Stopping Women Bullying Women in the Workplace

Key Concept
Women bullying women in the workplace is a worryingly common phenomenon and one that is important for leaders to understand and deal with; because, according to this Idea, its negative effects can ripple throughout an organization. Here, a metaphor involving priming, painting, peeling, and polishing is used to explain how such bullying occurs, and how it can be overcome.

Idea Summary
Have you heard of the ‘pink elephant in the room?’ If you are a woman in the US, you might be one of up to 70% of women that have experienced this: women bullying women (WBW) at work. Although it is unlikely that most women who bully other women consciously decide to do so to destroy other women's professional lives, this can often be the result.

According to faculty from the University of New Mexico and UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School, women bully other women at work more than twice as often as they target men. They define workplace bullying as “repeated and persistent negative actions towards one or more individual(s), which involve a perceived power imbalance and create a hostile work environment.”

In their paper, which featured as a chapter in the book Gender and the Dysfunctional Workplace, Elizabeth Dickinson and her fellow researchers suggest that the WBW phenomena involves four patterns, or processes: priming, painting, peeling, and polishing.

Business Application
Discussing this Idea, Dickinson says it is “extremely important” for organizations to understand the WBW phenomena, as without broader organizational and cultural intervention and reform — including
acknowledging, understanding, and addressing the issue — change will be difficult. Dickinson’s advice is threefold:

1. The first step is to create an organizational culture that supports gender diversity. “This does not mean an ‘add women and stir’ approach,” she says, referring to merely increasing female employee numbers. “Rather, people of all genders can bring innovative ideas and approaches, including creating collaborative work environments and challenging traditional power structures and ways of being.”

2. Secondly, leaders must constantly and critically assess people and their actions, and thoroughly listen to what’s going on, even if you don’t like what you hear/see. “What’s interesting is how many organizational members usually know who the bullies are,” highlights Dickinson. “Sometimes the tendency is to sweep these issues under the rug, because they can take a great deal of time and energy, not to mention HR and legal implications.”

3. Finally, in addition to looking at issues at the individual level, leaders need to ask how an organizational culture may directly or indirectly support the behaviour. “That's not to say bullies aren't responsible; it means leaders also need to look at the bigger picture. We pose specific questions (in the original paper, linked to below) that organizational members — as well as bullies and targets — can ask to guide them through this process, including possibly helping bullies see what they are doing instead of ignoring or firing them.”

Further Reading


Further Relevant Resources

Elizabeth. A Dickinson’s profile at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill’s Kenan-Flagler Business School
Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik’s profile at North Dakota State University
Karen. A Foss’s profile at the University of New Mexico
Kenan-Flagler Business School’s profile at IEDP