

I WAS JUST THINKING

Some Thoughts on Bullying in International Organizations

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From my study, I get a close-up view of the birds at the feeder on the table just outside the door. On a recent morning, there were as many as a dozen starlings chirping and hopping away as they breakfasted on the seeds, occasionally pushing one another around but not engaging in any major altercation. Suddenly, a resplendent cardinal swooped down and landed smack in the middle of the feeding dish. How elegant he was, the rich red of his plumage aptly reflecting his name. How he seemed to know how very grand he was! The first thing on his agenda was to chase away all the other birds, thrusting angrily at them and clicking loudly to banish them from the food. The starlings moved away towards the edge of the table, waiting for Mr Cardinal to eat his fill. Then I noticed the strangest thing: occasionally, he would go to the edge of the seed dish and, reaching across the rim, would offer some food from his beak to Mrs Cardinal (a rather drab-looking bird), whom he did not allow into the dish. Once he was sated, he flew off as dazzlingly as he had arrived, Mrs Cardinal meekly behind, and the starlings returned to what was left of their breakfast.

Very shortly afterwards, David Miller called to invite me to write something for this issue of the Journal — on bullying! I was still thinking of the cardinal, comparing him to the many powerful human bullies (often clothed in robes of office or bearing titles as impressive as the plumage of the cardinal) with whom I have come into contact both as an ombudsman and in other professional and personal circumstances. If what appears to be bullying takes place in the animal world, I wondered, am I to conclude that bullying may be a naturally occurring part of the human spectrum,

too? Despite this depressing thought, I asked myself whether those who are bullied can fight effectively against it. Most importantly for us as ombudsmen, what can we do to help to protect people from bullies and bullying behaviour?

In focusing on bullying in this issue, JIOA is not alone in facing the awful reality that bullying has become a part of all aspects of life: October is national anti-bullying month in the USA and other countries have established similar events, joining in efforts to establish new laws and provide help lines for those affected by bullying. There is a growing moral stocktaking of bullying worldwide — at local and national levels, in social and faith-based communities, in educational arenas and in the workplace — which is reflected in the increasing focus of the international media on this issue. Saddest and most compelling of all, young people across the world who have been subjected to the destabilizing effects of cyber bullying are losing their lives. This is as serious as it gets. Society has begun to take action and ombudsmen do indeed have a role to play.

We all have some idea of what a bully is — what a surprise to learn that etymologically, in English, the word started out meaning quite the opposite of what it signifies today. From a term of endearment for both sexes in the sixteenth century, it has come to designate, in the OED definition, “a tyrannical coward who makes himself a terror to the weak”.

Some of the organizations of the United Nations system established the ombuds function over forty years ago to address work-related problems in an informal manner. As in other workplaces all over the world, bullying in the United Nations has been near the top of the list of issues to be addressed. Sexual harassment has been another grave issue; here, progress can be seen in the measures that are now in place in most organizations of the United Nations system to

minimize its occurrence and to deal with it effectively when it does arise. Establishing those measures was not an easy task and the lessons learned can be of great value in dealing with bullying. Even calling bullying by its proper name, not concealing it under the guise of “tough managerial style” or “professional harassment”, is an important step forward as is not trying to explain it away on supposed cultural grounds or gender proclivity.

One of the disturbing facets of increasing decentralization in international and multinational organizations is the impunity that can accompany authority: managers become tyrants, cowing staff into obedience until someone has the courage to speak up. Well into my third decade as an ombudsman in the United Nations system, I have no hesitation in saying that dealing with bullies – men and women at all levels at headquarters and at duty stations – has been one of the biggest challenges I have faced. The United Nations has made some significant attempts to improve managerial standards but the problems are huge in a hierarchical, decentralized structure.

As ombudsmen, we are used to helping people in disadvantaged positions to explore their options. What options are there for those tortured by bullies? Is it reasonable or even possible to try to reach an informal resolution in a situation where people may have suffered great emotional and psychological harm from a bully?

In my experience, the visitor who has been bullied is often very scared to talk, even to an ombudsman. Keeping in mind the terror — but also the courage — that bring bullied visitors to the office, the first step is to help them to understand the bullying mentality. Handouts prepared by the office can be supplemented by the wealth of information and advice available online. While an ombudsman can certainly explain the bully’s psyche, corroboration from other authoritative sources can reinforce the message that the visitor should receive. If the visitor can grasp why someone bullies, it can be much easier to examine practical options.

It is sometimes possible to empower the visitor to take steps to confront the bully – to tell the bully exactly, either verbally or in written form, what personal damage the bullying is causing and ask the bully to stop. In my experience, this can be effective and the bullying does sometimes stop. Unfortunately, however, there is often too much at stake for the visitor to take the plunge, especially in international organiza-

tions, where work permits, visa status and family welfare may be placed at risk. Bullies often retaliate. An ombudsman, at the request of the visitor, may speak with the alleged bully, but the situation could deteriorate even further if the bully does in fact retaliate.

Is it a good idea to explore with the visitor the option of lodging a formal charge? Suppose that the alleged bully is in turn being bullied – to meet unreasonable deadlines with insufficient staff, say – and doesn’t interpret his or her behaviour as bullying but as the organizational norm. Only the affected staff may realize that in efforts to mobilize phenomenal resources, a manager may destroy the office spirit by bullying staff to reach the goals. Furthermore, in some instances, the organization overlooks — even rewards — bullying behaviour because the bully has excelled in meeting important organizational goals. Often, it does not regard disciplinary action as an option and may prefer to move the bullying manager to another office, perhaps with a warning, sometimes with a promotion, so that it can continue to benefit from the manager’s expertise. This enables, even encourages, the bully to continue bullying and sends a very discouraging message to the staff.

What if a manager is trying to reorganize an office according to new organizational requirements and some people on the team do not like the change and regard it as bullying? What if the ombuds discovers that the charge of bullying is false? What about those times when, in a shift of power (facilitated these days by electronic communications), it is the manager who is bullied by supervisees?

To be effective in all these circumstances, it is vital for the ombudsman to know as much as possible about the organizational environment. Precipitate action can have disastrous consequences. In the same way that ombudsmen worked with organizations to change the culture that condoned sexual harassment, we must now use our strengths as trusted agents of change to bring about a fundamental transformation that will enable organizations to decrease cases of bullying in the workplace and to act swiftly and decisively to hold bullies responsible for their actions. We can make recommendations in our reports and convene — and inspire — stakeholders to establish mandatory training in how to recognize bullying, how to prevent it and how to report it. In other words, the catalytic role of the ombudsman is to raise awareness of the scourge of bullying and help to empower organizations to root it out.