



The harms of bullying

by Julie Mikuska

You would expect that people working in non-profit organizations would naturally be caring and respectful to their clients, volunteers and co-workers. Sadly, we hear of just as many instances of disrespectful and bullying behaviour in the not-for-profit sector as we do in the for-profit.

There's been a lot of talk about bullying lately. What does it look like in the organization?

- It's persistent.
- It often involves a power relationship.
- The victim is singled out and isolated.
- The victim can do no right. Every effort is ridiculed, questioned.
- No amount of hard work can please the bully.
- The bully often yells at the victim.
- Attacks on the victim include personal attacks, questioning abilities and loyalties.
- Others may not intervene to avoid the same treatment.
- The bully is successful in convincing others that the victim deserves the treatment.

Bullying doesn't just harm the victim. Others in the organization put their heads down and try not to invoke the bully's attention. Or they figure it's alright to pile on, that the bully's attacks are warranted.

Bullying doesn't just occur among paid staff. We have seen it among board members, between volunteers and staff, and between staff and clients. It can happen in any size of organization.

Bullying harms individuals. They experience high stress, low self-esteem and massive self-doubt. They suffer from depression and anxiety. If they have to leave an organization they question their abilities to make a contribution elsewhere.

Bullying harms organizations. If, for example, an executive director is prone to bullying, staff turnover will be high. Morale will be poor and service to clients will suffer. Staff will feel entrenched and powerless. Volunteers will feel uncomfortable.

The reputation of the organization will suffer. And when that happens, donors will question why they should give.

So what can organizations do to prevent bullying? Policies alone won't stop bullies, but "respectful organization" policies lay the groundwork. Educate staff, board and volunteers about respect, what it looks and feels like, and what they can do if they see disrespectful behaviour. Support victims of bullying by not sweeping things under the carpet. And don't allow a perpetrator to keep doing it to others.

June, 2013.