

I WAS BULLIED

I know there will be many acquaintances, colleagues and friends who know the older and wiser me who might be surprised that this happened to me and that I even let a bully “get a foot in the door”. Perhaps my experience with this awful, invidious behaviour has made me the person I am today – I try to think that’s the case. I now attempt to find a positive note from a period in my life where my self-worth was at rock bottom and to move forward in a positive way by hopefully helping others by sharing my own story.

It happened to me in my mid-twenties. I had moved from a small place to work in London where things had gone well with good annual reviews, great supportive friends and a nice social life but I always wanted to work overseas and two years later this happened. At what should have been one of the most interesting times of my life I met someone who instead of being a supportive line manager was somebody who, with the benefit of hindsight, had to have a victim to make them feel better about themselves, I guess.

I was that victim. There I was in a new country, in a new job, living in a new home on my own (having gone from sharing) and I admit, initially, somewhat out of my depth in the early days – many things had changed in my life and I had taken over from someone older and more experienced. There was not one particular incident at the beginning that made me feel I was being bullied it was more a case of no interest in me personally, no mentoring or encouragement, constantly finding fault in my work and I will never forget the manner in which this person told me of a close family bereavement. I started to feel as if I could do nothing right, even my north-west accent was mentioned and the fact that I said OK on the telephone. When my report was deferred as the line manager said they wanted to give me more time to settle in or it would be a very low marking I reached rock bottom especially as I had wanted to say “go ahead, I’ve had great reports before, that’s one of the reasons I am here and a marking like that will say more about you than me”. But I didn’t – I’d never had to stand up for myself before and I just didn’t know how too. In many ways I felt so alone at work.

I now hated going to work - having never been a morning person anyway I now rarely made it in on time especially as I had turned to “enjoying” alcohol far too much than was good for me. Guess I was self-medicating in a way. Luckily I did still stay a social drinker and it never turned into solo drinking at home alone but it’s probably luck more than good judgement and the kindness of some colleagues/friends that I didn’t end up in a dangerous situation or hurt. Looking back my behaviour wasn’t always good either. I am pretty certain it affected my general health/immune system too. Only my pride and the financial costs of departing kept me there.

So for six months things were pretty bad and then the bully left. Luckily they were replaced by a truly decent person – my life changed on every level. The rest of my time there was enjoyable and I grew as a PA with managers who were non-judgemental, encouraged and supported me. I gradually recovered from a grim few months although I did, and still do, feel slightly aggrieved by the two colleagues who then commented on what I had been through afterwards rather than doing something at the time. One had nearly been a victim of it himself but had stood up to the bully and it had stopped. I felt they had let it happen to me and I wonder if I had known this before whether my own resolve to deal with it might have been strengthened. I would have known it wasn’t just me! I’ll never know and in truth the answer is probably not but I should not have had to – it should never have happened in the first place.

So how did I move on from all of this? One key turning point was meeting an ex-colleague of the bully a year or so later who made it clear to me in no uncertain terms what they thought of them and I truly did realise then it was not me – especially as the comments came from someone quite senior. I vowed that no one would be allowed to make me feel like that again regardless of who they are. I learnt that those that matter don't behave that way. Those that do get the door shut in their faces pretty quickly by me now. I challenge bullying behaviour whenever I see it and have gone to senior managers to alert them that people on their team behaving in this way. If people have discussed being bullied with me I try to strengthen their resolve to do something about it, to stand up to the bully and advise them to keep a diary of incidents and importantly how these made them feel. Where I work now has a 0% tolerance of bullying – it does not necessarily mean it still does not happen but there are clear guidelines and ways of reporting this behaviour to ensure it can be dealt with.

I sincerely hope that no one ever has to go through what I did. Luckily it only lasted six months but I will ever forget how difficult they were for me and how it made me feel. If any one of us can do just one thing to stop this happening to another we must. I got through this and came out stronger but it's not the same for everyone so please don't stand by and let it happen around you.

You are probably, by now, wondering who I am Gill Quirk, EPAA Regional Board Member.