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ABCS OF EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN ANALYTICAL SCIENCE

Surviving toxic work environments

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A common question asked of prospective candidates in an interview requests the candidate to provide an example of how she or he resolved a conflict with a co-worker or supervisor. A job candidate supposedly answered that she or he never got into conflict with anyone. After the candidate had left, the recruiter, from a well-known multinational corporation, commented to colleagues that the candidate was either lying or completely oblivious; neither quality was desirable in an employee. To be human is to experience conflict with other humans [1]. The present article is purposely provocative. The intended audience is both unfortunate colleagues (past and future targets of some of the more brutal potential aspects of academic life) and those who may have deliberately or unintentionally contributed and could do with a bit of soul searching.

Conflict can arise from a variety of sources. Some may arise from healthy competition and, although not without negative consequences, it can elevate overall performance. In higher-education institutions, higher workload levels and budgetary constraints are omnipresent and there is a continuous regulatory push for workplace diversity. Misunderstanding or amplification of underlying pathologies within such organizations often leads to conflict.

So how can one deal with conflict in the workplace? First, examine the underlying cause. As I began my academic career, some of the best advice came from Lane Sander, at the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Gaithersburg. He remarked: “Most people commit sins of omission not commission. They are not out to get you; they just aren’t thinking about you.” The moral is that if you feel you are in a situation where you are being wronged by Professor X, you must do an objective and honest assessment of your own actions and expectations. Begin with Professor X, the person that you perceive you are in conflict with. Imagine Professor Y exhibiting the exact same behaviour or expressing the same opinion as Professor X. Would your perceptions be the same if those actions or that behaviour had been committed by Professor Y instead? If not, you need to understand why. For instance, if your expectations for Professor X and Professor Y reflect any element of gender, ethnicity or any other kind of stereotyping, then you will be well advised to re-examine your own feelings and expectations and how these might influence your perception of the conflict.

Second, in any organization an important skill is to learn to pick your battles [2]. As noted previously [3], a willingness to compromise, without sacrificing realistic and reasonable expectations, enhances communication and reduces potential conflict. Examine the circumstances around the perceived conflict. Graciously accepting something less than the most desirable outcome demonstrates a willingness to compromise [1] and could work to your long-term advantage. Should the conflict emerge again, be prepared this time to pose a potential solution.

Third, it may be a good idea to sit down with the person or persons that you perceive you are in conflict with and have a frank discussion about your concerns. As with any potentially difficult conversation, it is prudent to have this discussion on some neutral ground and avoid confrontational statements. Instead, you might ask for clarification of what happened. Conflict resolution experts sometimes advise people in conflict to state their understanding of the other person’s position to each other. Ask if there are underlying issues or consequences that you were unaware of or if you misunderstood the intent [4]. Perhaps you have inadvertently done something to offend this person. Many people are open to this kind of frank discussion and will welcome the opportunity to clear the air to eliminate conflict.

However, if instead of resolution the conflict seemingly intensifies after the discussion, it is likely not the result of a miscommunication. This would be particularly true if the nature of the conflict shifts to more covert manifestations. In this case, you may have the misfortune of having encountered someone

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who is among those few who commit "sins of commission", a pattern of toxic behaviour that demeans other people.

How can you distinguish toxic behaviour from simple thoughtlessness or impatience? Although we all have days when we say or do things that we later regret [5], this type of toxic behaviour towards colleagues, staff or students has a lot of parallels to sexual harassment, in itself a subset of toxic behaviour. For instance, people who do this consciously choose targets on the basis of their lower status/exposure. As in the case of sexual harassment, such behaviour is rarely a singular event. Rather, it is part of a pattern that persists over time and often has parallel and/or serial targets. Like sexual harassment, long-term toxic behaviour towards others in the organization does not happen in a vacuum [6]; it happens either through collusion or because other people in the organization look the other way. Like-minded people tend to congregate. Unfortunately, as an inventory of political systems around the globe would suggest, people with less than laudable intent tend to be better organized than those who largely wish their colleagues well.

Carry out an objective and honest assessment of your own status within the organization. If the person that you perceive you are in conflict with has a higher status within the organization and further, this person exploits this difference in status [7], you are most probably dealing with a garden-variety bully. Social bullying involves diminishing the target's reputation by deliberately leaving her or him out of important discussions (i.e. devaluating the target's role), spreading false or only partially true information about the quality of the target's research/creative activities and/or teaching/mentoring skills (i.e. discrediting the target professionally) or publicly embarrassing the target [8]. All of these toxic behaviour patterns are typical weapons of workplace bullies.

In a particularly egregious example in an academic setting, a bully might embarrass a target by publicly humiliating the students of the target while rationalizing the action in the guise of academic rigor. Curiously, the bully has the added benefit that the process reinforces the bully's distortion regarding the target's mentoring skills or research programme while concurrently establishing the bully's zeal for maintaining institutional/academic rigor. One of the more insidious forms of this behaviour involves the bully demeaning minority faculty and their students while not applying the same academic rigor to her or his own minority students, thus carrying out the charade of being a supporter of diversity.

Can you protect yourself in such situations? The first impulse may be to remove yourself from any immediate contact or context to avoid any interaction. Subconsciously, some might wish that not being as easily accessible might make the bully find another target. Unfortunately this strategy rarely works, and in the bargain you lose input into the narrative. Much as in the schoolyard, workplace bullying tends to escalate in the absence of consequences regardless of whether the subject tries to make himself or herself scarce or submits altogether [9]. People in the organization who previously took this path are likely the ones who have been marginalized, whose authority has been systematically ignored, dismissed, undermined or overturned in key decision-making processes. Your career is likely to take the same trajectory unless you can somehow break the cycle.

The second impulse might be to appeal to someone in a position of authority. Carry out an objective and honest assessment of the status of the bully within the organization relative to those in authority. You might appeal to people in authority, beginning with people inside the academic unit. However, do not be too surprised if help is less than forthcoming. Most people are conflict-averse and reluctant to become involved. Long-standing antipathies within the academic unit could also put you at risk of being caught in the cross-fire or labelled as "not a team player". Not all administrators outside the unit are reluctant to intercede in departmental-level politics [2] but many are.

What else can you do to protect yourself? Bullies use their positions of power to target those with less power. Hence, they prefer to work within the trappings of respectability and do their dirty work in secret. Remove the secrecy. For instance, if a toxic colleague has a tendency to publicly humiliate your students, bring in people from outside the department to serve on their committees. Indeed, according to Craig Lunte, Professor and Chair of the Department of Chemistry at the University of Kansas, it is standard policy to require University of Kansas faculty members external to the department to serve on student committees as representatives of the Graduate School to ensure integrity in their programmes.

Ask for everything in writing. Document everything. Because social bullying in academia tends to be an ambiguous, cumulative process, it is helpful to keep a diary [10]. Memos with a carefully selected distribution list can also be very effective in cases in which documentation may be lacking. For instance, if a person that you are in conflict with made veiled threats in a private conversation, draft a memo which documents when and where the conversation took place, the primary topic discussed and your understanding of the discussion. It is critically important that the tone of the memo be courteous and professional.

As mentioned above, like-minded people tend to aggregate, so if there is one well-established toxic colleague, there are likely fellow-travellers [6]. This can evolve into a particularly sinister and toxic work environment called "mobbing". In the animal kingdom, mobbing is used to describe how individual members of a community will sometimes all spontaneously attack to drive an intruder off. Leymann [11] first noted the analogy between mobbing in the animal kingdom and work situations in which "hostile and unethical

communication which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual… over a long period (at least for six months)".

Kenneth Westhues, Professor Emeritus of Sociology and Legal Studies at the University of Waterloo, has written extensively on mobbing and maintains a website with some very helpful links [12]. According to Westhues, "once a mobbing has occurred and the target eliminated in one way or another, life generally returns to normal and the erstwhile mobbers go back to life as usual." However, in other cases, "the mob reasserts itself a year or two later and targets somebody else." Often, "a professor who joins in mobbing a colleague becomes, sometime later, the target of the mob." He has found that "once an ethic of tolerance, a rule of live-and-let-live, gives way to a culture of scapegoating and recrimination, this pattern of behaviour can become entrenched and persist through successive generations of faculty and students in a given academic unit" (K. Westhues, personal communication 2012).

Studies have also shown that professions particularly susceptible to mobbing include government, religious organizations and academia [13]. Although both genders have been reported to be at equivalent risk, typical targets are accomplished individuals who do not quite fit the prevailing organizational culture. Hence, in some academic departments, diverse faculty (e.g. women, minorities) may be particularly at risk [14]. Indeed, the comment "death by a billion pin pricks" in an article on women in analytical chemistry [8] suggests that elements of mobbing may have been a heretofore unrecognized facet of academic life for some of them. Reports from senior colleagues who endured the purge of analytical chemistry from many academic departments in the 1970s exhibit many elements of mobbing. Another cohort at risk of potential mobbing is aging senior faculty. A common factor in the purge of a subdiscipline and the mobbing of a senior faculty member is that the key person who identifies the target may not be a bully but may be a colleague sincere in the belief that driving the target off is in the best interest of the organizational unit (K. Westhues, personal communication 2012). Unfortunately, the cumulative effects of mobbing in the workplace impose a serious toll on the organization (e.g. lost productivity, disengagement, potential for entrenched toxicity) as well as the target [13]. Indeed, Leymann [11] attributed 10–15 % of the suicides each year in Sweden to the adverse effects of workplace mobbing.

So how can you distinguish simple toxic behaviour from mobbing? Mobbing contains all the key elements of social bullying (e.g. role devaluation, professional discredit, public humiliation) but with a broader participation within the organizational unit.

Remaining in a toxic work environment that periodically engages in mobbing activity can be very demoralizing to watch when others are the target and can ultimately feel like the children's arcade game "whack-a-mole" if you are unfortunate enough to become the target. If you find yourself in this situation, bide your time, wait for the right position to come along and then leave. As Dorothy Parker wrote, "Living well is the best revenge."

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