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How to deal with bullying from below

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News
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Bullying is commonly identified with the abuse of visible power. We close our eyes and we see the image of a big aggressive character bearing down on a little guy in a threatening manner.

In the workplace context, this translates into other familiar images of bullying - always from above. On a Dubai building site, it might be a large group of workers ganging up on a smaller group.

On a UK factory floor, it might be a foreman picking on some nervous victim who can't bring himself to retaliate.

In boardrooms everywhere, victimisation may take more subtle forms, less violent but no less hurtful, with endless opportunities for a bully-boy director to use his seniority. And of course, bullying with a sexual or racial slant has been attracting much media attention all over the world.

Power impact

But whatever the image of bullying, it always suggests a downward impact from a position of physical or hierarchical power.

Yet there is also bullying from below, and its effects can be just as harmful. This bullying does not evoke any particular mental image.

It is also less likely to be reported, especially as the victim may find it embarrassing to confess the problem. It occurs when subordinates demonstrate how easy it is to make a manager's job impossible.

A group of employees may get together and agree to perform only to the absolute minimum standard necessary - which will soon show up in the form of poor results. They are technically within their rights, so their jobs are safe.

But the manager has to face the stigma of ineffective leadership, and this could damage his career.

The same group may go further, and organise unofficial sabotage - arranging all manner of little accidents and obstructions which affect performance. So again, the manager's performance is made to look poor, while their own actions may remain undetected.

Or they may try mental bullying - making constant signals of protest that

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gradually wear down the manager's resistance and perhaps his health too, while also contributing to a generally negative atmosphere around the workplace.

Management

So, how can management tackle this less-known branch of workplace bullying?

One way is to split up the group, and re-deploy them in different parts of the organisation. Another is to re-organise the department, re-allocating the responsibilities, perhaps bringing in a deputy to re-align the command structure.

But experience shows that bullying from below is best dealt with in the same way as other forms of bullying - by bringing the problem into the open and tackling it with the help of specialist counsellors and trainers.

Key Points: About bullying from below

- Bullying is not always from above: employees can bully their managers
- Tactics include 'going slow', arranging delays, or constant acts of protest
- Try to split up the group of offenders - or bring in specialist counsellors.

- *The writer is a BBC broadcaster, with 20 years' experience as the MD of Carole Spiers Foundation, an international stress consultancy based in London.*

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