Book Review-Bully in the Ivory Tower

Bully in the Ivory Tower by Dr. Leah Hollis is an interesting treatise on the manifestation of workplace bullying in U.S. higher-education administration. I also find it interesting that she built, as a foundation for the book, a body of research covering more than 175 four-year colleges and universities. This extensive work confirmed that workplace bullying occurs at alarming rates in higher education but frankly, bullying cuts across all segments of society at an embarrassingly inhumane level.

In this book Dr. Hollis articulates the high cost of staff disengagement caused by bullying and she eventually puts forth a model for a healthy workplace specifically for higher education, which is also applicable to the general population. The model offers solutions for the leadership and organizational level, middle managers, and the bullies who are seeking healthier management strategies.

While the book is a great analysis of bullying and shares some suggestions on how to handle it in the arena of higher education, I would have loved to have seen Dr. Hollis spend some time examining the potential for her ideas in other segments of society. That said this book is worthwhile reading for anyone interested in understanding bullying and all of its ugliness.

Bullying is a vicious form of aggressive behavior that is intentional, hurtful, (physical and psychological), and/or threatening and persistent (repeated). There is an imbalance of strength (power and dominance). It should never be allowed to exist in higher education or anywhere else in a civilized society.

The disgraceful ‘facts’ about bullying are staggering to the imagination:

- Over 3.2 million students are victims of bullying each year.
- 1 in 4 teachers see nothing wrong with bullying and will only intervene 4 percent of the time.
- Approximately 160,000 teens skip school every day because of bullying.
- 1 in 7 students in grades K-12 is either a bully or a victim of bullying.
- 56 percent of students have personally witnessed some type of bullying at school.
- Over two-thirds of students believe that schools respond poorly to bullying, with a high percentage of students believing that adult help is infrequent and ineffective.
- 71 percent of students report incidents of bullying as a problem at their school.
- 90 percent of 4th through 8th graders report being victims of bullying.
- 1 out 10 students drop out of school because of repeated bullying.
- Harassment and bullying have been linked to 75 percent of school-shooting incidents.
- Physical bullying increases in elementary school, peaks in middle school and declines in high school. Verbal abuse, on the other hand, remains constant.
A 2009 survey found that 9 out of 10 LGBT youth reported being verbally harassed at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation.

So, what is my point to all of these statistics??? Bullying starts long before the workplace. Maybe it’s possible to address the problem at its point of genesis? Maybe we should consider how to suppress it before people have had a chance to develop its toxic results in adult society where it is a full blown pervasive, escalating hostility and berating behavior that is exhibited in mistreatment on the job. A disease left unchecked will only result in disastrous consequences every time…it will not transform itself.

We have seen what happens when errant behavior in the workplace spins out of control unchecked. Namie & Namie of the Workplace Bullying Institute studied 7,740 adults nationally in 2007 and reported that 37% of American workers have faced bullying on the job. Women are more likely to be the target of bullying and female targets tend to quit the job 45% of the time. Further, when employers are made aware of the bullying, 62% of the time, the situation escalates for the target or nothing happens (Namie & Namie 2009). Disengagement and turnover caused by bullying costs American corporations over $64 billion (yes with a B) a year. In addition to the above there are countless anecdotal records of bullying in higher education…many with tragic results.

In Bully in the Ivory Tower, Dr. Hollis contends that ‘The Ivory Tower’ is supposed to emerge from intellect and enlightenment, showing the way to the American dream through education. The higher education sector is a subset of American culture, and unfortunately, bullying is even reflected here. Bullying in higher education doesn’t just affect faculty and staff, but the students they strive to serve as well. Imagine teaching a class after being bullied. The emotional capital required to connect with students has been spent on defending against the bully. Hollis has noted that student service administrators need to focus to advise students, guide students, and serve students, as many students come to a campus with previously identified chronic issues themselves. The bullied student service administrator has also spent his or her emotional capital surviving a toxic work environment, and potentially has precious little energy to invest in students. What a waste.

While bullying is still legal, it is clearly destructive. We need to make it non-existent and Dr. Hollis does a grand job of pricking our consciousness about that. We need to find a way to ensure that this unacceptable behavior is eliminated before it becomes embedded as a generational curse that can’t be broken.

In the end, I am reminded of at least four things we can do to immediately impact bullying:

1) Commit to fostering a culture of caring, respect, and awareness starts with a few simple steps that make the biggest change
2) Increase our own awareness, realize when bullying is taking place is a necessary first step in finding solutions
3) Respond personally, forceful and respectfully…if one is seen as being un-accepting of bullying it will encourage others to behave the same
4) Teach those you love protective skills…ensure that they are persistent in getting help and is prepared to continue to ask for help

Kudos to Dr. Hollis! While I have always abhorred poor social skills and harassment on the school yard and in the workplace, I never intellectualized the matter of bullying until prompted to by her work. Maybe it’s because I never thought of myself as a ‘victim’ before. However, we are all negatively impacted in some way when we blindly accept this behavior without doing our part to abate it. We are all prisoners of bullying in one way or another but as Emma Lazarus, a great Jewish American poet once wisely noted, “Until we are all free, we are none of us free.”

I wish you well Dr. Hollis in your journey to educate America on this most serious topic, and what we need to do about it...now. After reading your work I am motivated to do my part.

PEACE