

[Commentary] Toxic Leadership and Vicarious Bullying

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Abstract

In this paper I argue that the workplace culture cemented in place by the presence of a leader espousing neoliberal leadership beliefs creates a space where subordinates receive free reign to also bully: called vicarious bullying. We see “unethical, opportunistic, or colluding subordinates” behaving in ways that “maintain the pernicious center of power” (Hollis, 2019, p. 2). In order to do so I will identify the elements of a toxic, bullying managerial style and demonstrate how these characteristics link to vicarious bullying. The aim is to examine the relationships between toxic leadership and vicarious bullying.

Toxic leadership

I have previously argued that our neoliberal world predisposes leaders to behave in a manner that ultimately becomes toxic (Sims, 2020). In an early paper Anissimov (2013) suggest that key features of neoliberalism are both the ideas that hierarchy and inequality are essential for society and organisational wellbeing, and that regulatory governance and quality assurance processes are equally essential. In neoliberal societies and organisations power becomes firmly entrenched in the elite, the leaders; followers, by definition, are therefore of lower status and need to be managed in order to perform adequately (Chomsky, 2016; Giroux, 2015; Monbiot, 2016). This management demonstrates a lack of trust in workers and is often perceived by them as micromanagement (Sims, 2020). In order to maintain their positions of power leaders need to act in ways that support their superiority and they police the boundaries between themselves and followers very carefully to ensure that clear delineation of status differences is evident to all. Management jargon, often called bullshit language (Ball, 2017; Christensen, Kärreman, & Rasche, 2019; Frankfurt, 2005; Smyth, 2020), is used to create linguistic barriers between those who have and those who do not have power (Spicer, 2018).

Haslam, Alvesson, and Reicher (2024, p. 1) argue that unthinking acceptance of the neoliberal management script creates a form of zombie leadership whereby “ideas survive not because they are supported by evidence or by careful, critical thinking but rather because they accord with the interests of particular groups (e.g., venture capitalists, the uber-wealthy, and disciples of neoliberal ideology.” Leaders learn to accept the way things are, and the ways they are expected to behave, in order to maintain their positions in the elite. Questioning these unwritten rules is likely to lead to expulsion, thus questioning (by those in the elite group at least) rarely happens (Sims, 2022) and pressures to conform to the

required management script are huge (Davis, 2017). Leaders who don't comply can easily be removed from their jobs (Sims, 2022). Subordinates who question are simply positioned as troublemakers; not heard by management until they have said or done something for which they can be manipulated to either resign or be sacked (Sims, 2020).

There is extensive research indicating that those who position themselves as superior tend to either develop, or have always possessed, higher levels of narcissism and self-centredness (Beattie, 2019; Bettache, Chiu, & Beattie, 2020; Küfner, Hutteman, & Back, 2022) and are more likely to value only those relationships that are self-serving (Beattie, Bettache, & Ching Yee Chong, 2019). This combination of traits is characterised by McKoy (2013) as the PICO syndrome: power, influence, control and over the top feelings of importance. Such a form of narcissism is found to be more prevalent in today's business leaders than in a matched sample of committed psychiatric patients (Beattie, 2019). Interestingly, a link has been drawn from the neoliberal ideology underpinning this form of narcissism to impairments in moral reasoning. A study of members of the US Congress found that a degree in economics (and thus greater indoctrination into neoliberal ideology) made it more likely that the holder would behave corruptly (Ruske, 2015); not surprising when the inequality enshrined in the neoliberal ideology entrenches the self-centeredness and entitlement of the elite.

Narcissism in leaders results in toxic leadership (Milosevic, Maric, & Loncar, 2019; Ross, Sasso, Matteson, & Matteson, 2020) or dark leadership (Braun, Kark, & Wisse, 2019) which generates behaviours underpinned by dishonesty and exploitation. Unfortunately such bullying behaviour has become all too prevalent in many workplaces. Saunders (2006, p. 16: emphasis in the original) sums this up in the pithy phrase: management does not "simply foster bullying, it *is* bullying." Certainly, there is evidence that toxic leadership is becoming more common in the workplace. Early research summarised in Dobbs (2014) suggests that 94% of workers reported having worked with a toxic leader at some point in their working life and 64% were doing so currently. Singh, Sengupta, and Dev (2019) estimate that 56% of employees experience a toxic leader.

I argue (Sims, 2020, 2022) that the need for leaders to demonstrate they belong in the world of the elite, and maintain their position, means that even if they were not bullies before their appointment, they had to become bullies afterwards. Research suggest that the majority of bullying in organisations is done by managers (Ross et al., 2020). This creates a context that leads to vicarious bullying. I argue in an organisational climate the reality of managers acting as bullies (for whatever reason be that personality, the need to maintain their position of power or any other reason) creates spaces in which other work colleagues need to negotiate in order to advance their own positions, or simply just survive.

Vicarious bullying

Much of the research on vicarious bullying in recent years has been undertaken by Hollis and colleagues (Hollis, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). Hollis (2019, p. 2) writes: "vicarious bullying is a form of organizational aggression when the primary bully sends or inspires a messenger, henchman, to bark orders, diminish staff accomplishments, and extend the bully's rule through fear... such secondary bullies often gain favour in additional pay or privilege for doing the primary bully's bidding." Hollis and colleagues (Hollis, 2017b; McKinney, Halkias, & Hollis, 2021) note in their work of vicarious

bullying in higher education in America that minority groups are particularly targeted by vicarious bullies. In their work those from under-represented backgrounds involving race, gender or sexuality reported being targets of vicarious bullying at much higher rates: 44% compared to 22% for those of colour; 38% compared to 29% for women; 51% to 34% for those who identified as LGBTQ and 38% compared to 35% for those over the age of 36.

One theory of vicarious bullying suggests that it is supported in workplace cultures where there are little or no perceived consequences for the behaviour, where there is a tolerance for mistreatment and where social relationships are not valued (Dhanani & LaPalme, 2019). It is often suggested that the leader of an organisation is key in establishing and maintaining this organisational culture (Samaddar, 2021). Providing more evidence that workplace culture impacts on the development of toxic leadership traits is research that indicates reinforcing communal work rather than agentic independent work is found to decrease narcissism in college graduates (Heyde, Wille, Vergauwe, Hofmans, & De Fruyt, 2023). Another approach to vicarious bullying suggests that it is triggered by particular characteristics of targets, an approach supported by the work of Hollis and colleagues (Hollis, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2019) who identify a range of minority characteristics such as race, gender and sexuality as impacting on the risk of becoming a target. In reality, explanations for vicarious bullying are complex and I see no reason why both perspectives cannot be at play.

The consequences of unchecked vicarious bullying are considerable. Targets are stressed by the way they are treated and it is well known that chronic stress has a range of negative consequences that impact not only on workplace performance but on the long-term health and wellbeing of the targeted individual. These include (but are not limited to) diminishing cognitive capacity (Arifi, Bitterlich, von Wolff, Poethig, & Stute, 2022), poor attention control (Liu et al., 2020), poor work attendance and increased likelihood of staff turnover (Van den Brande, Baillien, De Witte, Vander Elst, & Godderis, 2016), changes in metabolism leading to risks of obesity and declining immune response (Nold et al., 2019), reduced cardiovascular health and ultimately reduced longevity (Eachus & Cunliffe, 2018).

In an early study in the US, Namie and Namie (2009) state that 37% of all American workers faced bullying in the workplace with 49% impacted by the bullying in some way. Hollis' research focused on the American higher education sector where she found that 58% had been targeted or impacted by workplace bullying and 42% were targeted through vicarious bullying (Hollis, 2019). A later national survey in the US stated that 30% of workers were direct targets of bullying, 19% had witnessed others being bullied (49% are thus impacted directly or indirectly by workplace bullying) and 66% were aware that bullying happens (Workplace Bullying Institute, 2021). This survey did not address vicarious bullying but if the Hollis proportions are similar, then it can be assumed that vicarious bullying impacts 35% of the entire American workforce. Similar figures relating to the prevalence of workplace bullying are reported elsewhere. For example, in the UK it is estimated that about a third of all workers are targets of workplace bullies (Agency Central, 2000-2022) which suggests that about a quarter could have been subjected to vicarious bullying. In a worldwide survey undertaken by the UN International Labour Organisation, Lloyd's Register Foundation, and Gallup (2022) the international prevalence of violence and harassment in the workplace (physical, psychological or sexual) is more than one in five.

Discussion

I think one of the key drivers in the increasing rates of toxic leadership in the workplace is our overarching neoliberal ideology that guides many western and non-western nations in our modern world. This ideology prioritises certain values (the importance of maintaining inequity, of competition and excessive supervision of workers based on a lack of trust), creating a script that leaders are required to follow in order to maintain their position of privilege in the elite. Leaders coming into their roles with certain narcissistic traits are more likely to be successful in maintaining this role. Those who do not possess these traits either have to develop them or face expulsion from the elite. Once toxic leaders are in positions where they can use power, they create a climate that encourages their subordinates to copy their bullying behaviours. Such imitation serves to demonstrate the support of subordinates for the leader (in the hope that such support will be rewarded). In addition, lack of consequences for negative behaviours reinforces beliefs that such behaviours are valued in and of themselves, and subordinates whose main focus is their own wellbeing and advancement are more likely to engage in vicarious bullying of their colleagues.

Vicarious bullying, as does bullying of all forms, costs an organisation. Cullinan, Hodgins, Hogan, and Pursell (2020) estimate that the cost of workplace bullying in Ireland annually in lost production was 187.7 million Euro in the private sector and 51.8million Euro in the public sector. In Australia the estimated cost of workplace bullying to construction businesses is estimated to be between 17 and 36 billion dollar per year (Doran, Rebar, Waters, Meredith, & Doran, 2020). Bullying impacts on targets, creating a climate of stress that impacts physical and mental health and wellbeing (Giorgi et al., 2016; Nielsen, Einarsen, Notelaers, & Nielsen, 2016; Qureshi, Rasli, & Zaman, 2014). The more narcissistic a leader, the longer that leader is likely to stay in position, widening their impact on successive cohorts of subordinates (Harris, 2023).

Bullying also impacts on the bullies. Increasing narcissism increases conflict in the lives of the narcissist, increasing the risk of poor relationships and inability to trust others with consequent increases in loneliness (Küfner et al., 2022; Mukhtar, Rehman, Lashari, & Bibi, 2023). Narcissism “induces a collective downward spiral resulting in an ill-calibrated allocation of resources within society, business and social relationships (i.e. giving most to those that produce negative results)” (Küfner et al., 2022, p. 1). One might argue that the increasing levels of societal trust in politicians and the government (Dalton, 2005; Hitlin & Shutava, 2022; Winsvold, Haugsgjerd, Saglie, & Seggaard, 2024) is a symptom of this. Narcissists may ultimately exhibit pathological narcissism/narcissistic personality disorder (Ronningstam, 2022) with consequent impacts on family, workplace and community.

Toxic leadership and the bullying that is part of this narcissistic leadership style create a space for others to also engage in bullying behaviours (vicarious bullying); perhaps one of the reasons why we appear to be seeing an increase in narcissism, a world wide trend identified by Küfner et al. (2022). Increases in narcissism are signalled by increases in interpersonal problems, conflictual relationships and selfishness, trends that are hardly beneficial to society as a whole. This trend was identified as early as 1880 when Fyodor Dostoyevsky first published *The Brothers Karamazov*: “The world says: ‘You have needs -- satisfy them. You have as much right as the rich and the mighty. Don't hesitate to satisfy your needs; indeed, expand your needs and demand more.’ This is the worldly doctrine of today. And they believe that this is freedom. The result for the rich is isolation and suicide, for the poor, envy and murder.”(Dostoevsky, 2002, p. no page

number)

We need to consider how to arrest this slide into pathology if our world is to have a chance of a future: a future where people actually support each other, care for others and the environment. Perhaps we could begin this change by focusing on challenging the neoliberal ideology that produces toxic leadership, changing our expectations of leaders and successful leadership to focus on improving interpersonal relationships in the workplace and elsewhere, and having zero tolerance for bullying by anyone.

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