

Can This Happen in Your Workplace?

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Imagine the following scenario:

It is the first day of your new job. You are very excited and also somewhat anxious. You are aware that many others desired this well-publicized position, but it was offered to you after an extensive evaluation process. You enthusiastically accepted. It is your ideal job, one for which you have prepared for years both mentally and physically. It also pays very well, and you are earning far more than almost all of your classmates who were fortunate enough to have secured employment. You are eagerly awaiting the training you will receive in preparation for your new responsibilities.

But the first few days are not what you anticipated. Some of your supervisors yell at you loudly for mistakes that you make as you attempt to learn the requirements of your job. Some speak to you as if you were a child and demand you carry out tasks that they dictate such as carrying their trays in the lunchroom although they are very capable of doing so themselves. Others direct derogatory comments at you, some filled with religious, racial, and/or sexual slurs. At one point, out of frustration you disagree with a supervisor and in response several of your co-workers hogtie you to a pole and douse you with water to teach you not to express any opposing views. You are informed that all of these actions are taken to improve group cohesion and help you become a more effective, cooperative member of the team.

Harassment and Bullying in the Work Environment

I would guess that if you experienced any of these behaviors, you would be outraged and swiftly initiate legal action. These behaviors clearly meet criteria as workplace bullying, a topic I addressed in my January, 2009 article in terms of bosses who intimidate and demean their staff. Unfortunately, bullying and harassment continue to occur with regularity in places of employment, sometimes with little disguise as represented in the example above or sometimes with greater subtlety.

One example of the prevalence of bullying in the workplace has been exposed by Kim Werner, a courageous educator, who in response to her own experience as a staff member being bullied in the school setting began the organization “A Piece Full World.”

Its website www.apiecefullworld.com contains disturbing stories of harassment of school staff but as importantly, steps to address this issue. I invite readers to visit Kim's website and learn more about her efforts on behalf of educators who have faced bullying that has affected both their physical and mental health.

The example I offered at the beginning of this article may seem hypothetical, but it is based in great part on actual events highlighted in the media in the past month or two. These incidents are taken from the world of sports, more specifically the National Football League. One explosive story arose when Jonathan Martin of the Miami Dolphins left the team for what were labeled "emotional issues." Allegations then emerged that he was being bullied by teammate Richie Incognito. In an article published on *Grantland.com*, author Brian Phillips elaborates on the allegations: "Hazing him, if that word makes you feel better. Threatening him. Threatening his family. Leaving him racist voicemails. Sending him homophobic texts."

In the weeks that followed, some players supported Incognito and criticized Martin for not handling things in the locker room away from media scrutiny. Phillips reports that some players described Martin as a "coward." One player suggested, "You handle it in house—fight, handle it on the field, joke about it, etc.—and keep it moving" while another asserted, "I might get my ass kicked, but I'm going to go down swinging if that happens to me, I can tell you that." Incognito was interviewed on national TV and emphasized that he is not the villain he is painted to be even if he was suspended from the team.

I recognize that there are additional facts likely to emerge during the investigation of what occurred between Martin and Incognito and that one must be careful not to rush to judgment. However, when I read some of the actual words uttered by Incognito, I felt that such racist, homophobic remarks cannot easily be dismissed as simply joking around or so-called "locker room" bantering. For all intents and purposes such comments seem very hurtful and demeaning.

A "Bonding" Experience?

One of the television stations that aired the Martin-Incognito story noted that hazing or bullying is prevalent among sports teams. Sometimes these behaviors might appear more benign, such as players having to shave their heads or wear children's

backpacks, but on other occasions the behaviors seem to be nothing short of abuse. For instance, reference was made to the HBO reality show *Hard Knocks* when the focus was on the New York Jets training camp. In one segment rookie cornerback Brian Jackson was hogtied, carried to the goalpost, and tied feet up. If this wasn't degrading enough, two coolers of orange Gatorade and some heat balm were poured on him. Jackson was being punished for allegedly speaking disrespectfully to one of the coaches.

Rex Ryan, coach of the Jets, was quoted as saying that Jackson seemed to take it personally, adding that he would talk with him and let him know it was a "training camp tradition." As I read this, I couldn't help but wonder, "Why wouldn't you take being hogtied and having two coolers of Gatorade poured on you personally?" I believe there should be consequences in response to Jackson speaking disrespectfully to one of his coaches, but it's difficult for me to fathom the kind of punishment that was imposed.

I have never played sports on a professional, college, or high school level (pick-up games inside or outside of school were as far as my talents would take me). Perhaps those who have participated at these levels can argue that I just don't understand how behaviors that I consider harassment and bullying can serve as a source of bonding. I addressed concerns about hazing and bullying almost 10 years ago in my April, 2004 article, suggesting that "bonding exercises" could take other forms rather than humiliating a teammate. I wrote:

Not only do I believe that particular activities can contribute to the cohesion of a group, I strongly advocate that they be established as regular routines of initiation. However, these activities should never include acts of humiliation and physical harm. Rather, they could involve age-appropriate activities in which the group helps others such as clearing a playground of debris, building a house through the auspices of Habitat for Humanity, teaching younger children sports skills, or helping to raise money for a selected charity. I believe that such acts of giving serve to bring a group together.

The Perspective of a Team Captain

A refreshingly different viewpoint about the treatment of teammates than the Martin-Incognito or the Brian Jackson incidents has been advocated and applied by what some might consider to be an unlikely source given the intensity of professional hockey,

namely, Zdeno Chara, the captain of the Boston Bruins. Chara is an all-star defenseman from Slovakia who at 6 feet-9 inches is an imposing figure, purported to be the tallest player ever to play in the National Hockey League.

In an article written by Kevin Paul Dupont and published in *The Boston Globe*, Chara eschews the word “rookie” for reasons that date back 20 years to when he was playing junior hockey in his native Slovakia. He recalls that rookies were forced to engage in demeaning chores or rituals. “I said, ‘You know, if I ever am in a position to control that, I would totally change it, because it’s not fair.’”

Chara observes in the Dupont article, “It was just very immature things guys were doing to younger players—just stupid things that they did and you look at it, thinking, ‘Hey, why would you do that?’ It was just basically them proving, ‘Hey, I’m the older guy, I have the right to do that to you.’ But at the end, it was like, ‘Really? Is that going to make you happy? Is that going to make you feel like you are dominant, or a better player, a better person?’”

Dupont writes that Chara focuses on reinforcing teamwork and communication, while insuring that hazing or insulting remarks are not permitted. Chara explains that his approach, which is rooted in respect, does not absolve newcomers to the team from being accountable for their actions. “Don’t get me wrong, they do have responsibilities, just like any new young player coming in. For example, after a practice, usually they are the last ones off the ice anyway, so we want them to help the trainers pick up pucks. In the locker room, it’s the same for everybody—pick up the towels, clean up after yourself, be responsible, be normal, be as normal as you would be at home. Just be an adult.”

Perhaps the following comment expressed by Chara should be prominently displayed in every workplace, whether in sports or outside of sports: “But as far as doing any stuff that they are not comfortable with, anything that they are not OK with, I would never allow that. I would never be part of it.”

Chara elaborates on what he considers the appropriate stance of a team captain. “I always find if you sit down with somebody and talk to him, kind of pull him from the side of the team, then you give him a chance to speak and just to listen and take it as a human. . . . And whatever he decides to do with it (advice), it’s up to him.” Chara states that if the problem persists, you address it again and, when indicated, take it to a larger

group, letting the person know, “Listen, you are going to have to correct it, or there is not going to be room for you in here.”

Chara’s Views: Beyond the Hockey Rink

Interestingly, Chara’s perspective about leadership was highlighted in an article authored by Adam Vaccaro in *Inc. Magazine (Inc.com)*, a business publication. Devoting an article to Chara’s views in *Inc.*, which describes itself as “a magazine dedicated to successful, growing corporations and the people who manage them,” provides testimony to the fact that Chara’s views are not confined to the hockey rink. Rather, they apply to any workplace environment.

Vaccaro recognizes the relevance of Chara’s position for all work situations at the very beginning of his article. “Hiring and training young talent presents an inherent challenge. Companies need to both bear with fresh employees as they get used to the working world while still making them feel like they’re a crucial part of the team.” Vaccaro emphasizes that players still have to earn their way up the leadership ladder, but observes that Chara “strives to make them feel like they’re a welcome part of the team—not part of some strange subset within it—before they even lace up their skates.”

The word “welcome” resonated with me since I often use that word to describe how teachers should relate to students or co-workers relate to each other. I advocate that any organization, whether it be a school, mental health agency, or a corporation, strive to make certain that all members of that organization feel secure, safe, and welcome. While Chara’s words pertain primarily to newer members of a team, in my remarks about making people feel welcome, I always refer to all members of the group, whether they recently joined the organization or have been working in that particular setting for years. As the efforts of Kim Werner, cited earlier in this article, capture, bullying and harassment in the workplace can be directed at any member of a group or organization at any point in his or her career.

Resonant Leaders: Encouraging the Heart

As I reflected upon Chara’s words, I thought about two of my favorite books about leadership, *Primal Leadership: Realizing the Power of Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee and *Encouraging the Heart: A Leader’s Guide to Rewarding and Recognizing Others* by James Kouzes and Barry

Posner. Both of these books highlight the importance of the relationship that leaders develop with their group as foundations for the overall success and happiness of the group.

Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee describe “resonant leadership,” characterized by leaders with high emotional intelligence and empathy who “drive emotions positively” and bring out the best in everyone. They observe, “Leaders give praise or withhold it, criticize well or destructively, offer support or turn a blind eye to people’s needs. They can guide in ways that give people a sense of clarity and direction in their work and that encourage flexibility, setting people free to use their best sense of how to get the job done.”

Kouzes and Posner offer a thought-provoking quote by Irwin Federman, a former chief executive officer and a current venture capitalist. Federman observes:

You don’t love someone because of who they are; you love them because of the way they make you feel. This axiom applies equally in a company setting. It may seem inappropriate to use words such as “love” and “affection” in relation to business. Conventional wisdom has it that management is not a popularity contest. . . . I contend, however, that all things being equal, we will work harder and more effectively for people we like. And we like them in direct proportion to how they make us feel.

Kouzes and Posner support Federman’s view by offering the following comment: “It is impossible to escape the message here that if people work with leaders who encourage the heart, they feel better about themselves. . . . These leaders set people’s spirits free, often inspiring them to become more than they ever thought possible.”

Resonant leaders do not humiliate, intimidate, or bully people in any setting. The style of resonant leaders is in sharp contrast to what Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee label as “leaders who spawn dissonance, undermining the emotional foundations that let people shine.” These authors cite numerous studies that indicate the more resonant the leadership, the more satisfied the team members, the more productive the organization.

It is sad and unfortunate that dissonant leadership still exists in far too many organizations in which bullying and harassment are daily events both tolerated and subtly

or not-so-subtly encouraged. Eventually all parties lose when such an oppressive atmosphere exists.

Let us always keep in mind what may seem obvious, that it is far better to nurture positive relationships, to build people up rather than tear them down, to create a climate that enriches the organization and all of its members while prohibiting any actions that belittle, embarrass, or demean others. The resonant leader would never allow the examples of harassment cited earlier in this article but instead would subscribe to Kouzes and Posner's view, "When leaders do get personally involved in encouraging the heart, the results are always the same: the receiver and the giver both feel uplifted."

If only we could all experience these positive emotions regardless of the setting in which we work!

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