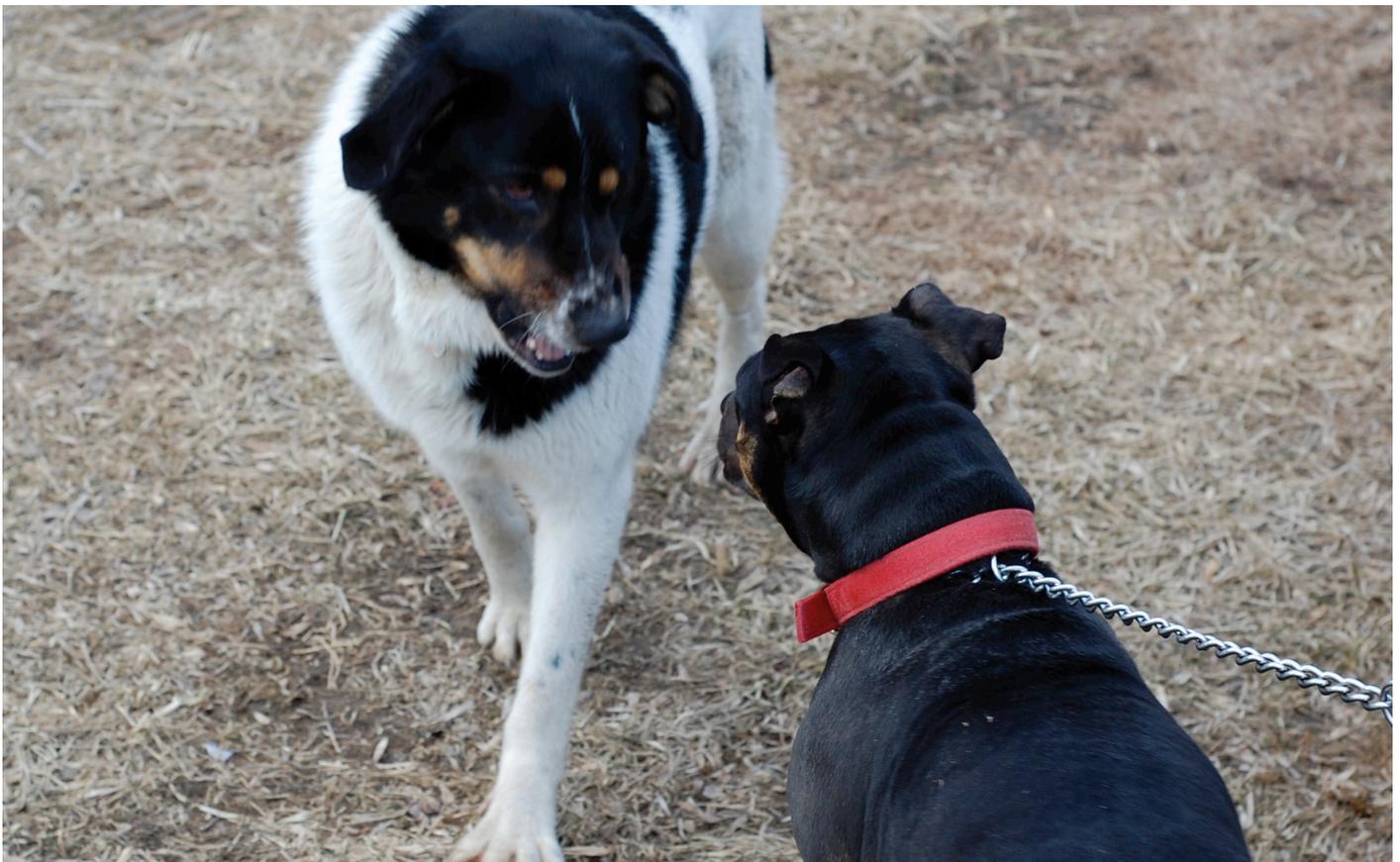


# Upward bullying in education; what the research is telling us

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**T**he schoolyard bully does not necessarily grow out of the habit on reaching adulthood. In fact, research shows that the extent of workplace bullying is comparable to bullying amongst children and adolescents and since the late 1990s, researchers worldwide have shone some light on the existence, extent and ramifications of workplace bullying (Andersson and Pearson, 1999; Kim and Smith, 1993; Leymann, 1996). Hospitals and schools unsurprisingly rank highly in the number of academic studies undertaken to date around bullying in the workplace.

Workplace bullying has been categorised as downward (the bullying boss), horizontal (also known as lateral conflict) and upward (staff to supervisor). Predictably the type of workplace bullying to attract the greatest interest from researchers has been downward bullying, the misuse of power by managers who undertake repeated negative acts over a long period of time in order to harass and intimidate members of their workforce in calculated and deliberate acts (Birks, 2014; Branch, 2004; Einarsen,

2000; Hadikin, 2000; Rayner, 2001).

**Reasonably often,** subordinate bullies disguise their activities by accusing their supervisor of being the **one doing the bullying**

But it's not only the people with the formal power who have the opportunity and propensity to bully their work colleagues. Supervisors may also be subjected to repeated acts of aggression, within a structure that allows for an informal power imbalance between the supervisor target and the subordinate antagonist. The amount of upward bullying that occurs is not clear and this may be due to several factors, not the least of which being that managers tend to believe that dealing with upward

bullies is just a rather distasteful but necessary part of their job and that admitting to being a target of bullies shows them in a poor light. Reasonably often, subordinate bullies disguise their activities by accusing their supervisor of being the one doing the bullying, so the unfortunate executive staff member is caught in an invidious position. Some researchers express regret that upward bullying has not attracted significant attention (Branch, Ramsay & Barker, 2006; Casimir, McCormack, Djurkovic and Nsubuga-Kyobe, 2012; Zapt 2003). Certainly support for principals, deputies and middle executive who are targets of upward bullying is patchy at best. Unless executive staff members actively seek support, it is unusual for them to receive it.

**What do we know about upward bullying?**

A number of researchers dismiss upward bullying as insignificant in comparison to downward and horizontal bullying. (Casi-

mir, McCormack, Djurkovic and Nsubuga-Kyobe, 2012; Hadikin and O’Driscoll, 2000; Keashly and Harvey, 2006). They spend their energies on where they perceive the majority of the issues to be, however even those who downplay the existence or significance of upward bullying concede that this form of bullying is more complex and multifaceted than the other two recognised types. In fact, upward bullying may well be much more widespread than acknowledged, manifesting itself as it does in more subtle ways. We have all dealt with (or are currently dealing with) upward bullies in our schools. Think of the staff member who bears a grudge because someone else got the supervisory job that they were “entitled to”, or the person on an improvement program who resents being managed despite identified performance issues, or the

“we’ve always done it this way” characters who destabilise workplace harmony in order to block change that will force them to lift their games. Perhaps you have someone on staff who has superior knowledge or ability in IT, who uses their expertise as a power base.

Upward bullying may more readily occur where there are conflicts between or among different faculties or factions within a school, where there are significant power imbalances and where the working environment is challenging. This could be due to a new leader addressing the deficiencies of an entrenched culture within in school or to leadership missteps in managing the implementation of mandated departmental priorities, where a high degree of emotional intelligence is required to effectively bring an apprehensive staff on side.

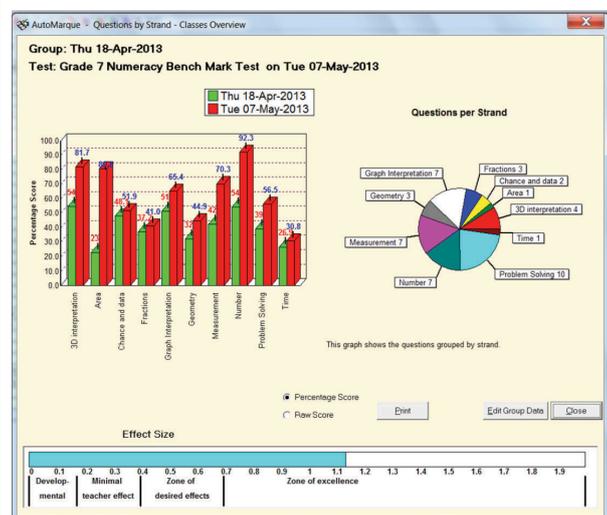
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### What does an upward bully look like?



Upward bullies with a great deal of informal power amongst their colleagues are able to manipulate followers sometimes unwittingly or even unwillingly, into the game created by the bully.



While upward bullies seem to have no qualms in who they take on, their ability to entrench and extend a bullying culture in the workplace is dependent on how their targeted supervisor perceives and manages the bullying behaviour



Bullies may have narcissistic traits, with low self-reflection and high self-esteem, (not low, as sometimes assumed). The confidence to take on someone with greater formal power is part of the upward bully's makeup.

### What sort of person bullies their boss? What type of boss do they target?

Anger and aggression are common tactics used by the bully against their targeted supervisor, especially in those who undertake to push back against disciplinary procedures or the mediation process (Baumeister, Smart and Boden 1996; Stucke and Sporer, 2002).

Such bullies may have narcissistic traits, with low self-reflection and high self-esteem, (not low, as sometimes assumed). The confidence to take on someone with greater formal power is part of the upward bully's makeup. In order to take the heat off their aggressive behaviour these bullies may also resort to embarking on a grievance process that moves the focus of any scrutiny away from themselves and onto their targeted boss.

Upward bullies with a great deal of informal power amongst their colleagues are able to manipulate followers who are drawn, sometimes unwittingly or even unwillingly, into the game created by the bully. Unfortunately, people who participate in this mobbing behaviour are all too often fully aware of their role, which they undertake with enthusiasm – launching with gusto into malicious gossip and mischievous sabotage.

While upward bullies seem to have no qualms in who they take on, their ability to entrench and extend a bullying culture in the workplace is dependent on how their targeted supervisor perceives and manages the bullying behaviour. Some newer leaders could misinterpret upward bullying as a relatively harmless rite

of passage, some longer serving leaders might attempt to ignore bullying in the hope that the situation will wear itself out. Both of these responses will give the bully what she or he needs to ramp up the toxic behaviours.

Studies are unclear as to whether there is an identifiable type of target for an upward bully and a few indicate that a victim type may emerge as a result of rather than as a cause of bullying. Coyne, Seigne and Randall, (2000), found that around 1/3 of almost 400 targets they identified were more introverted, neurotic and submissive, while a further 1/3 were tending more to being jaded and disengaged. A further 1/3 seemed to have no common traits. However they assert that a manager who can be isolated, has underdeveloped organisational skills, a poor professional or personal support network and/or can be perceived as different or difficult is a prime target for the upward bully.

### What workplace conditions support upward bullying?

In a workplace where there is a great deal of stress, a lack of job clarity and demands on staff that do not match their level of ability or expertise, frustration and conflict may flourish and increase the probability of upward bullying ( Birks, Budden, Stewart and Chapman 2014; Einarsen 2000; Jenkins, Zapf, Winefield and Sarris 2012). If staff members feel that their opinions or needs are being overlooked, they may well blame their supervisor for the situation they find themselves in (Vartia 1996). Where custom and practice includes "office politics" the upward

bully may seize the opportunity to attack. If middle management or a new deputy are seen to be pushing too hard for higher standards of performance, the push back may well include upward bullying strategies.

Staff have a propensity to blame the principal for what they perceive as poorly communicated or unwelcome change, especially when such change is incontestable. Upward bullying may be undertaken as retaliation aimed at school leaders for imposing such change upon disengaged or overwhelmed staff members

### What can we as school leaders do about Upward bullying?

As with schoolyard bullying, the target who defuses conflict in a consistently non confrontational and transparent manner, calling it each time he or she sees it, is well positioned to neutralise the upward bully. In short, if we've got well developed emotional intelligence with a good strong backbone and a handful of grit, we are well situated to beat the upward bully. But we must not go it alone. We need to use a professional support network, whether that be a trusted supervisor, members of our professional associations or our personal brains trusts. Dealing with upward bullying is draining and we need people in our corner to keep us focused and grounded.

Once we have some confidence in our own abilities to deal with upward bullying, we need to turn our attention to supporting our executive team members who are also the natural targets of upward bullies. As well as supporting and upskilling our

executive staff members, it is helpful that the entire school community understands that just as for schoolyard bullies, our schools do not tolerate adult bullies and it's not okay to bully the boss.

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