

# The Other Bullies

By Sonny Wong

We have heard of workplace discrimination: The big, mean boss bullying the staff, the employers who know how to manipulate policies and laws to intimidate employees. However, over the years, more and more employers have been sanctioned through employment laws and/or by union regulations and told to treat employees "appropriately." Government officials have made enormous progress in the areas of anti-discrimination, work & safety laws, human rights and employment equity.

Where progress lags is in the dealings with the other bullies. These bullies often are opportunistic workers who know how to manipulate information, company policies and the law to benefit themselves. Remember, these are the kids at school who managed to persuade the smart pupils to do their homework. These bullies are so sophisticated in developing their plots that they often go unpunished for years. It can take an entire community of workers to stop the bullies.

Let's examine the phenomenon of employees bullying the employers. Does it happen? Is it clearly definable? Is it real? What are the consequences in the workplace? In preparing for this article, I conducted interviews with the victims of these bullies. I will let you determine the answers to these questions. By the way, sometimes the story is more interesting than the answers to the questions.

Wilma Wilson. Wilma has been working with a retail department store for the last twenty years. The workplace is unionized for its sales associates but not for its management. When Wilma first started, she was a sales clerk. Wilma had personal and homelife problems, and when she spoke with her immediate supervisor, the supervisor recognized her as a valued employee and advocated on behalf of Wilma to have her position and work hours adjusted to accommodate her situation.

Wilma, recognizing the power of the union, pushed her way into the cosmetic division by using the seniority argument although she had no professional training. As a result, she bumped the trained cosmetician out of a job.

For the last ten years, Wilma has been working in the cosmetic division and has added to her earnings with high commissions. Additionally, she is now an active union representative, saying that she took the position because she wanted to advocate for the underdogs. During her term, Wilma has become proficient in manipulating the union regulations. Many staff members consult with her when they have problems with management.

Over the past ten years, the department profitability took several hits, and Wilma learned to be adaptable during the less profitable periods. Wilma started forging medical notes in order to take long, paid leaves of absence. Coincidentally, those absences were during low business seasons.

Wilma was smart enough to exercise her "optional Sunday shifts" during slow summer months and only worked "money making shifts" to maintain her commission level. As a result, her colleagues had to work in her absence making minimal commissions.

When there were changes in Wilma's tasks or when there were disagreements with management, Wilma exercised the union grievance process claiming unfairness and discriminatory practices.

It came to the point where managers avoided her after two former managers had lost their positions because of Wilma's continuous grievances. The worst part is that other staff began to model Wilma's grievance tactics. The department manager, human resources and the store manager spent more time dealing with grievances than attending to running the business. To this date, that particular cosmetic department remains unchanged. No improvements, no progress and no profits. The only outcome is that most of the cosmetic staff are now well aware of their rights and know when to exercise them. Is there a resolution to this type of group behaviour? How can a community prevent gang behavior when these bullies are running the neighborhood?

Kat Kingston. Kat worked at a large federal government organization and had been terminated for behavioral reasons. Months later, Kat started a new job in a non-profit centre as a front line worker. Kat was very motivated to learn and extremely eager to be productive. Kat got along well with staff, and she actively worked to

be part of the team by making home-baked goods and arranging events outside of work hours.

She later revealed to her new work mates that she had sued her former employer for wrongful dismissal. When she described how her former employer "degraded" her at work, it was heartfelt and sad. Kat's new work mates supported her and truly loved her as a workmate.

Everything changed after Kat passed her three months probationary period.

The workmates were surprised at the changes in Kat's behaviour. At first, Kat was open to constructive feedback, but then she responded to feedback by shouting at her workmates.

Once, Kat had taken initiative, but now she surfed the net during her work hours. Once, Kat arranged work outings, but now she did not even say good night. Once, Kat would bring baked goods but now she accused her work mates of taking advantage of her. Every time a situation did not work out favorably for Kat, she reported it to the manager and then to the human resources department. Kat treated some clients better than others, and at one point developed a personal relationship with a male client.

Because Kat constantly spoke about her pending human rights case that she had filed against her former employer, her present employer became intimidated and paralyzed by Kat's disruptive behavior for fear of similar repercussions. The staff was immobilized by Kat's behavior and did not engage with her for fear of her outbursts. Kat did not hesitate to make a scene in the centre in front of clients to prove her point. Furthermore, the staff began to see preferential treatment towards Kat from her manager. Kat's frequent days off, unsubstantiated sick days and disruptive behavior towards clients were ignored. All to keep Kat calm and out of the manager's office.

The workplace was toxic until finally two senior staff members took the initiative to exercise their own rights. Six months later Kat was terminated from her employment, but that was too little too late. The consequences of Kat's year-long employment resulted in the existing staff members requesting transfers or quitting their own jobs.

The centre suffered from brain drain, the staff suffered from abuse by Kat, the manager suffered from stress, and the organization suffered the loss of hiring and training costs. Kat's new plan is to study Human Resources Management!

Marcus Marshall. Marcus is an executive marketing professional who is charming, educated and highly productive. Marcus, at an evening out, met another professional woman visiting Toronto from the U.S. She was spending several months in Toronto studying business communication and effective English skills. Marcus and his new found love were the talk of the organization. After all, Marcus was well-liked by his peers and upper management. They were truly happy that he found love.

At the time Marcus had a junior executive that he was grooming in the field. It was just a matter of time. Then Marcus's personal life changed; his new romance was getting serious and the couple was running out of time. She was heading back to the U.S.

Marcus had a formal education, an impressive portfolio and good experience. He went to his employer to discuss a six-month leave of absence from his position in order to work on his relationship.

The employer was not happy about his plans and denied this leave of absence. Instead he offered Marcus all of his vacation time, which Marcus did not take. Marcus seemed to accept the situation very well and continued to produce for the company. He no longer mentioned his personal life to his employer.

However, within weeks of the employer's decision not to grant him leave, Marcus started calling in sick and complaining of stress. First, it was one afternoon out of the office, then a sick day, and then days of sick days. Finally, a medical certificate was issued, which said Marcus was suffering from stress and needed time off.

Marcus took his leave of absence after all. The young executive who Marcus was grooming for a promotion, well, that is pending. How did the other team members feel about the incident? They could not understand why the employer supported Marcus's sick leave. A once happy organization is now experiencing low morale problems.

There is a difference between making the most of opportunities being opportunistic. With every behavior there is a consequence. Stop and think of the rippling effects that your behavior may cause the organization and its workers. In short, regulations and rules are meant to structure an organization so that there is order and fairness. They are privileges. Everyone suffers when privileges are abused.

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