

## **Is it time to stop 'Bullying'?**

by Tim Kingsbury

I've been thinking for a while that the term 'bullying' may be becoming less and less useful. We all know it goes on around us, we all know people who have been damaged by it, and the scale of workplace bullying is worrying. To give just one indication of scale, at a recent conference<sup>1</sup> Gill Dix of ACAS said that the ACAS Helpline receives 74,000 calls annually about bullying and harassment.

'Bullying' as a term is a useful shorthand to denote a type of abrasive or aggressive behaviour that otherwise we have to define at some length. The trouble with the term is that it becomes a label. We can recognise bullying behaviour, we all know or have known bullies. But who, ever, has been able or willing to recognise this about themselves? Have you ever known anyone who has been prepared to accept that they are a bully? Far more commonly, the reaction of someone to being confronted with the impact of their behaviour is one of shock and, probably, disbelief. Most Respondents of complaints about bullying or harassment are horrified and frequently themselves feel victimised by the complaint.

Part of the reason for this disconnect is that when we see this type of behaviour in others (particularly if we are on the receiving end) we tend to ascribe the motivation for it to their moral character – we will usually label their 'bad' behaviour as bullying and see them as 'bad' people. However if we ourselves indulge in the same sort of behaviour, we know there is a rational reason for it – 'the job needs to be done, so do it'; 'I need it – NOW'. We know we aren't fundamentally bad people, but there is a situational demand on us, and we pass that pressure on to get what we need. This is known as 'Attribution theory'.<sup>2</sup>

At the same conference Professor Ståle Einarsen, from the University of Bergen and one of the foremost academics in this field, pointed out that most modern thinking and research about

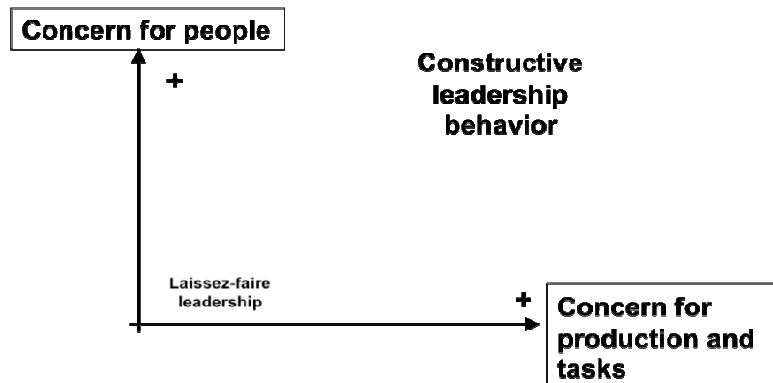
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<sup>1</sup> 7th International Conference on Workplace Bullying and Harassment, Cardiff, June 2010. See <http://www.iawbh.org>

<sup>2</sup> See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attribution\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attribution_theory)

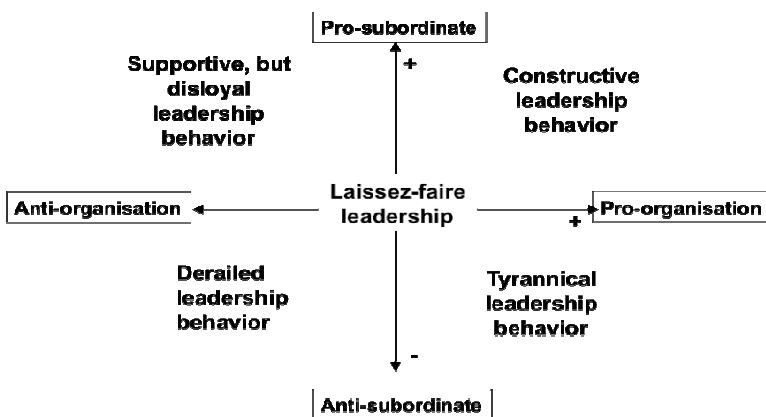
leadership and management is rather two-dimensional. He suggested the basic model can be thought of as shown in the following graph<sup>3</sup>:

This contrasts Laissez-faire leadership with Constructive leadership behaviour. Alongside this, we have a tendency, as described before, to 'demonise' poor management behaviour and to see a distinction between 'black demons' and 'white angels'.



The reality though is much more nuanced, and Professor Einarsen's research into leadership behaviour has led to the thought that there are many more 'grey suits' than either of these two extremes. He has also developed another model of leadership behaviour that extends the two axes of the graph in the other directions.<sup>4</sup>

Based on his research, Professor Einarsen shared his observations at the conference that sometimes good or at least fairly good leaders do bad things; bad leadership is rather common; and sometimes leaders are both good and bad at the same time (e.g. promoting the needs of the organisation in a way that is detrimental to the employee being managed).



<sup>3</sup> This is similar to a useful CMP model for examining different conflict management styles of avoidance, control, accommodation and collaboration: see John Crawley's article 'Resolving Disputes in the Workplace' in Business Executive magazine (2006) at <http://cmpresolutions.co.uk/resources/library/articles/>

<sup>4</sup> Constructive and Destructive Leadership Behaviour: Einarsen, Aasland & Skogstad 2007.

His point was that we are not static in our behaviours, and can move around between those quadrants at different times and under different circumstances. In my experience from investigating formal complaints of bullying and harassment, and of reviewing organisational responses to bullying situations, one result of the stigma attached to the 'bully' label is whatever the policy definition there can be a reluctance to uphold complaints of bullying. Research presented at the conference shows that often the organisational response is to blame the Complainant. Although policies may state that it is not the intention of the perpetrator that is relevant but the impact on the recipient, even so the tendency exists to 'understand' the organisational needs as causes of the manager's behaviour rather than to label it as bullying, unless the bullying behaviour is seen as being intentional.<sup>5</sup> We might think of this as a form of 'corporate' Attribution theory.

Which leads me back to the problem. Labelling people as 'bullies' may be cathartic for us as individuals, but is it an appropriate or helpful strategy for organisations and businesses? All of us will probably own up to having occasionally behaved 'poorly' towards colleagues (justified by the circumstances we were in at the time or the organisation's needs, of course). Very few of us will own up to having behaved in a bullying manner. But if I'm asked whether I may have behaved abrasively or abruptly towards someone, well, perhaps I might accept that.

So, is it time to recognise that we all have the potential to behaviour negatively towards our colleagues at times, but that the stigma of the label 'bully' does not help improve working relationships or the ability of organisations to manage internal conflict in a sensible fashion? Perhaps we might begin to wonder whether promoting 'Zero Tolerance' may be counter-productive, and simply drive the problem underground, rather than promoting healthy debate and better understanding of workplace behaviours. Maybe now is the time to update our Bullying and Harassment policies and to begin to think more widely and positively, along the lines of promoting Dignity at Work.



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**at CMP Resolutions.** CMP Resolutions work to Close, Manage and Prevent disputes at work through skills development, mediation and investigation services. ©CMP Resolutions 2010

<sup>5</sup> Bullying or performance management: Human Resource Practitioners' responses to workplace bullying: Susan Harrington and Charlotte Rayner, Professor of Human Resource Management, University of Portsmouth