

# Managing

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## Does the Schoolyard Bully Work in Your Firm?

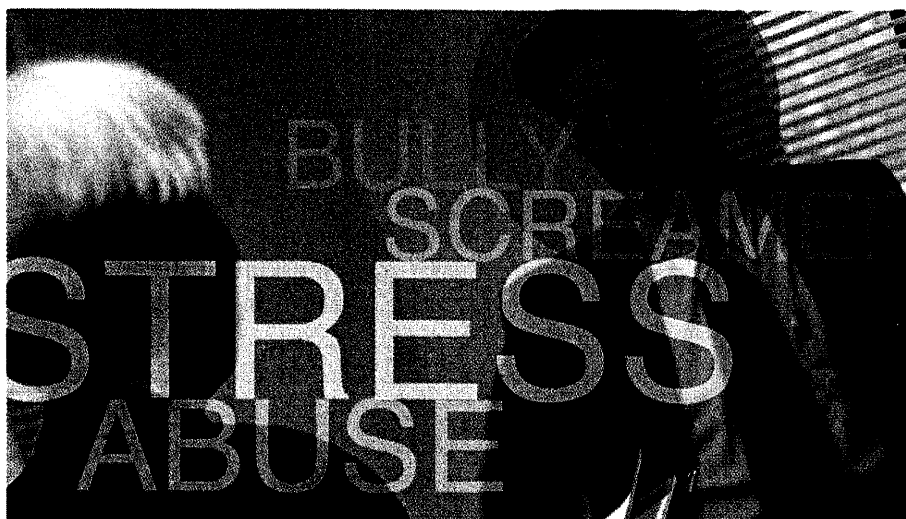
**W**e've all heard for years that the profession has become less collegial—but it appears that bullying behaviors have become more commonplace as well. In one recent week alone, I heard about four different instances of bullying by lawyers. I'm referring to individuals who yell or scream at others, put unreasonable demands on subordinates, criticize without offering constructive words, and demean and disrespect others on a routine basis.

Firms often tolerate these individuals because they are big rainmakers, their bad behaviors are only "occasional" or, sadly, their conduct is considered acceptable by the firm's standards. As stress and pressures build in law firm life, inappropriate behaviors are on the rise. Do you know if, and how, they are affecting your firm?

### Defining Bullying Behaviors

Do you recognize these scenarios?

*"I'm constantly stressed out. The partner I work for doesn't do anything ahead of time. It's always last minute, and her expectations are unbelievable. I'm pulling all-nighters all the time. And most of it is unnecessary. I can't plan anything outside of the office. Frankly, I'm ready to quit."*



*"He's a screamer, but none of the other partners will do anything about it because he brings in a lot of business. It's humiliating. And it's very unprofessional. This firm has had a lot of turnover because of this one partner. What makes him think it's okay to treat people this way?"*

If those scenarios sound familiar, don't be surprised. According to the U.S. Hostile Workplace Survey 2000, bullying in the workplace has greatly increased and is more prevalent than illegal discrimination. Here are the bullying behaviors the survey lists as the most common:

- Blaming others for errors
- Raising false concerns about or criticizing the work of others
- Making unreasonable demands

- Yelling and screaming threats of job loss, insults or put-downs
- Inconsistent enforcement of arbitrary rules
- Social exclusion
- Stealing credit for another's work

The law firm environment can be particularly conducive to these kinds of behaviors. Not only are intensive demands placed on lawyers at all levels, but also many in the profession are competitive by nature. Those factors make it all too easy to step over the line from appropriate to inappropriate behavior.

### Costs in Increased Stress and Reduced Productivity

Studies have shown that abusive behaviors, especially by those in man-

agement, cost a tremendous amount of money in terms of increased sick leave, lost productivity and higher recruitment costs.

The fact is, bullying behaviors cause higher stress and people under increased stress tend to take off more time each year than their less-stressed peers. In addition, people who have experienced a bullying incident tend to spend a lot of time thinking about that incident instead of working productively. And costs of replacing individuals who leave because of a bullying boss can be up to two to three times the individual's actual salary when you take into account training, benefits and other factors. Is tolerating these behaviors really worth the financial costs, as well as the costs in employee morale?

#### Assessing Your Own Behaviors

Has the pressure cooker of law firm life caused you to become a situational bully? It's common for lawyers to be unprepared for the demands of being a supervisor. Unfortunately, the stress of being unprepared for the role can cause the "situational bully" to appear. Honestly assess your behaviors: When the pressure starts, do you find yourself blowing up at people or making demands that cannot possibly be met?

Identify the kinds of circumstances that cause you to turn from Dr. Jekyll into Mr. or Ms. Hyde. Next, determine where to turn for assistance in reducing those behaviors. Here are some options:

- Management training courses or workshops
- Mentoring by someone who has strong management and people skills
- Coaching from a professional who can work with you on stress reduc-

tion, time management, communication and supervisory techniques

- Working with your firm's employee assistance program (EAP) or a counselor to figure out strategies to help you overcome burnout

Also, you might want to bring your "team" on board. Alert individuals who work with you that you are striving to become a better manager and tell them how they can help.

#### Motivating Others to Change

It may well be that your own managerial behaviors are up to par. But if there's another person in your firm who is a bully, then you, as a manager, need to correct the situation. Doing nothing sends the message that abusive behavior is acceptable in your firm.

Assess the nature of the person's behaviors: Is the bullying situational, or is it characteristic of this individual's personality? If the behaviors are situational, talk to the person about what you have seen and how you can work together to figure out what triggers such incidents. From there, help the person find the assistance that will meet his or her needs.

If the behaviors appear to be intrinsic to the individual's personality, the situation is more difficult. Yes, people can change—but they must be motivated to do so. Does this person have a motivation to change and, if so, what is it? Is firm management prepared to impose consequences for the person's poor behaviors? If there are no consequences, there is no reason for the person to ever change. He or she can just keep getting the wanted attention and control over others that so often underlies routine bullying.

#### A Collegial Profession Once Again?

Ah, to go back to the days when

lawyers considered their profession to be civil and collegial. It is not an impossible dream. What if law firms sent the message to all their partners, associates and support staff that bullying, abusive behaviors are categorically unacceptable? I suspect the outcome would be greater satisfaction for all in the profession—and that's a pretty worthy goal. ■



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## Action Plan

- Make it known that one of your firm's goals is not to tolerate or accept abusive behavior on the part of any of its employees.
- When someone exhibits abusive behavior, assess the situation and identify the cause. For example, is this person under unusual stress? Does he or she have poor time management skills? Or is this "routine" behavior?
- Be prepared to offer concrete assistance to help people overcome inappropriate behaviors. Identify useful resources, including workshops, training programs and individuals who counsel lawyers. Assistance might also include mentoring or coaching.
- If necessary, create a written policy that defines acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in your firm. Consider including specific consequences for engaging in abusive behaviors.