Executive Secretary

MAGAZINE

THE ESSENTIAL TRAINING RESOURCE FOR SENIOR AND ASPIRING ADMINISTRATIVE PROFESSIONALS

ADMINISTRATIVE PROFESSIONALS WORKPLACE BULLYING SURVEY WORLDWIDE RESULTS

WWW.EXECUTIVESECRETARY.COM

May/June 2017
Volume 7 Issue 2
ISSN 2046-3855

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Executive Secretary is published bi-monthly by Marcham Publishing

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ISSN 2046-3855.

A modern day epidemic

At the end of last year, Victoria Darragh, CEO of the UK's Executive & Personal Assistants Association (EPAA) approached me about working in collaboration to produce some statistics around workplace bullying and Assistants.

I immediately agreed to work with her. I have been the victim of workplace bullying myself and it resulted in a nervous breakdown. It was one of the most stressful and disturbing periods of my working life and I truly believe bullying needs shining a light on. Bullying must be seen as totally unacceptable. We needed to start a conversation.

Like sexism, racism, homophobia or domestic violence once were, this is a hidden epidemic but it is just as intolerable. The difference is that the conversations on most of these are in full swing and they are being tackled. Not so workplace bullying.

Too many businesses sweep it under the carpet and the bullies are allowed to continue. Often the victims are branded as troublesome or unstable or difficult. Many employees feel they have no form of redress and leave jobs that they have been passionate about, costing businesses huge amounts of money, simply because there is no process set up to deal with the problem.

Enter Bonnie Low Kramen; trainer, author and founder of the Speak Up Pledge, taken last year by thousands of Assistants who pledged to speak up either for themselves or for colleagues that they could see were being bullied.

Bonnie had heard we were pulling together this survey and was keen to support and share the survey and its results. Thank you Bonnie for your support both emotionally and financially. And thank you Victoria for having the vision to want to push this subject to the forefront again.

Victoria published the UK statistics at the end of last year and has been running a series of webinars on the subject. This version is the Global Supplement.

Thank you to the 3,350 of you that took the time to answer our questions. The results aren't pretty but we finally have facts. And a special thank you to Carole Spiers, our international authority on Workplace Bullying and Corporate Stress for composing our introduction, sense checking the results and providing sage advice in our summary for those of you that being bullied.

We have included some of the comments that you made, but for obvious reasons we have left them anonymous. Please share the survey with anyone you feel would find it useful.

Let's go change the world!

L.B

Lucy Brazier

Meet Your Editorial Board

Bonnie Low Kramen
Instructor, Speaker & Best-selling Author

Sue France
Award-winning PA and Author

Joan Burge
Founder & CEO, Office Dynamics International

Eth Lloyd, M.Ed
Globally recognised authority on the role of the Assistant

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Visionary author & "executive level" trainer for professional Assistants

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CAROLE SPIERS

CEO Carole Spiers Group, International Motivational Speaker, Founder of National Stress Awareness Day, Chair of the International Stress Management Association [UK] & Author of Show Stress Who's Boss!

Workplace bullying has been around for a very long time and back in the late nineties, I was already delivering keynote presentations and running training programmes to industry in order to educate both management and staff regarding the destructive effects of workplace bullying.

Policies and procedures were written at the time but many were put in a drawer and forgotten about. Industry had a 'to do' list and as bullying behaviour was on it, it was ticked off but not necessarily implemented. Today, not enough has changed and there is still a conspiracy of silence surrounding incidents of bullying. Individual victims are reluctant to speak-up as they fear for their jobs and even their safety. They can end-up by being reluctant to come into work and often experience isolation and/or panic attacks, to name but two known effects of bullying behaviour.

My work in the field of stress and risk assessment, led to my appointment as an expert witness before the courts regarding the devastating effects of bullying behaviour upon individual lives and the vast sums of money being awarded in compensation claims. Yet, still nothing has really changed except, perhaps, the nature of the bullying.

Social media has also opened up a wider range of opportunities for unacceptable behaviour. Cyber bullying which is equally as insidious as other modes of bullying behaviour, can be much harder to manage as it often falls outside the remit of workplace policies and procedures but nevertheless, is equally as damaging.

The challenges facing organisations seeking to manage workplace bullying today are perhaps greater than they were 20 years ago and the damage that intimidation can do to 'victims', is immeasurable.

However, it is important to bear in mind that what is, in some cases, perceived as bullying behaviour by one person may be taken to be merely overly zealous supervision, by another, and is, therefore, something to be withstood rather than to be complained about. It is often for this reason that bullying and/or intimidation is, on occasion, a difficult and complex situation with which to deal.

Now in 2017, there is a need for organisations and managers, in particular, to focus upon actively promoting dignity at work and respect for all employees. HR has a role to review and update workplace bullying policies and procedures and actively promote them as an integral part of management training and employee induction. The senior management team need to say, very clearly, that the organisation has a zero-tolerance attitude towards bullying behaviour and that their own behaviour needs to reflect and demonstrate this also.

Effective communication, at all levels is essential, and it should be clear to everyone as to what is 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' behaviour. If Managers don't know how to communicate with their team, then they need to be trained.

This timely, first-class report offers a painful insight into just how little has been achieved over the past 20 years in the management of workplace bullying. Lives are still being shattered and careers ruined and I really do hope that industry as a whole will sit up and take notice and become more proactive about managing this intolerable situation.

Organisations need to pride themselves on a healthy workplace culture: a culture where good communications are at the very heart of the organisation: a culture where the organisation will thrive through its people and a culture where the vision and values of the organisation will reflect appreciation, value and respect.

I commend this report to all those who read it and to make sure that it achieves the profile it richly deserves. I will always support 'BAN BULLYING' in any way, shape or form.

Carole Spiers FISMA, MIHPE

BONNIE LOW-KRAMEN

Founder of the Speak Up! Pledge campaign for the eradication of Workplace Bullying, international speaker, author & one of the most respected voices in the Administrative Profession.

"When you know better, do better." This quote by Maya Angelou is the reason why I co-sponsored this first-ever international workplace bullying survey.

From my work training assistants all over the world and from hearing hundreds of stories, I know that we have a global epidemic. The survey results prove it. 69% of the respondents have personally experienced workplace bullying in their careers and 67% have had it occur on more than 3 occasions.

World, we have a problem.

There are numerous issues that this data raises but to me, the top 3 are:

1. The trauma of bullying does not only last for the day it happens. It lasts for weeks, months, and sometimes years. Assistants can instantly recall the exact words that were said to them, the time of day, and what they were wearing. The human price we are paying is far too high.
2. The trauma of bullying eats away at people's morale, productivity, and ability to work at optimum effectiveness. Leaders need to be aware that to permit these behaviors to persist means profits decrease due to absenteeism, presenteeism, and low motivation. Can anyone produce great work while feeling humiliated?
3. The data shows that we need a fresh look at the problem by our leaders and human resources professionals in collaboration with the staff and recruiters in order to come up with a realistic plan, which begins with setting clear expectations at the start.

The future of our global workplace is at stake. This is not hyperbole. Awareness is the first step which was the goal of the survey. Training and education is the second. New and effective policies that are actually enforced and based on accountability and consequences is the third.

When we break the silence and the destructive cycle of bullying, the workplace will transform not only for ourselves but for our daughters and sons. As leadership expert Simon Sinek says, "Imagine a world where people feel safe at work." I can imagine it. Can you?

Bonnie Low-Kramen

An Introduction to Bullying

The word 'bullying' is strongly associated in many people's minds with the school playground. Bullying of children and teenagers by their peers is a widely observed and understood problem, and there has been considerable effort put in by authorities to deal with it.

But bullying is not a childhood phenomenon, it is a general problem, part of human life at all ages and in all social contexts. Bullying can occur in families, within relationships, in clubs and groups, and in the military.

Even the United Nations, which adopted a resolution in 2014 to protect children from bullying, has yet to address the concept of workplace or adult bullying.

There is no formal definition in our society of abusive behaviour, and the lack of clarity about what might constitute bullying behaviour has contributed to misunderstanding, lack of regulation, and a lack of appreciation of the scale of the problem.

Individual countries are, however, beginning to recognise and address bullying in the workplace, although the definitions vary from country to country:

The Australian Human Rights Commission website describes workplace bullying as "verbal, physical, social or psychological abuse by your employer (or manager), another person or group of people at work."

In Ireland, The Health and Safety Authority's definition is that it is: "repeated inappropriate behaviour, direct or indirect, whether verbal, physical or otherwise, conducted by one or more persons against another or others, at the place of work and/or in the course of

employment, which could reasonably be regarded as undermining the individual's right to dignity at work. An isolated incident of the behaviour described in this definition may be an affront to dignity at work but, as a once off incident, is not considered to be bullying."

And in Canada, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety defines bullying as "any behaviour that demeans embarrasses, humiliates, annoys, alarms, or verbally abuses a person that is known or would be expected to be unwelcome".

Workplace bullying in Sweden falls under the definition of victimisation "...recurrent reprehensible or distinctly negative actions which are directed against individual employees in an offensive manner and can result in those

employees being placed outside the workplace community" (http://bit.ly/2rUpoNq)

We can establish some general principles, though. In all such instances, a bully-victim relationship is established, in which the bully sets up a long-running game to make someone feel inferior, be put down, be hurt, ridiculed, humiliated, and insulted, for no other reason than to make the bully feel superior. One-off events that do not recur are different: bullying involves setting up a bully-victim relationship, and then by repeated acts of abuse spoiling someone's life over a period of time.

The workplace is a perfect place for such relationships to be set up. Not only is it a part of life where long-term interactions between people take place, but, just as in abusive marriages, it is a place that people usually cannot leave without great difficulty.

The best thing to do with a bully is simply to walk away, but most of the time that's not possible at work. This is particularly true if the bully is your direct manager, but if a colleague or group of colleagues starts making your working life miserable, in a context where no-one else knows what's happening, it can be impossible to walk away without damaging your career.

The Australian Human Rights Commission provides examples of repeated behaviour that can be considered bullying:

- repeated hurtful remarks or attacks, or making fun of your work or you as a person (including your family, sex, sexuality, gender identity, race or culture, education or economic background)
- sexual harassment, particularly stuff like unwelcome touching and sexually explicit comments and requests that make you uncomfortable
- excluding you or stopping you from working with people or taking part in activities that relates to your work
- playing mind games, ganging up on you, or other types of psychological harassment
- intimidation (making you feel less important and undervalued)
- giving you pointless tasks that have nothing to do with your job
- giving you impossible jobs that can't be done in the given time or with the resources provided
- deliberately changing your work hours or schedule to make it difficult for you
- deliberately holding back information you need for getting your work done properly
- pushing, shoving, tripping, grabbing you in the workplace
- attacking or threatening with equipment, knives, guns, clubs or any other type of object that can be turned into a weapon
- initiation or hazing - where you are made to do humiliating or inappropriate things in order to be accepted as part of the team.

The Candian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety notes that "bullying is a form of aggression, the actions can be both obvious and subtle. It is important to note that the following is not a checklist, nor does it mention all forms of bullying. This list is included as a way of showing some of the ways bullying may happen in a workplace. Also remember that bullying is usually considered to be a pattern of behaviour where one or more incidents will help show that bullying is taking place.

Examples include:

- Spreading malicious rumours, gossip, or innuendo.
- Excluding or isolating someone socially.
- Intimidating a person.
- Undermining or deliberately impeding a person's work.
- Physically abusing or threatening abuse.
- Removing areas of responsibilities without cause.
- Constantly changing work guidelines.
- Establishing impossible deadlines that will set up the individual to fail.
- Withholding necessary information or purposefully giving the wrong information.
- Making jokes that are 'obviously offensive' by spoken word or e-mail.
- Intruding on a person's privacy by pestering, spying or stalking.
- Assigning unreasonable duties or workload which are unfavourable to one person (in a way that creates unnecessary pressure).
- Underwork - creating a feeling of uselessness.
- Yelling or using profanity.
- Criticising a person persistently or constantly.
- Belittling a person's opinions.
- Unwarranted (or undeserved) punishment.
- Blocking applications for training, leave or promotion.
- Tampering with a person's personal belongings or work equipment.

If you are not sure an action or statement could be considered bullying, you can use the "reasonable person" test. Would most people consider the action unacceptable?"

"The difference between bullying and a mistake is with the intent: the bully wants to wound, to have power over, to humiliate, and destroy."

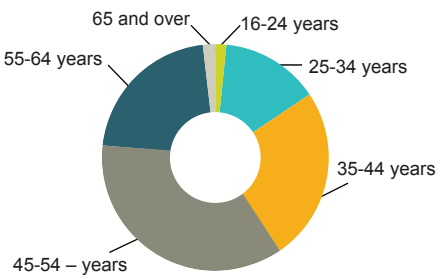
– Sherry Benson Podolchuk, 'Workplace Bullying And The Strategies I Used To Survive'

The Survey

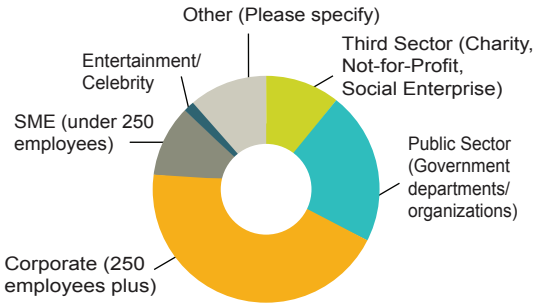
Setting the scene

The survey questions started with personal details, including the respondents' sex, age, and administrative experience. As expected, 98% of respondents were female.

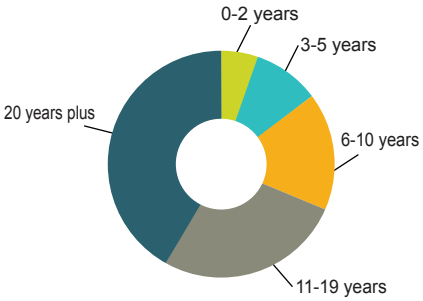
Our Assistants came from around the world, with North America (52%) and the UK (33%) fielding the most responses. 32% of our Assistants held the job title "Executive Assistant"; whilst 42% had more than 20 years experience as an Assistant. Just over a third of respondents were between the ages of 45-54, and 45% came from large corporate organisations.



What is your age?



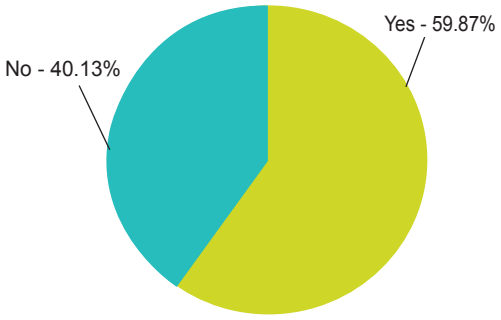
Which sector do you work in?



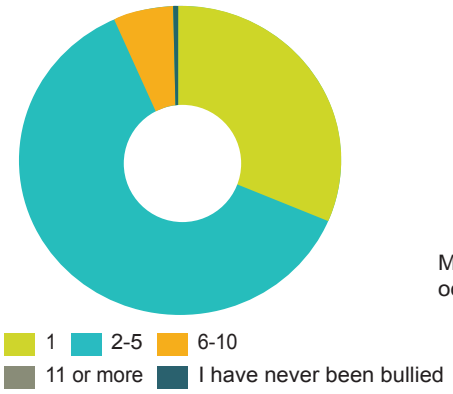
How many years' experience do you have in the Assistant role?

Have you personally experienced workplace bullying during your Assistant career?

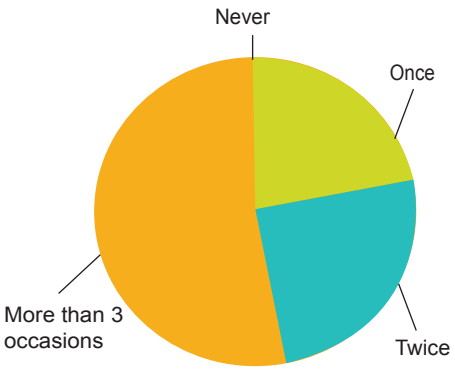
The most important result from the survey may well be the percentage of Administrative Professionals who are being bullied. Almost 60% have been bullied at least once in their career with two thirds of Assistants being bullied more than three times during their career. 67% of respondents were bullied by between 2-5 people



Have you personally experienced workplace bullying during your Assistant career?



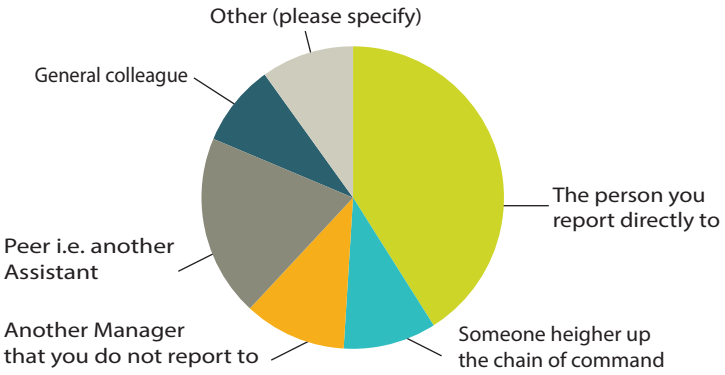
How many different people have bullied you in your career?



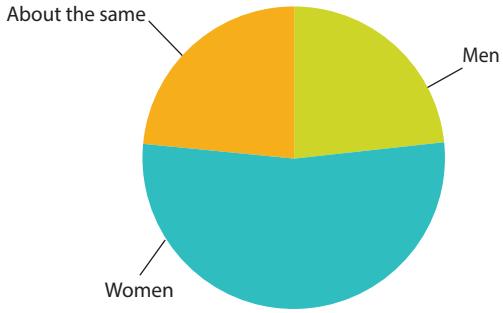
How many times have you experienced bullying during your career?

Who is doing the bullying?

Shockingly but unsurprisingly, our results show that majority of the bullying is being instigated by those abusing the power of their seniority. 41% of respondents were being bullied by the person they reported to directly, and a further 20% were being bullied by another manager or someone senior to them. A further 20% were being bullied by their peers. Our survey also showed women were more than twice as likely to be the bully.

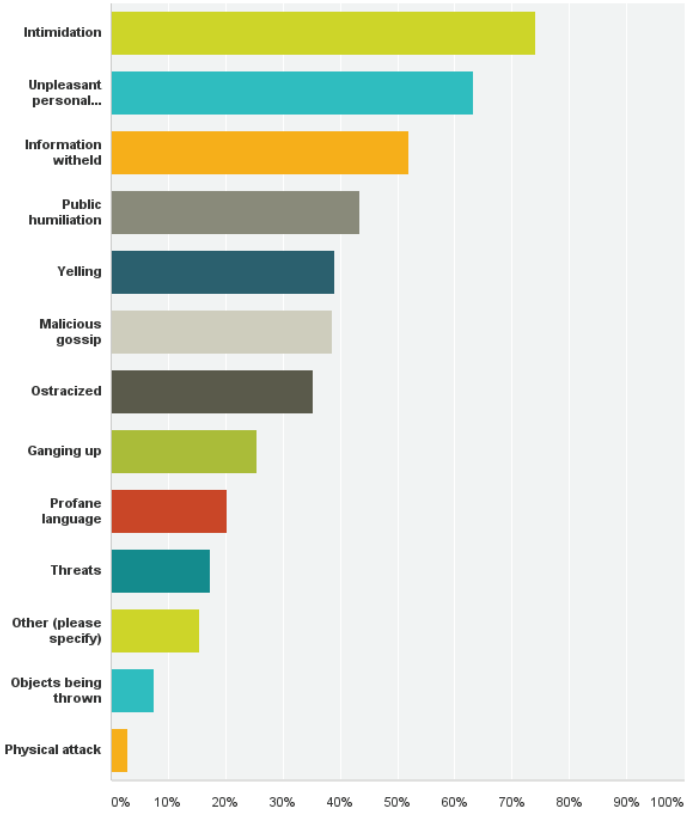


Who has been the main instigator of the bullying which has taken place during your career?



Who has more often been the bully?

What form did the bullying take?



If you have been bullied or harassed, which of the following happened to you?

The problem with bullying in that it can be insidious. Sometimes you can't put your finger on what is happening, and taking things in isolation, incidents can seem insignificant when reported separately. But taken together, over a period of time, a picture emerges.

Our results show that almost three quarters of our respondents felt they had suffered intimidation with 63% experiencing unpleasant personal remarks. Undermining the victim appears to be one of the prime tools of the bully with information being withheld, public humiliation, being ostracised and malicious gossip all appearing high on the list.

And most worryingly, verbal and physical aggression is apparent with 20% experiencing profane language, 17% finding themselves on the receiving end of threats, 7% having objects thrown at them and 3% actually being physically attacked.

It was never one big incident, but a series of small actions daily in the way I was treated by my boss and my colleague that belittled me as a person and the work I did for them.

She admitted, and laughed as telling me, that she lied to two MDs about me.

Given the silent treatment. Shaking of the head in a condescending way. A raised voice saying their disapproval.

Non verbal non physical aggression. I can just feel them getting angrier by their silence and facial expressions.

Attacked all aspects of my life, professional and personal and tried to get me. sacked.

Small, constant criticisms, telling you how to do your job, undermining you in front of other colleagues. An accumulation of small things that are insignificant in themselves but build up over time.

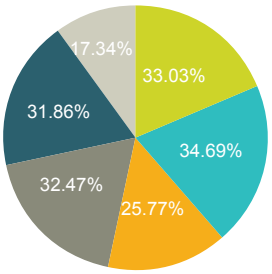
Unreasonable demands and timeframes, piling on work when already. stretched.

Other Assistants actively encouraged to tell tales on anything they didn't like about the way I worked.

Personal property damaged.

What did you do about it?

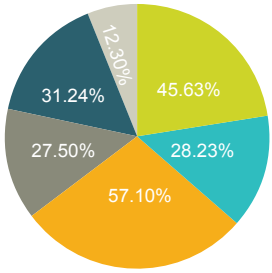
We asked our respondents whether they had ever spoken up or taken action against someone who bullied them. 60% had done so and they took the following action.



Answer Choices	Responses
Met/spoke directly with bully and made them aware of their actions	34.69%
Followed company policy and grievance process/procedures – via HR department	33.03%
Spoke to my Executive	32.47%
Spoke to another senior member of staff	31.86%
Confided in another colleague and took direct action from advice they gave me	25.77%
Other (please specify)	17.34%
Total Respondents: 1,626	

If you took action, what action did you take?

The 40% that hadn't spoken up gave the following reasons for not taking action



Answer Choices	Responses
It could have made my working situation worse for me	57.10%
The bully was my direct manager	45.63%
I was too uncomfortable	31.24%
I did not think it would be believed or taken seriously	28.23%
I was afraid of getting fired	27.50%
N/A	12.30%
Total Respondents: 1,098	

If you did not take action why did you not take action/speak up?

Other comments from respondents to this question included:

I felt so low and it was only later that I learnt the behaviour is classified as bullying.

Lacked confidence to do so.

I knew that people were aware of the situation but nothing was being done about it. I thought it would cause more hassle than it was worth.

He was a serial bully and bullied many people in the organisation. Because he was one of the owners, no-one challenged him and just accepted it as his normal behaviour.

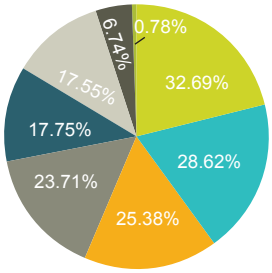
Other managers said it would be my word against hers. They have since said that they were all behind me.....too far to see them at the time!

Our HR department remit was to support the management.

What did your business do about it?

Worryingly, when our respondents gathered courage to speak up, the most common response (33%) was that their complaint was ignored completely and 26% found the situation turned back on them, which made them feel even more vulnerable.

Whilst it is noted that 29% of our respondents' businesses DID then speak to the bully about the situation, it is concerning that only 7% of the perpetrators had disciplinary action taken against them and only 1% were suspended whilst an investigation took place.



Answer Choices	Responses
Ignored It completely	32.69%
Spoke to the person concerned	28.62%
Turned the situation back on you, so you felt even more vulnerable	25.38%
Other /Commend (please specify)	23.71%
N/A	17.75%
Consulted With HR	17.55%
Took disciplinary action against the person concerned	6.74%
Suspended the member of staff whilst an investigation took place	0.78%
Total Respondents: 1,915	

When your company became aware of the issue, did they do any of the following?

Our respondents told us

They asked me what I would like to do about it. When feeling vulnerable and threatened I just said to leave it and I would keep my distance. The Manager should have informed me it was now being dealt with in accordance with our Anti-Bullying policy - I should not have been given the choice as I believe they knew I would say to let it drop.

They called it a clash of personalities.

At my request they did not approach the individual for fear of the repercussions of them being approached about their behaviour. Looking back on it, I wish I had not done this. The situation would have been resolved a lot quicker!

Constructive advice on how to manage the situation was offered.

Ignored it, didn't deal with grievance in timely manner. Solicitor involved and ended up paying me off.

I was told it had been addressed and to advise them of any further bullying. Unsure how it had been addressed, wasn't told but the guy wasn't at the company 8 weeks after that. I only felt confident to speak up as had been with the company for almost 10 years already (and his direct sales team had already been complaining 18 months prior to me making a complaint).

I was made 'redundant' before it could be addressed.

How did you feel about the way it was handled?

We asked our audience whether they were satisfied with the outcome of any investigation conducted on behalf following their report? 66% told us that they were not.

I felt that at the end, the manager got away with it and although they left the organisation, my colleague was left feeling that no apology had been made, that the person left with a pay off and reference. I feel that she was totally unsupported throughout the process by HR and management.

Was swept under the carpet and made to feel it was me being overly sensitive.

The company supported the fee earner and my claim was not upheld.

The outcome resulted in HR/management trying to mask what had happened and to just keep it quiet for the sake of the business rather than my wellbeing.

No action was taken apart from to move me to another office, leaving new members of staff open to bullying from the same person.

Made to feel like I was trouble making even though I was helping someone else out. Basically the management didn't know how to handle the situation.

I was given an ultimatum of get on with it or leave.

Interestingly, when asked whether having complained, their business offered any form of professional support, 84% said that their business did not offer any and of the 16% that did offer support, 69% did not suggest any action against the perpetrator.

It is worrying that 75% of our respondents told us that their companies did have a code of conduct policy on workplace bullying, and the processes to undertake should they need to report bullying, but our results showed that in the majority of cases, these policies and processes are not being implemented.

This is a key finding of our survey and employers would do well to act to ensure that there is professional support and a process that is followed for those that report being bullied.

What help were you offered?

Of those that were offered help

- 32% received help from their company's Employment Assistance Programme,
- 22% went to their GP,
- 23% saw a counsellor and
- 9% visited a psychiatrist.

My Manager listened and always asked what he should do and how did I want him to deal with it. The point is when you are being bullied you can't deal with it yourself.

Sort of supported but not fully. Restorative Justice meeting was proposed and held but not chaired by an independent person. I reported outcome to Senior Colleague and no further action was taken by anyone.

They helped me find a new role.

They offered to send me on a course to deal with stress as if I'd brought the whole situation on myself.

I met with a coach to teach me skills to cope with conflict resolution and deflecting aggressive behavior.

I had to go off work due to stress. The company then arranged counselling where I described the bullying which re-built my confidence enough to return to work.

The last time I got ill with depression and was out on sick leave for 6 months - my job was about to move to another location so they had to offer redundancy which I took - bridging it with garden leave until the official redundancy date.

In addition, only 18% of the companies surveyed offered any kind of coaching or education for bullies.

The Human Cost of Bullying

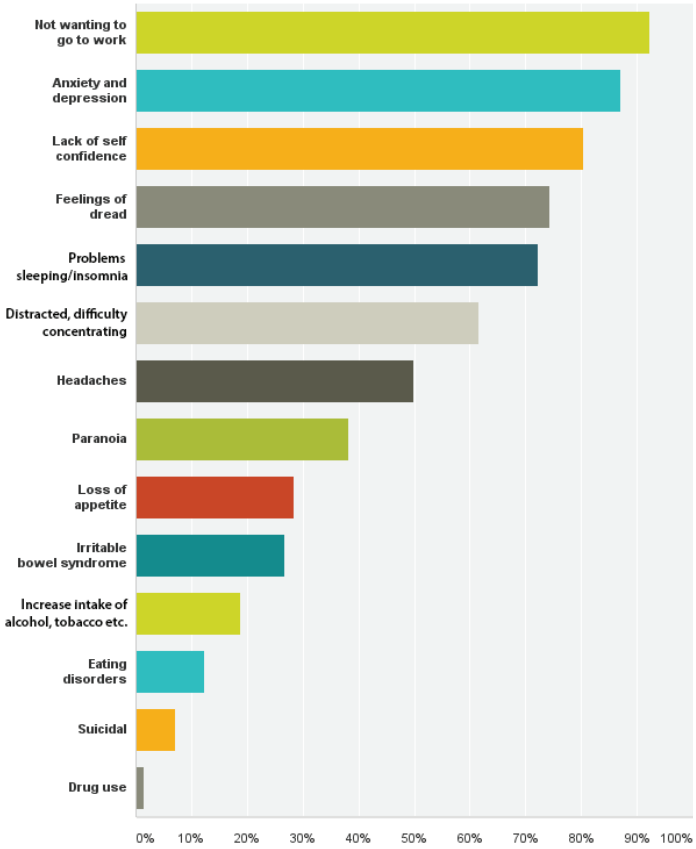
According to Supportline, "Bullying in the workplace can place an intolerable strain on the emotional and physical health and well-being of an employee who is subjected to bullying by an employer or colleague at work.

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, if you are being bullied at work you might:

- be less active or successful
- be less confident in your work
- feel scared, stressed, anxious or depressed
- have your life outside of work affected, e.g. study, relationships
- want to stay away from work
- feel like you can't trust your employer or the people who you work with
- lack confidence and happiness about yourself and your work
- have physical signs of stress like headaches, backaches, sleep problems.

This can cause loss of confidence, loss of self esteem, tiredness, an inability to sleep, lack of appetite, panic attacks, depression and a dread of going to work."

The ACAS report states: "Bullying and harassment can make someone feel anxious and humiliated. Feelings of anger and frustration at being unable to cope may be triggered. Some people may try to retaliate in some way. Others may become frightened and de-motivated. Stress, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem caused by harassment or bullying can lead to job insecurity, illness, absence from work, and even resignation. Almost always job performance is affected and relations in the workplace suffer."



Our research bears this out with

- 44% of our respondents having taken time sick leave as a direct result of bullying,
- 22% for between one week to a month,
- 12% for more than a month and
- 4% for more than 6 months.

41% of these were signed off by a doctor. Just 13% of our employees were offered a support process for when they returned to work after sick leave.

In terms of physical and emotional wellbeing, Assistants found themselves affected in the following ways:

A massive 92% didn't want to go to work, with 74% experiencing feelings of dread and 61% saying they had difficulty concentrating at work.

In terms of health, both physical and mental, it is disturbing but not surprising that 87% experienced anxiety or depression, 72% reported insomnia, and the bullying contributed directly to increased use of alcohol, tobacco & drugs, to eating disorders, to irritable bowel syndrome and, in the case of 7% of our respondents, to suicidal thoughts.

I would frequently get terrible nausea mid-morning on Mondays where I would retch for hours and often would have to go home for the rest of the day.

I was pregnant I ended up miscarrying my baby - very traumatic. After that I never went back into work.

Jumpy and when I moved roles, I still questioned my professional judgement in simple matters.

I developed shingles. My personal relationships also suffered and I became quite withdrawn.

Stress induced stomach ulcer.

Affected my ability to be a good Mum to my young son.

Shaking, wanting to cry whilst at work/ crying whilst at work.

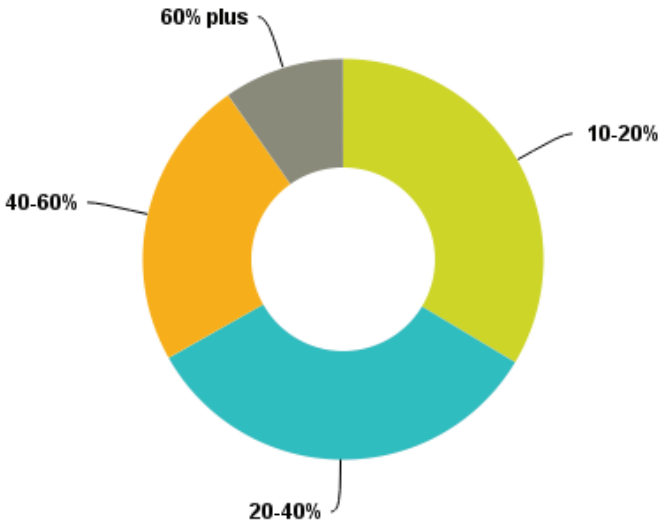
Stress

The stress felt by those being bullied cannot be underestimated. When asked "on a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being minimal and 5 being extreme), how stressed did you feel when experiencing bullying?" the average was 4.26.

A recent study in Norway showed victims of bullying can also exhibit long-term symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The effect on productivity

85% felt that their productivity dropped whilst they were being bullied by the following percentages.



By how much did your productivity levels drop?

Any drop in productivity will have a direct impact on a company's bottom line.

Research by the Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform estimated the economy-wide aggregate costs of bullying-related absenteeism, turnover and lost productivity in 2007 as £13.75billion and a 1.5 per cent reduction in overall UK productivity - equating to a financial impact on GDP of approximately £17.65billion (Giga et al (2008) The Costs of Workplace Bullying, Unite/Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform, London).

The effect on other members of staff

The Workplace Bullying Institute tells us that colleagues experience the following:

Fear

"One might agree that we would like to think we all would jump up to help our bullied friends when they emerge from a closed-door meeting obviously slump shouldered and defeated after 30 min. of denigration and humiliation. We don't. The research shows it. The extensive literature on the bystander effect demonstrates that all generations of witnesses to emergencies and crises do little to help.

The reasons are varied for not intervening, of not helping more than is done. The reasons are all related to the "F word" — fear. Fear of being the next target; fear of not helping correctly and botching it; fear of being the only one from a group to act; fear of retaliation by the bully; fear of loss of one's job and income.

Thus, for coworkers as well as targets themselves, the workplace becomes a fear-plagued environment. Employers should hate this because it freezes everyone. When too afraid to act, workers are also rendered less capable of being productive.

Guilt

Coworkers with a strong sense of duty or responsibility to help others in need may feel personal guilt of having not taken immediate helpful action. Coworker guilt revolves around their behavior or lack thereof; shame, a sense of personal worthlessness, is the primary emotion felt by targets. Guilt can gnaw at coworkers and erode their confidence over time.

Depression & Trauma

The vicarious experience of bullying, as lived by witnessing coworkers, has been shown to trigger the same emotional injuries as experienced by individuals directly bullied. Witnesses suffer anxiety, depression and, in worst cases, PTSD-like symptoms of trauma. Depressed coworkers have sleep problems (disorders involving difficulty falling asleep and sleep of shorter duration with reduced REM time) just like targets who manifest sleep disorders, according to recent research. Depressed workers have trouble concentrating. Bullies falsely claim that their targets are stupid. Over time, with prolonged exposure to stress, anyone's ability to memorize new things or to retrieve facts, can be impaired. Thus, the stress response that accompanies depression tends to make the bullies lie appear true to the naive observer or investigator.

Trauma symptoms include intrusive negative fearful thoughts at inopportune times that interfere with normal cognition. Flashbacks and replaying of horrific incidents invade routine days and nights. A sense of apprehension over future negative events — hypervigilance — leads traumatized individuals to lash out at others with anger or suspended living waiting for the "other shoe to drop." Finally, trauma leads to avoidance behaviour people can no longer approach locations, tasks and people who remind them of their traumitising incidents. Bullies are the human source of work trauma. It is trauma by intentional human design, unlike PTSD from surviving natural disasters and accidents. The severity of trauma from personalised assaults is stronger than for trauma from impersonal events.

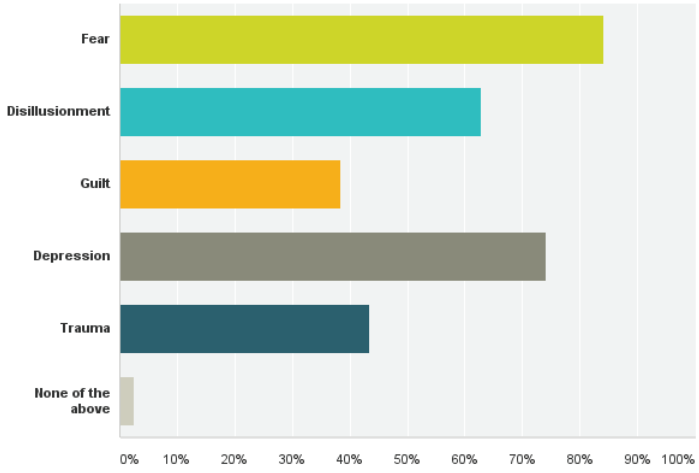
Disillusionment

As stated above, group members who betrayed the target within their team, inflicted wounds on themselves by depriving themselves of satisfying the strong inclusionary need.

In other ways, the witnessing of the abuse of the target speaks volumes about employer credibility. There is always lofty language in the company statements about its mission, vision and values. Phrases such as "Respect for all individuals," "Dignity for all," "We care about everyone" are proudly printed, framed and hung in prominent places throughout the building. Unfortunately for most employers, those phrases ring hollow.

The employer's response to bullying is a litmus test of its ethicality. If the bullied target is persecuted but no action is ever taken to stop the bully and the target is most likely disappeared, then witnessing coworkers see that their employer is not honest. Dishonest unethical employers do not bother to provide safe workplaces. Coworkers start to fear for their own safety if such horrific treatment of the target was possible. Time to look for a job elsewhere."

Our results support this insight.



What do you think the impact of workplace bullying is on co-workers?

I think it's distressing to see someone else being bullied more than anything and ultimately creates a bad working atmosphere that no one enjoys working in. No one wants to stay long term in a work place that makes you unhappy.

It makes good people leave bad organisations, which is what I did. Another person was due to come into our team as an Assistant and refused when she saw what I had to deal with - she had the right idea. I ended up leaving a very good organisation because of my manager and other team members.

Creates a toxic work environment, particularly in a small office. There is no escape and it has made some good staff leave the company.

If a person is being bullied and everyone knows it, if you do nothing there is shame and guilt involved at not intervening and fear that if you do intervene you will be next. There can be huge trauma to the victim involved. The company will also ultimately suffer as I have found over the years that those who bully are normally lazy or mediocre in respect to their intellect and abilities. They tend to try and isolate and pick on colleagues who are intelligent and successful or those they perceive as being vulnerable or sensitive. Bottom line, it is in a company's interests to stop bullying as they will eventually lose all valuable staff and be left with the dregs.

Lack of motivation and productivity not only on the person being bullied but also those around them. Bullying is a complex matter and as such people don't want to get involved for fear of it impacting on them and affecting their career. If people are happy at work they perform better so I cannot understand why people would want to encourage a culture of bullying. It is far too common place and has a very negative affect on teams morale and productivity. It also impacts on turnover of staff.

What can Employers do better to support Assistants with Workplace Bullying?

There were 1,629 answers to this question. Here is a selection:

More information needs to be available to Assistants on how to avoid and combat workplace bullying, and report it. Bullies need to be held to account. More training needs to be provided.

Instead of protecting the bully by offering compromise agreements to the victim (which is a way of keeping the fee earner and eliminating the problem) that they should consider all employees equal in any investigation. The outcome should always favour the victim and the bully should be fired for gross misconduct, regardless of status.

Have an absolute ZERO TOLERANCE policy. Any matters of reported bullying or suggested bullying will automatically fall under Policy and will be dealt with. There should be serious consequences. No second chances!

Good regular supervision, mentoring and buddying so that assistants have the confidence and feel secure enough to speak up rather than suffer in silence.

It is all about fostering a respectful environment - if our job was respected and understood then I think the bullying levels would drop.

Provide constructive support from external professionals and training to help deal with bullying. Provide the same to the offending colleagues to realise the impact of behaviours.

The Assistants should know without the shadow of a doubt that, should there be bullying, the right thing to do is to report it. There should be no fear about doing so. Silence is what allows it to go on.

Have a proper procedure in place to deal with such events sensitively and confidentially, including the option to report people anonymously.

Develop a culture that makes it unacceptable.

Just because I am an Assistant please don't think I am not intelligent! Treat me as an equal.

Not treat it as 'hearsay' or a clash of personalities. Provide 3rd party impartial input into accusations from both sides.

Gain a better understanding about the role of an Assistant and how they can support the management team. Stop 'dumbing down' the role and see it as an important job. Develop the role within the organisation.

Stop paying lip service to harassment policies and then not disciplining the guilty party because they are part of the inner circle of management.

360 degree reviews for managers so they become aware of their behaviour on others. Management training.

Listen and take any complaints seriously.

Encourage people to speak up and act on it regardless of the bully's job title!

Provide a whistle-blowing facility.

Awareness training. We have diversity training but no guidance as to what constitutes bullying.

Assistants are often seen as lower level, not intelligent enough to be integrated as significant members of the management team. I think there needs to be better education from the top down and a leadership team who recognises the importance of the impact of their behaviours and should promote open, honest, and nurturing environments in which to encourage their workforce to flourish.

More respect, acceptance, support. Don't take admins for granted. Treat us respectfully.

Identify the problem differently from harassment and include it in the required harassment training. Threats around job performance or negatively delivered feedback disguised as coaching should be called out.

Educate employees and reinforce the steps that can be taken to prevent. It's important for leaders to model the desired behaviours and not just spit out policies.

Before anything can be done, employers need to fully understand the unique relationship between Assistant and Boss/Line Manager.

Stop using stupid excuses not to deal with the bully - like the victim is too sensitive or clash of personalities.

Have consequences for the bully.

Managers & Executives should be held accountable.

Take the matter seriously. Train managers how to actually manage. Train leaders to lead.

Make it more known and not something that should be hidden.

Offer coaching and courses.

Take it seriously or lose a valued employee. The response "it can happen anywhere" is not acceptable.

Give the Assistant role it's due respect in the workplace.

Bullying and the Law

The legislation and advice covering workplace bullying varies from country to country. Here are a few examples:

In the UK, bullying is not against the law. Harassment is, but harassment is defined in law to occur when the unwanted behaviour is related to one of the following:

- age
- sex
- disability
- gender (including gender reassignment)
- marriage and civil partnership
- pregnancy and maternity
- race
- religion or belief
- sexual orientation"

At the moment in the UK, therefore, no non-discriminatory form of bullying is illegal. (http://bit.ly/1eS1By7)

In the US, although bullying is not against the law, nearly 30 states and 2 Territories have introduced some version of anti-bullying legislation call The Healthy Workplace Bill, supported by the Workplace Bullying Institute (http://bit.ly/1oSMi1v).

In Australia, employers have a legal responsibility under Occupational Health and Safety and anti-discrimination law to provide a safe workplace. Employers have a duty of care for health and wellbeing whilst at work. An employer that allows bullying to occur in the workplace is not meeting this responsibility. (http://bit.ly/2rAtxpb)

To date, few Canadian jurisdictions have occupational health and safety legislation that is specific to bullying. However, almost all jurisdictions have legislation specific to workplace violence and/or harassment. Where there is no legislation which specifically addressed bullying, the general duty clause establishes the duty of employers to protect employees from risks at work. These risks can include harm from both physical and mental health aspects. In addition, federal and provincial human right laws prohibit harassment related to race, national or ethnic origin, colour,

religion, age, sex, marital status, family status, disability, pardoned conviction, or sexual orientation. In certain situations, these laws may apply to bullying. (http://bit.ly/21fYmMT)

In Ireland, the Health and Safety Authority provides a code of practice, (under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005), which is aimed at preventing and dealing with bullying where is happens in Irish workplaces. It is code for both employers and employees. (http://bit.ly/2qWvmcY).

In New Zealand, bullying complaints may be dealt with by different Government bodies depending on the circumstances. There is a range of legislation and external help available depending upon what type of bullying occurs. Worksafe.govt.nz provides a bullying prevention toolbox with good practice guides, templates and scenarios (http://bit.ly/2rLm05l)

Conclusion

Let's recap the key points:

- 60% of Asssistants have been bullied at least once, with 67% of these being bullied more than three times at least once in their career.
- 41% were being bullied by the person they reported to, which points to a need for management training in how to effectively motivate without abusing power and trust.
- Women were more than twice as likely to be the bullies.
- The bullying takes many forms, with intimidation, unpleasant personal remarks and information being withheld topping our list. But worryingly, verbal and physical aggression is also apparent, with 20% experiencing profane language, 17% finding themselves on the receiving end of threats, 7% having had things thrown at them and 3% being physically attacked.
- 66% of those that complained told us they were not happy with the way their complaint was handled.
- Worryingly, when our respondents gathered courage to speak up, 33% found their complaint was ignored completely whilst 26% found the situation turned back on them, making them feel more vulnerable. To tackle bullying as an issue, we absolutely must provide a safe environment in which people being bullied can speak up without fear of recrimination and where they know that action will be taken.
- 84% said their businesses did not offer any form of professional support and 69% did not suggest any action be taken against the perpetrator.
- Although 75% of our respondents told us that their companies have a Code of Conduct, an anti-bullying policy and processes in place, it is clear from our findings that these are not being implemented in the majority of cases.
- The cost to businesses is clear, with 44% of our respondents having taken sick leave as a direct result of bullying; 12% for more than a month. 92% didn't want to go to work, 74% experienced feelings of dread and 61% had difficulty concentrating.
- The physical and mental toll were enormous with 87% experiencing anxiety or depression, 72% reported insomnia and in the case of 7% the bullying led to suicidal thoughts.
- 85% felt that their productivity dropped and 24% said their productivity dropped by over 40%.
- On a scale of 1-5 (with 1 being minimal and 5 being extreme) respondents reported an average stress factor of 4.26 when being bullied.
- Only 12% were offered a support process when they returned to work.
- The impact of workplace bullying on co-workers was also clear with 84% feeling fear, 63% disillusionment and 74% depression.
- A massive 84% would like to see a specific anti-bullying law to protect employees against bullying.

Our findings make clear the huge costs of bullying for businesses in terms of bullying related absenteeism and productivity. Not to mention the personal cost to health - both physical and mental, not only to the victims but also to co-workers.

Businesses need to stop paying lip service and start implementing their Codes of Conduct and policies on bullying.

Recommendations to Help Combat Bullying Behaviour

WRITER
CAROLE SPIERS

Possible actions available to those currently experiencing bullying behaviour

Individual

- Understand that bullying behaviour is always unacceptable
- Learn how you can confront the bully
- Know how to approach the bully's immediate superior
- Appreciate how to actively request support, when needed
- Contact HR or Occupational Health to discuss what action can be taken
- Talk to your colleagues – they may be experiencing the same problem
- Keep a diary of events. Keep copies of emails and/or social media messages that represent bullying behaviour
- Involve a trade union
- Make a formal written complaint
- Request a sideways move to another department
- As a last resort, look for alternative employment elsewhere

Actions Available to the Organisation

- Introduce clear bullying and harassment policies and ensure that everyone is aware of them by publishing them in all departments. Make sure all policies are part of the culture, vision and values of the organisation
- Train HR to recognise signs and symptoms of stress and workplace bullying
- Commitment needs to come from the top: The C-suite team need to say, very clearly, that bullying behaviour at any level is unacceptable
- Ensure that all employees are fully aware that bullying behaviour could lead to dismissal
- Train managers to actively watch and listen for a change in atmosphere among staff – when cheerfulness turns to silence; when productivity inexplicably falls or when absenteeism rises
- Carry out a stress / culture audit to identify problem areas and 'hot spots'
- Introduce agenda-free meetings to provide a platform for troubled staff to diffuse
- Focus on soft-skill development: Train all staff in how to treat individuals with dignity and respect
- Adopt a holistic approach to bullying that is problem-solving and not punitive
- Undertake a formal investigation
- Introduce in-house counselling support teams
- During 'exit interviews', include the specific question 'Have you ever experienced bullying within this organisation'

Executive Secretary

MAGAZINE

ABOUT EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

Executive Secretary is the industry's leading publication for Assistants globally. Subscribing is not like purchasing a normal magazine – there is no advertising, fluffy information or venue features.

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Founder & CEO, Lucy Brazier is one of the leading experts globally on the role of Assistant. She campaigns tirelessly for increased recognition of the profession and more training investment for administrative professionals. In 2016, Lucy spoke at over 180 events across 33 countries.

Her continuous roadshows ensure that we have our finger on the pulse when it comes to understanding what training and development you need.

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ABOUT CAROLE SPIERS

Carole's credibility is rooted in twenty years' success as CEO of the UK's leading consultancy on Stress Management & Wellbeing. Through their proven stress management initiatives and nationwide employee counselling service, the Carole Spiers Group shows companies how they can profit from a healthy workplace culture and increase profitability by developing personal resilience to minimise the risk of stress.

Her charismatic style of combining inspiration with insight has made Carole a sought-after international keynote speaker working with equal success in the contrasting cultures of the UK and the Gulf region where she deliver keynotes addresses to many conference and seminars.

In the UK, she launched National Stress Awareness day on behalf of the International Stress Management Association, a mental health charity and professional association, of which she is the current Chair. Carole is also Past President of the London Chapter of the Professional Speaking Association.

Carole says, *'We need to speak up and speak out about bullying behaviour and stamp it out once and for all. For strategies on what action you can take, contact us to receive our complimentary Special Report: 'Uncovering the Real Costs of Workplace Bullying'.*

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ABOUT BONNIE LOW-KRAMEN

Audiences find her refreshing, entertaining and inspiring. Students are empowered by her intelligence, generosity, and passion. Readers can't put the book down.

With honesty and humor, Bonnie Low-Kramen pulls the curtain back on a career that is glamorized and misunderstood. For 25 years, Bonnie worked in show business as the Personal Assistant to actors Olympia Dukakis and Louis Zorich. One of her biggest accomplishments was surviving 1988 which was the year Olympia won the Oscar for Moonstruck, Michael Dukakis ran for the presidency, and Bonnie gave birth to her son Adam… and all without a computer or a cell phone.

Seeing there were so few resources for Assistants, she authored the bestselling book, "Be the Ultimate Assistant: A celebrity assistant's secrets to working with any high-powered employer". Her articles on workplace issues affecting professional Assistants are widely published. Bonnie is a co-founder of the Professional Association New York Celebrity Assistants (NYCA) and works to build positive collaborations and networks between Assistants around the world.

Bonnie Low-Kramen is one of the most respected voices in the industry. Never one to shy away from the difficult issues that need discussing, Bonnie's gift is to get Assistants attending her sessions to open up, talk and share their knowledge with their peers. Her style of teaching is interactive, inspirational and a call to action that changes lives.

Find out more about Bonnie at
http://www.bonnielowkramen.com/