This shows that, though open door policy is adopted to promote openness and satisfaction, whether it is utilized appropriately, is a matter of concern.

1.1.2. Family interference

Looking at the literature, one can find abundance of family work interference studies, or studies relating to family controlled businesses, however, the authors were unable to find studies relating to family members' of top officials interfering in the office, and creating their own rules and using the position of the leader.

Family and work life are two sides of any individual. However, as the individual rises up the ladder, her privileges, and that of her family, also increases. This may result in family members interfering in workplace and taking advantage of the position of the leader. These family members (as identified by targets) are either children of the leader, or spouse. Here, the role of the leader comes into play. While it may seem only logical for the leader to withhold her family members to take advantage of her position, failure in doing so has been found to be prominent in Indian organizations.

“She comes to the office every second day, and no one can say anything to her. And it is not that our boss encourages her, he is a nice person, but he doesn't say anything to her, so she thinks it is ok. This is one thing I absolutely do not like about him.”

It was also noticed that, such behavior of family members was seen either in the family owned businesses or in government organizations. Employees often found themselves in a fix between their work and between their obligation to their leader or superior. The interviews suggest that these are not isolated incidences, and that employees working in such firms as mentioned above often humiliation, and dominance, by the family members of the leader, although they do not mind accommodating the family members, wills and wishes, they do except respect in return of their service.

“No no it is not me only. So many employees have to tolerate the family of their bosses”

“See I know people take advantage of their position and get their house work done, and help their family, but you know his family should not think of me as a slave right. Give some respect *na*”

1.1.3. Laissez-faire approach

Frischer and Larsson [18] have noted that, when superior's fail to take actions and let things be the way they are, it has detrimental effects on efficiency and job satisfaction of the subordinates. In inactiveness of leaders towards taking necessary steps to solve a problem, has be characterized as passive behavior in within the realm of poor leadership – the laissez-faire leadership style. Laissez-faire leadership is defined by Bass and Avolio [19] as “the absence of leadership, the avoidance of intervention, or both. With Laissez-faire (Avoiding) leadership, there are generally neither transactions nor agreements with followers. Decision are often delayed; feedback, reward, and involvement are absent; and there is no attempt to motivate followers or to recognize and satisfy their needs.”

A similar situation was seen in this study, where participants talked about the avoidance of the leaders towards inappropriate behavior in the organizations. Seemed that the participants, mentioning about such attitude of the leader, blame her for the bullying that the participants face rather than blaming the bully.

“She just lets things happen, I have been to her few times, but she only has one thing to say. It will be okay, just ignore. May be he is just trying to get the work done. But she won't talk to him. You see....when the person with all the power doesn't want to do anything, what can anyone else do?”

Skogstand et al., [14], has also mentioned that the laissez-faire approach of a leader may lead to bullying at workplace and that such behavior is destructive for the wellbeing or the employees and the organizations.

1.2. Bullies

Emphasis have been long given on characteristics of the targets. Samnani & Singh [20] acknowledges the need of research on the perpetrators and their characteristics. Although, we do not give specific personality characteristics, we put forth certain common typology of the perpetrators identified in this study.

1.1.4. The senior

It is no hidden fact that bullying occurs between the powerful and the weak [3]. In most cases this power comes with the holding position. Ten participants identify their superior as the perpetrator, of which seven happen to be males, while three females. Interestingly, when asked ‘why do you think they bully’, three reasons, were recognized ‘being unable to handle stress’, ‘issues at personal level’ and ‘they like doing it’. While, the last reason was iterated by participants who were unsure of the reason, the earlier two didn't much probing.

“.....well may be he gets some kind of pleasure.... I can't really point one thing, because..... he does tell me that I perform good, but he finds some kind of..... pleasure in constantly teasing and making fun of me. But he doesn't do this with others.”

Although, the participants stated the above reasons that resulted in perpetrator's inappropriate behavior they also emphasized the deliberation of the perpetrators. In simple words, the negative behaviors were deliberate and not a reaction towards previous stress situation, this was because the participants could reason, certain events of negative acts, however, they did couldn't relate to the repetition of such behavior, moreover, they felt that, they were the cornered targets.

“See I understand, he may be stressed for whatever reasons, but how come he is always stressed and always shouting. And that too on my. Others are treated better.”

1.1.5. Family bully

As stated earlier, the family members of the leader were found to take advantage of her position. Four participants, raise their concern towards it. According to them these type of bullies consider the workplace as their own and expect the employees to fulfil their wishes. While their demands may not be of concern, their behavior is considered inappropriate and unfriendly.

“His children call me and tell me to do their work, like assignments or to get something for them....and their behavior is soooo bad. I am their father's PA, not servant. Then I take out my anger on my children.”

1.1.6. The Opportunist

According to the participants, opportunists are those individuals who are eyeing an opportunity to be able to target the target. These individuals may not have direct power to harm the target, however. They thrive at opportunistic power to exert negative behavior. Having said that, the participants note the ongoing passive negative behavior of the individuals, until they find an opportunity to exert active negative behavior. These behaviors were not necessarily direct in nature, rather they targeted the target through their work, or by sabotaging the image and relationship of the targets.

"She was just waiting for one chance...one chance...When she saw that there are problems between me and our team lead, she...she just grabbed it. I knew she would but I wasn't ready for it. She has said so many wrongful things about me to our team lead that.....I can't even imagine."

These opportunists included those individuals who had some differences or conflicts with the participants. Which included personality or cultural differences and task conflict.

1.1.7. The Favorites

The participant identifies individuals who, in order to be in good books of their bosses use flattery. These individuals use their flattery skills to get away with bullying. The literature also provides evidence about such individuals who take use flattery to get away with incompetence (See [21]). Their behavior is intentional but passive.

"He is always praising our team lead... all the time. And so the team lead always favors him, and he doesn't know any work...I tell you he is sticking only because of his 'yes sir' 'you are the best sir'. He knows, even if I take it to the higher authorities, boss will favor him only.....it will only back fire, so I can't do anything."

The other kinds of favorites are the ones who are good at their work, the best employee types. They are creating a positive image of themselves due to their performance. Further, they take the advantage of this image to get away with inappropriate behavior.

"she is a very good employee, best in her job...her picture of being the best makes it easy for her to do her wish. And she by choice humiliates me, and has fun from it. She knows they can't afford losing her."

The favorites may or may not be direct perpetrators. Analysis reveals that the manager or the team leader may be unknowingly favoring one individual over the other, which empowers the perpetrator to carry on their hostility. Participants describe recurring events of degrading, suggestions ignored, scolded or compared to the favored peer. It creates a pressure to keep performing and maintaining self-identity on the target.

"I won't say he does it intentionally, but this always ignoring my suggestions, and degrading me in front of him. I feel that I am nothing. And my boss doesn't even know he is doing this to me."

1.3. Targets

The extant literature on bullying has extensively reported on target characteristics [20]. However, this paper recognizes two types of targets as classified by the participants themselves.

1.1.8. Sufferer in Silence

Participants who consider themselves as introverts, think that they are being targeted because they like to stay with themselves. They tend to ignore the situation or try to stay away from the perpetrator to avoid being bullied. However, they also blame themselves for not taking action against the perpetrator. They think that their own traits don't allow them to do so. The theme 'sufferer in silence' was taken as an in vivo code from one of the interviewee's narratives.

"I can't complain..... its kiddish andand I. I am a sufferer in silence type person. I try to ignore as much as possible. But it finally gets to you. You can't close your ears right."

1.3.1 The Hard Worker

Hard working employees get recognized easily. However, it may not always be for the right reasons. Some participants, raised the issue of being targeted because they put in extra effort at work. Being teased, or asked to do others work are common occurrences. Being devalued in the meetings, or criticized in front of an audience in order to damage their image, has also been experienced by the participants. Certain participants were mainly troubled about rumors spread about them. It seemed that one of the major ways to bullying towards the hard workers was image attacking or sabotaging image. Participants talk about being scared of getting their reputation and image getting hurt.

"I go an extra mile to do my work. I won't deny I am workaholic, but.....I try to mind my own business. Its not my fault that the management is recognizing me. Why are you trying to jeopardize my image in front of the management?"

IV. Conclusion

This paper presents only three aspects of bullying identified through narratives. It is still a work in progress and further the authors shall describe consequences, forms and coping strategies of the participants. However, further interviews from participants of different sectors may give a broader picture of the phenomenon. Capturing the perspective of the leader may also give better insights on how the issue of bullying can be addressed in such organizations. A comparative study between person-led and system-led organization may be done to understand the difference in the phenomenon in these two type of organizations.

Paternalistic culture still exists in Indian organization. Be it private or public organization, the hierarchy is set and the final authority lies in one hand. While analyzing the perspectives of employees in Indian organization, the concept of person-led organization was identified, which was considered for theoretical sampling. It revealed that in person-led organizations, the role of HR is minimal, thus voicing up is negligible. In such organizations leaders need to acknowledge their negligence towards bullying, and take up steps up develop conducive work environment and retain valuable employees.

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Shreya Mishra "Leaders' Approach And The Bullies It Nurture: A Qualitative Study." *IOSR Journal of Business and Management (IOSR-JBM)* 20.4 (2018): 42-46.