

# Shared Responsibility Approach: How to resolve bullying in three steps

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## Abstract

*Bullying confronts HR managers with a lot of complexity. It's often unclear who is involved, what it is all about, and what really happened. In this article we introduce the Shared Responsibility Approach as one of the most efficient tools to stop bullying at the workplace. This method is straightforward and rather easy to use. It is resolution focused and structured in three simple steps of action.*

## Introduction

Bullying in the workplace is rediscovered by the media at regular intervals. This proves that the topic is of great relevance. There is an obvious demand for practical intervention concepts. However, professional training is rather seldom desired.

We observe great reluctance and caution from HR in companies, public authorities and in other organisations. This fact makes one think, since especially and foremost those executives are the ones who have the responsibility to intervene.

We have identified several reasons why conflict situations which might carry the label 'bullying' are met with great reserve by most people with responsibility for personnel:

- On first sight the situation seems non-transparent and complex.
- It is uncertain whether or not it actually is a case of bullying.

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- Often the actions in question take place within a legal grey area because bullying is covertly performed and therefore difficult to prove.
- There is a danger of escalating the situation through premature attribution of roles like victim, culprit, bystander etc. as well as through accusing one another.
- Often the management finds itself confronted by allegations of leadership failure or managers often associate bullying with personal failure and guilt.
- A further difficulty is that the established intervention methods in bullying cases such as conflict moderation, mediation, supervision, organisational measures and legal interventions or sanctions rarely lead to the hoped-for satisfactory results for all parties involved.

Bullying situations require fast and decisive actions from HR managers in order to avoid damage for the entire organisation. The one crucial factor for a real change in the situation is a true interest in ending the bullying.

Bullying is basically a conflict with special characteristics, but with commitment and willingness towards open and honest conflict resolution every case is solvable. A sound basis for an effective intervention is to abandon the view of bullying as failure of HR policy or leadership. Constantly directing the attention on failure and blame can get in the way of the process and will tie down valuable energies needed for the process.

Over the last few years a lot has been achieved on the subject of bullying prevention. However, if prevention work is not followed up by preparing for the case of a bullying emergency, the management will be more or less helpless. They will be unable to act when push comes to shove because they are not familiar with the necessary tools for a constructive resolution.

Therefore, we developed a resolution and resource-orientated approach with the aim of ending bullying in a human atmosphere and re-establishing a good and fruitful work climate.

## **Shared Responsibility Approach**

The Shared Responsibility Approach (SRA) is grounded in the No Blame Approach (NBA), developed by Barbara Maines and George Robinson in the 1980s in England. It has been implemented and successfully used in Switzerland, in the Benelux-countries, and in Germany for stopping bullying in schools. As with the NBA, the SRA focuses on solutions instead of allocations of blame. It can effectively change seemingly hopeless situations and will provide new chances for everyone.

What distinguishes this approach from other established intervention strategies? The following aspects are new:

- a time-consuming cause study and account of past events is not necessary;
- allocation of blame and the threat of sanctions are dispensed with;
- the sole focus is directed at the search for a resolution of this particular problem;
- not only the alleged bullying participants but also colleagues who are not directly part of the problem are included in the process.

### **Many participants – many diverse roles**

Most astonishing might be the inclusion of the bullying ‘culprits’ and ‘bystanders’ themselves. They are quite deliberately not being addressed as people in any negative role but rather asked to assist the process as ‘experts’. Since allocation of blame and sanctions are out of bounds, it won’t be necessary to waste time with soul searching and justification. The persons concerned are invited to open up and contribute suggestions from a neutral position within a support group. This frequently leads to noticeable relief and first positive changes on their side.

The person affected by bullying is only included in the first step of the intervention. No special activities are demanded from her or him. For them it is a great relief not to be obliged

to actively contribute to the process and not to be confronted with the bullies.

### **How to work with the SRA in three intervention steps**

The implementation of the SRA is carried out in three chronological steps.

**Step 1:** Conversation with the person affected by bullying.

**Step 2:** Establishing a support group and having a conversation with this group.

**Step 3:** Follow-up conversations with everyone involved.

#### **Case example:**

*The team on the shop floor of a chemical company experience difficulties more and more often. Mrs. B. is newly assigned into a team that up to now consisted entirely of men. First she experiences polite attention. But after a while she notices a change in attitude of her colleagues towards her. Conversations become shorter and once in a while there are none of the usual 'good-mornings'.*

*At first Mrs. B. doesn't think of this as being of great significance. But her colleagues ignore her more and more. Hardly anyone keeps her company at the table in the canteen any more. Discussions take place without her. Derogatory remarks are made. Information is withheld, given too late, or given in parts only. Documents are wrongly filed or hidden from her.*

*Eventually several colleagues complain about her to the floor manager and claim Mrs. B.'s work was of poor quality and she was unreliable. After about nine months Mrs. B. starts to suffer from insomnia and anxiety. Her sick-days build up. Mrs. B. seeks advice about the incidents from a trusted person within the works council.*

## **First step: A conversation with the person affected by bullying**

The intervention starts with a conversation with the affected person. The strategy of the SRA will be explained and consent needs to be agreed for the following steps. It will be established which people are contributing to the difficult situation. As important is to learn which colleagues are kind and supportive. However, details about the bullying events will not be discussed. The latter are of no importance for the process.

*For Mrs. B. the situation develops as follows:*

*First she went to see the works council and asked for help. With her consent her manager was informed. He consulted the personnel office and it was agreed to intervene with the aid of the SRA. A short time after that her manager invites Mrs. B. to a confidential talk about her situation. Mrs. B. is grateful for the help and glad that an open confrontation is not necessary because the manager wants to speak with her colleagues himself about possible changes. She feels relieved since the situation has left her with low self-esteem. And she is delighted to hear that the aim is to solve the problem rather than forcing her to denounce individual colleagues. She fears that otherwise things would get worse and she would be hated even more. That her manager takes control now puts Mrs. B. at ease. This approach creates trust and confidence and hope for a brighter future. The next meeting is agreed within a fortnight's time to find out whether there have been any changes.*

## **Second step: conversation with the support group**

The focal point of the approach is the support group. This group is supposed to support the manager and to carry responsibility for resolving the bullying situation. The initial talk with the person affected helps to find the right members for this group. The group should consist of 50% of the alleged bullying 'culprits' and 50% of colleagues with an impartial or positive relationship with the person affected.

The crucial elements of this conversation:

Naming the problem. The chair of the meeting outlines the bullying situation without accusations or blame. Instead it is stated that the situation is untenable and change is needed and that the invited colleagues are trusted to contribute vitally to the outcome.

Ideas for change:

Further into the conversation the participants will be asked to collect ideas of what individual colleagues could do to improve work life for the affected person. Each one of them is asked which one of these ideas he or she would take on.

*Back to Mrs. B., our example case:*

*After the manager has spoken with Mrs. B. six other colleagues from the team are invited to a meeting. Three of them are alleged bullies.*

*This support group meeting is chaired by the responsible manager and one works council member. They inform the group that Mrs. B. is unhappy in her new work place and with the team spirit. Also that Mrs. B. is off sick more and more often and that the general impression is that the work climate in the department is rather tense. Details are not mentioned. Instead the manager emphasises that the welfare of each and every member of staff is extremely important to him and that his main concern is to cultivate a work climate where everyone can feel well and safe.*

*The manager explains that he invited them to this meeting because he needs the help and support of the colleagues in order to improve the situation for Mrs. B. He stresses that he won't be able to take care of the situation on his own and pleads for help to develop possibilities and steps together to find ways for a good outcome for everyone.*

*Neither the manager nor the works council member puts any blame whatsoever on anyone.*

*The manager asks his employees to suggest ideas of what could be done in order to help Mrs. B.'s wellbeing within the team. They collect possible actions each person could take on, such as 'seeking to chat with Mrs. B. during breaks more often', 'including Mrs. B. in a new field of work', 'sharing tea breaks', 'asking whether she was interested in car-sharing', 'actively stopping negative gossip about Mrs. B.', ...*

*The manager lets the group know how important it is for him to find out how the situation develops and that he therefore will seek a conversation with each one of them in about two weeks' time.*

### **Third step: Individual follow-up conversations to secure results**

These follow-up conversations take place after between one and two weeks. The first one is held with the person affected by bullying, followed by conversations with each individual member of the support group. These meetings are important for securing the results and stabilising the changes – but never in order to check on the involved employees.

These support team talks are the main contribution towards sustainably ending the bullying case.

#### **Back to the example case:**

*The manager re-invites Mrs. B. The manager hears that Mrs. B.'s health is much better. She reports that most colleagues have changed their attitude. They talk to her more often and even have a laugh with her. However, it is better with some than with others. But she now sees her overall situation positively and realises that one does not have to be best friends with everyone else. She feels greatly relieved that the daily humiliations have stopped and she even comes to work feeling relaxed.*

*The conversations with individual members of the support group confirm Mrs. B.'s report. Furthermore, the colleagues mention a generally positive improvement in the work climate as such. The manager gives thanks to the group for their support.*

If against all odds the situation cannot be improved satisfactorily it is advisable to hold further conversations with the support group. However, in most cases the bullying will stop within the two weeks the process usually takes.

### **Who can use the SRA?**

The SRA can be carried out by any executive, leader, or manager as well as those in a position of trust (works council members, conflict managers, . . .) or responsible for personnel (personnel managers, industrial psychologists, equality officers, . . .)

This approach is easy to learn. Special psychological knowledge is not required. The necessary knowledge and certainty to carry out the approach can be taught in a seminar of one or two days. First the basic techniques of how to administer the conversations are implemented. Then in a proactive session the conversations and possible reactions in different situations are practised with the help of case studies.

The SRA is not a preventative approach. It is used when bullying occurs. Pure prevention work needs different measures.

### **What framework conditions are necessary?**

Certain basic framework conditions are necessary to implement the SRA.

First and foremost and absolutely essential is the distinct commitment of the superior manager wanting to work with the approach. This person needs to make very clear that finding a solution for the unbearable situation is his or her personal concern and that the support of a group of colleagues is needed because as a manager one cannot deal with such complex situations alone. For that a common basis of trust is needed. Of course, the initiator of the intervention process should never be or become part of the problem. It also needs enough colleagues working with the affected person or in the same team in order to form a support group. The SRA does not need

any extensive resources. It is easy to execute with very little hassle and effort.

### **What happens after the use of the SRA?**

During the process it could be discovered that a certain bullying situation is only one symptom of an underlying problem. For this a solution needs to be found after working with the SRA. A successful resolution of the bullying case with this approach creates a favourable climate for finding solutions for other and deeper conflicts. The central idea is to end the bullying first and then to face all other questions and problems.

The SRA is a ground-breaking approach. The gathered practical experience in companies, hospitals, and educational organisations tell us that introducing this method has been effective and most helpful in most cases. Acute bullying has been stopped quickly and sustainably.

Now we can only hope to fascinate more and more supporters and trained users of the SRA in order to encourage better constructive conflict-resolution work in the workplace.

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Further information:

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