Electronic bullying at work – some personal thoughts on avoidance strategies
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Tuesday 7th November 2006 was ban bullying at work day. During the day I decided to use a small amount of my time to write a few thoughts down about bullying by email. If you are reading this, and you would like to send me your comments, you are welcome to email me at: elt_gps@talk21.com

To begin with, it seems that almost everyone has been the victim of aggressive and intimidating electronic messages at some stage in their lives. In popular belief, it is usually a person in a position of power or strength (e.g. a 'manager') who bullies someone in a weaker position. However, electronic or cyber bullying, being a relatively new phenomenon, often transcends simple power relation hierarchies – for example, students can bully their tutors as well as the other way round. And of course, students and staff can bully each other too. There are two particular comments about cyber bullying:

- Cyber bullying is not always dependant on how well you know the bully. It is possible to be bullied by someone you know well or by someone who has never met you, or you have never met. Being bullied by someone you have never met can often happen in very large organisations.
- A bully doesn't even have to be an 'enemy' – it could be someone you are (at least superficially) friendly with. The bully, because of their own inadequacies, will exploit this friendly relationship to their own ends and advantages. They may end up using your ideas and passing them off as their own, or they may feel that your relationship with them allows them to tell you what to do. It is always unwise to get trapped into this phenomenon.
- We are all, in fact, victims of a highly pressurised electronic age where there is an expectation, for instance, that emails will be responded to immediately. However, this does not excuse bullying. The speed with which emails are sent and responded to often means that this important process is not given enough thought or attention. Email has, also, increasingly replaced more traditional (and perhaps more effective) means of communication such as face to face meetings and telephone calls, but it is not always the **best** way of communicating within the work place.

- Cyber bullying has brought with it widespread trafficking of unpleasant material which may even incite others, and is always unwelcome.

Some of the most common signs of bullying to look out for in workplace email correspondence are:

- direct, or veiled threats;
- dismissive comments about your work without due justification or evidence;
- strong criticisms, personal or professional, of the recipient;
- statements of personal blame;
- humiliation tactics;
- blackmail tactics ('I will only do this if you….')
- attempts to belittle the recipient;
- sarcasm and misplaced humour;
- inclusion of any offensive materials as attachments;
- unreasonable ultimatums or deadlines;
- unacceptable language;
- imperative, power based language;
- unwanted political propaganda;
- inappropriate and offensive visual materials;
- inappropriate sexual innuendo;
- unacceptable comments about someone's sexuality, race, religion, age, gender, etc.

These are just some of the many strategies that are used in emails that bully others. There are plenty of others.

An added 'twist' to the bullying scenario in email correspondence is the matter of who the email is copied to, and who gets to see what you have said. On the face of it, it is tempting to copy a critical email to one's line manager, for instance, to 'get them on your side'; but let's think for a minute about what effect this might have on the person being emailed - where two or more people seem to be in collusion, the recipient can become even more powerless to respond, and may find no escape at all from distress. Similarly mailing lists may be used unfairly to copy an email to everyone when the material is only suitable for certain named recipients.

Remember that bullying of any sort can cause serious physical and mental illness, and even suicide. Everyone has the responsibility to think about what they are doing and to ensure that their work colleagues are treated with dignity and respect.

So, how can we avoid bullying by email? Here is a short checklist that could be useful in improving our positive use of email:

- Think carefully before writing an email. Is the email really necessary? Is the reason for writing it justifiable? Does the recipient actually WANT to receive the email? How will he/she feel when they open the email? Will it affect them in any long-term way? Will they feel depressed? Worthless? Unhappy?

- What are your intentions in sending an email? Is it to be positive and helpful, or is it to stir up trouble? If you are trying to stir up trouble and make life difficult for others, consider why you are trying to do this. Is it to make you feel more important? Or is it that you yourself are unhappy at work and you are using email as an outlet for your own pent-up emotions? If there is a genuine need to problematise a situation, which may arise from time to time, then perhaps a better strategy is to use email just to arrange a meeting - and then to deal with some of the issue face to face?

- Is the email actually being written to the right person? It is important to respect people's right not to be contacted about something they can do nothing about, or about something which does not lie within their immediate jurisdiction.

- Is the situation a very complex one? If so, perhaps it would be better to have a face to face communication or a brief telephone chat instead?

- It is generally best not to write when feeling angry or upset. Would it be better to wait to 'calm down'? Or perhaps, to save any email to draft and look at it again in the cold light of day? Sometimes everything will seem better once you have had a chance to sleep on the problem.

- Email is a poor and ineffective means of dealing with disciplinary issues or seeking to change people's behaviour. It is also a lazy option which is often used as a substitute for human interaction. A good manager will know when different forms of communication are most appropriate.

- It is important to recognise the power that language can have. Words are not cheap - they need to be weighed up and considered carefully. What to say in an email is often a question of finely balanced judgement. Making the correct judgement is a big responsibility and cannot be undertaken lightly.

- Email should never be used to reprimand others;

- It is important to be careful about who you forward an email to, and to respect confidentiality where appropriate;

- It is important to avoid threats, accusations, heavy-handed or direct language, sarcasm or misplaced humour;

- It is always good to be positive – e.g. thank the recipient for an earlier email; ask how they are; enquire after their health; include a friendly and positive comment about their earlier email; etc. Friendliness does not hurt anyone.

- It is good to achieve a 'win-win' situation with email correspondence – it is good if everyone emerges from the interchange happy and satisfied.

- It is best not to put the recipient under undue pressure to reply. Similarly, it is not advisable to send emails in duplicate or triplicate or to keep sending the same email several times.

- It is not acceptable to 'talk past' the recipient by talking about the recipient in the third person to someone you have copied in on the email. E.g. Gerard had better sort pout the problem immediately.

- One might apply a five stage evaluation of an email before it is sent:

- Is it **necessary**?
- Is it **helpful**?
- Is it **appropriately worded**?
- Is it **positive** in tone?
- Is it **fully respectful of the recipient's feelings**?

And here are some strategies that I bear in mind when receiving bullying message from others:

- Remember that bullies are troublemakers and are unwelcome in any organisation. However, they operate and are given space to spread their influence because people allow them to do so. So it is important to take a firm stance against any bullying activities and to remember that you are not obliged to put up with it.

- Even if the bully is a senior manager, don't be fooled into believing that you have to do what the bully says or that the bully will be able to carry out the threats he/she makes simply

because they have a higher status than you. If you are being bullied, the law is on your side, not on the side of the bully. The workplace is governed by legislation, not by the whims of the bully. So, you are not obliged to respond or act on any intimidating comments. The bully will not be able to 'control' you simply by writing unpleasant emails. Bullying is often a question of pure bluff, bluster and personal ego. If you call the bully's bluff, you will soon find out that most of what is said is empty language, and cannot form part of any proceedings against you;

- Remember that bullying emails have no legal validity. You cannot legally be cautioned, downgraded, reprimanded or dismissed by a line manager through an email message;

- You are under no legal obligation to reply to any email that you deem to be offensive or inappropriate;

- Remember that you do have a 'delete' button on your computer. You are not obliged to read or take account of emails that convey bullying or harassment tactics. If you are receiving bullying emails, don't enter into the game – the bully will soon get bored and move onto some other power game;

- If the situation becomes very protracted, it is useful to keep copies of any bullying emails that you receive (even if you don't read them fully yourself);

- Remember that bullying emails often say more about the deficiencies or inadequacies of the sender than they do about you; try to maintain your feeling of self-esteem and composure, and remember all those positive qualities that you bring to the job; the bully does not really know you except in a professional capacity, so he/she is not entitled to make any summative value judgements about you.

- Most institutions have a clear bullying and harassment policy. There are often very specific channels by which you can **report any abuse** and your complaint will be acted upon. Find out more details from your HR department.