

EXPERT GUIDANCE ON CRITICAL COACHING ISSUES

“My Client Feels Bullied”



the situation

“I have a client who feels bullied at work. I feel this could be arising from deep-seated issues, but I am not a therapist and am not equipped to offer therapy. How can I empower this client to feel as if he has a say in how he’s treated?”

the experts weigh in

By Carol Adrienne, PhD

If your client is being bullied by someone at work, he (or she) has legal rights that can prevent or eliminate such practices. While petty slights, irritating behavior or isolated incidents don’t usually qualify as unlawful harassment, your client needs to realize that he should clearly communicate his concerns to his superior. Encourage your client to investigate and clarify the legal definitions of harassing behavior in the workplace that may affect his continuing employment there. Ultimately, the employer is responsible for remedying the situation.

If your client’s concern is not employment-related, then you are right to try to assess the severity, depth, and long-term pattern, and suggest possible therapy. Taking on the issue of bullying as a coach, however, could mean asking your client some questions that get him to come up with his own empowering behavioral changes. How could he set up his schedule to avoid being around the bully? Who else does he need to communicate with (parents? friends? employer?). There is no quick fix, but can he identify how his buttons get pushed? What’s in it for him to be around the bully?

Sometimes we box ourselves in and feel we have to put up with things. We fear that we may lose something important unless we try to be “perfect,” nice to everyone, or placating. Help your client remember that everyone has insecurities, no one is perfect, and some people

may have an inordinate need to dominate others.

We cannot change anyone else, so help your client get back to focusing on the goals he wants to achieve, instead of fixating on the bully. Paying attention to his own physical health can be an empowering step. If he is being worn out emotionally, he may simply need to get more rest and enjoy relaxing with creative hobbies (not just vegging out with screen time.)

If he has a poor body image, (or if appearance is related to the bullying), he could make a plan to start eating better. Small, albeit important, changes like this can go a long way to creating a feeling of control over one’s life. Whenever we feel successful in one area, we automatically feel more empowered. Suggest that your client commit to regular exercise – even walking more often – especially when he needs to let off steam. Remind him that often we have to fake it before we make it. Coach him in refusing to be a victim. Instead of focusing on problems and lack, encourage him to feel thankful for what he does have. Ask him to acknowledge (and write down in black and white) his strengths and what he is grateful for. Help him become aware of a tendency to make negative or self-deprecating remarks. As a coach, I often refer clients to seek out a practitioner of Emotional Freedom Technique for a variety of issues that may or may not need long-term therapy. I have found this technique to be quite effective.

Are you grappling with a sticky situation?

You don’t have to go it alone. Let our senior coaches give you some different perspectives to consider. Email your situation to: editor@choice-online.com and put “sticky situations” in the subject line.

By Victoria Trabosh, CDC®

I don't think your lack of a therapy background is a deterrent in helping your client. I often say that coaching is an easy way to shift behavior. If behavior cannot be shifted, then it's possibly deeper seated and does require therapy. Questions you ask, responses from the client, and the shift you ask them to make (and their response) will tell if you're out of your league as a coach.

Asking Great Questions:

My first round of questions to your client refer to the situation to decipher whether or not there is a true bullying issue. What happened? Is it always with the same person? Are there patterns and regularity to this behavior? What tactics have you applied to solve the issue? What support have you been able to get internally within the company? (These are not therapeutic questions – these go to the heart of the behavior, not his feelings about it).

Your Client's Responses:

If your client is truly victimized, there's often very little he may feel he can do or say to change the situation. Yet he should be able to tell you what he has tried to do. He can reflect back on the situations and articulate the actual exchanges and consequences. But if he is frequently bullied by many parties, there may be critical self-esteem issues which cause him to fold at the first sign of tension

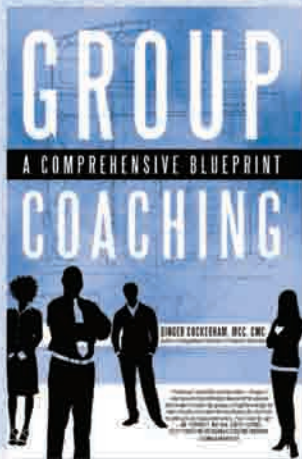
– no matter the other party – thus calling the other party the bully.

Your Role as Coach:

Your and your client's success in dealing with this issue depend upon your ability to ask great non-therapeutic questions, his ability to reflect back on the actions and reactions that lead to his feelings, and finally your ideas on how to solve his specific situation. Bullying can often be minimized or extinguished through very specific action the employee can take through the chain of command within their organization. Encourage your client to pursue steps through his employer – either his direct boss or, more likely, his HR department. No help there? Then teach him to speak for himself and confront the bully with charge-neutral words that clearly state his boundaries of how he will be treated. If he feels as if everyone is bullying him, he is not willing to shift or try new things, or he frequently comes back to your every suggestion with that wildly frightening “yes, BUT...” you may need to send him to a therapist.

It's hard to admit when we feel bullied because we figure we're not on the playground anymore. But maybe we are if this behavior is present. It's better to admit we need help than to believe we have better things to talk about in our coaching session.

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By Craig Carr, PCC, CPCC

Here in the U.S. the topic of bullying is only now beginning to get some traction in the media and in the public's awareness, and this question continues that important conversation. I'm not exactly sure why it has been a closeted social issue for so long, but I suspect it has a lot to do with the shame victims feel. In that way it is not unlike other abuse issues. It takes a brave and determined individual to stand up to a bully and overcome the psychological obstacles bullying causes.

A general comment on your situation is a reminder that a lot of successful coaching, on a lot of issues, is grounded on re-building self-esteem, re-establishing self-worth and restoring self-care. You don't have to be a psychotherapist to help with these things, but you do have to have skills in this area and a willingness to slow down a results-only model if that's what you work with.

I like to remind coaches that one of the most important jobs we do, on occasion, is to help determine if there is a need for a referral to psychotherapy. The primary way you determine that is if the client, after some time, still cannot take action to move forward in their lives and is in serious pain about it.

In this case there are two basic options I suggest you look at with your client before you decide this issue is out of context for coaching. First, you want to find out if the bully

dynamic at work is a repeating pattern that occurs in other areas of his life. He'll know right away if this is true and can describe how else he is now – or has previously been – in a similar position. If so, you know the crux of the matter is not exclusive to what's happening on the job. It's time to get to work on self-esteem, self-worth and self-care.

This may be a real breakthrough opportunity, but it is not for the faint of heart. Is it time for your client to be the whistle-blower inside the organization? Is it time for him to fulfill some key purpose and be the one who takes a stand and speaks out for the truth? The focus of what needs to change in the company is coming down on him: is he willing to do something about that? Is he willing to risk losing, for the sake of something greater? In this latter instance the distinguishing characteristics you will hear are a core fear of surviving ("I have to keep this job"), "yeah-buts" that rationalize and justify the perpetrator, and procrastination. If your client can't get mad about what is going on around him, refer back to option one!

Confronting this issue in your client's life will be incredibly transformative. Coaching most definitely is important for this client right now, so don't submit to the "It's a deep-seated therapy issue" gremlin too soon. I'm not saying it isn't, but you are in a perfect position to help make that determination. And in either event it could be hugely empowering for this client. •

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