
Why me? What have I done?

Do you see staff that, bewilderingly, are being accused of bullying and harassment and seem very unlikely candidates? Are they managers who are keen to keep others happy? Will they normally go out of their way to avoid conflict? How do they end up charged with bullying? Who are the accusers? What is going on for them?

Working in the NHS, we are seeing an interesting and troubling phenomenon where an increasing number of bullying and harassment cases are being brought against experienced managers. Those accused tend to be fifty plus in age and in managerial positions. Often their accusers they are young and keen- staff who are expressing frustration with the inertia of their managers.

So what is happening?

This article will put forward some suggested explanations using theories around

- positional authority
- research around generations X and Y
- links to assertive/non-assertive behaviour

Some background

If we go back 40 years children were raised to respect authority for its own sake. Individuals in senior and specific roles were afforded respect purely by position eg police, teachers, managers and your elders! The title was all that was needed. This generation (X), grew up working hard, hoping to reach a level to engender respect. As children they experienced much time playing with their peers, mainly unsupervised, and learnt skills of collaboration and negotiation through this experience. This hard work ethic was based on reaping the benefits of working your way through the ranks, from colleague to manager.

Children born in the last 20-25 years (generation Y) have had a very different formative experience. Parents have become far more protective (in general) and few children have the freedom to play for extended periods away from their parents. If there are disagreements with their peers it is the culture for parents to

intervene and/or others to resolve for them. Their collaboration and negotiation skills are less well rehearsed. At the same time children are being encouraged to “know their rights” and to demand that they are met. We are celebrating the birth of a “go getting: change focused” younger work force. But to what cost?

What we believe is happening in the teams we observe, is that generation Y individuals have high expectations of what they want, indeed expect from a manager. These expectations are often self focused and do not pay attention to contextual constraints. Thus they can be perceived as unreasonable. Generation Y has learnt it is okay to speak up for what they need. As their experience of negotiation is limited they often are unskilled and can come across as aggressive in their requests rather than assertive which is usually their intent. They appear to assume that respect can only be earned and is not given purely due to position or role. They are seen by older generations as having no respect for authority and thus their unskilled requests are seen as challenges.

Generation X has worked hard to reach management and expects others to respect their positional authority, as they would have respected the authority of their manager's in the past. Particularly within the “caring professions” many managers want to look after their staff, to be liked and to be seen as ultimately supportive. When they receive the challenges from generation Y they are perceived as attack and criticism and they respond with basic fight, flight behavior. Many initially become subdued and less able to make decisions and this inertia may reduce the level of respect from generation Y even further leading to more vocal pushing for change. Eventually the manager (generation X), turns to fight and demands respect “as the manager” usually with great frustration and anger and will push for compliance from generation Y. And then the bullying and harassment grievance is made against the manager.

The manager, who has been challenged “aggressively” for some time, is bewildered and will often make a counter complaint against the member of staff.

Much research has gone into how we develop and encourage generation Y to be our new and upcoming workforce but it strikes us that there is some support needed for their current managers and some development required to enable them to be collaborative managers of the future. Staff at all levels need to

learn how to have powerful conversations that end up win-win and optimise individuals different skills whilst respecting the differences.

This article will draw on case studies and offer ideas which managers can use to address some of these issues before they start costing the organisation time and money.

Sally is a manager of a team of 15 staff who work as a team delivering public health services. Sally has worked in various posts within the Health Authority and is known and respected by many staff over her prolonged period within the Trust. She started within the trust as practitioner and over time has taken on increasing responsibility for management of other staff. She has set this service up from scratch developing processes, procedures and delivery of clinics, health promotion and education. Sally has received management training around task but not about people management. Sally believes in her staff and the job they are doing with a passion and wants to do the right thing by them and the people for whom they deliver a service. Her staff share her passion but also have other ideas about how they could deliver excellence in their service. Many of her team are young and new to the NHS and look to her experience to enable them to deliver a high quality service. Over a period of a year there have been increasing clashes between Sally and her staff particularly around future planning-what do we do next? The staff are challenging the current ways of delivery and what the service is offering. The way this is presented to Sally is as direct challenge to her previous decision making (assertiveness that has swayed towards aggression) and she receives this as direct questioning of her position as leader. Her response to such "fighting talk" from her staff is instinctive fight or flight. Sally does not want to get into conflict with her staff, she wants everyone to be happy so initially her response was to try even harder to please them and to internalise the "criticism". Her staff see this inaction, withdrawal or total compliance as more evidence of weakness in management and it exacerbates their frustration. This in turn leads to more determined challenge which is received as more aggression by Sally.

Eventually Sally can take the attacks no more and she flips into a fight response "I have done everything for you and all you do is demand more...you have no idea....Just do what I say,...I am the manager here" The staff, shocked, on the receiving end, and coming from a generation who know their rights exert

these and complain about Sally's bullying tactics through grievance procedures. A rather bewildered Sally has gone from zero to grievance in one movement. And her response is "But they were bullying me"...and the counter grievance is lodged.

Stuart, once a member of a team who make deliveries, has been promoted from within to now manage it. The manager before Stuart was perceived to have favourites and to be aggressive to many staff. The team was very pleased when Stuart was appointed as they felt he was kind, fair and approachable. Over a period of time the service ticked along "happily" until there were some service changes required and disagreement from within the staff about what this should look like. Stuart needing to be liked and wanting to keep both sides happy agreed with whoever he spoke to. Initially this fuelled the fire between the parties and there was both verbal and physical aggression. Both sides became frustrated with the lack of leadership and came to shift their frustration onto Stuart. Faced with such hostility Stuart made some rapid, strong and firm decisions which were a shock to the staff that reacted defensively to being told what to do. They put in a claim of being bullied against their manager. Stuart was left feeling confused about how he had ended up here after trying so hard to please everyone, and then when he provided the leadership they demanded he was still "in the wrong"

Sound familiar?

There is understanding and development needed in both Generation Y staff and Generation X managers to address this issue. Staff must learn the truth about assertiveness-that it is not defined as getting your own way. The assertive position is win-win where both parties come away feeling listened to, understood, valued and with an agreed way forward. Managers and staff need to see disagreement as healthy and hear it non-defensively. They need to learn how to use the wider idea pool to negotiate and thus find the most robust solutions. The best teams have great differences within them. Both sides must appreciate that a leader cannot and should not have all the answers, but that a team can come pretty close. There needs to be a realisation that the very best leaders of today may not be the best leaders of tomorrow, not through lack of ability or skill but because requirements, ideas and needs are constantly changing and thus we must use the resources of staff at all levels, experience and knowledge. Managers need to learn to

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be brave, to say what they see openly and non-emotionally and to deal with the reactions of the recipient in the same vein. From here the opportunity of open discussion, negotiation and a win-win outcome is great.

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If this connects with your organisation, contact Lynn info@3dcoaching.com or 0845 458 0154 about workshops and facilitation including:

- Understanding Unexplained Grievance
- How to not need mediation
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