

Opinion **Leadership**

## Bullying bosses should examine their own ego problems

The tetchy leader needs to understand that people never forget abuse of hierarchical power

**AMANDA GOODALL**



Priti Patel, the home secretary, faces multiple accusations of bullying, all of which she denies © Toby Melville/Reuters

**Amanda Goodall** MARCH 6 2020

---

*The writer is associate professor at Cass Business School, City, University of London*

The other word of the moment — coronavirus aside — is bullying. The main alleged culprit in the UK is Priti Patel, the home secretary, who has now [received accusations](#) from three separate government departments over her conduct. She follows John Bercow, the former Speaker of the House of Commons, in being accused of bullying staff. Both have denied all allegations.

Elsewhere, concern is growing about [online abuse](#) and [cyberbullying](#) via the thousands of anonymised beatings transmitted daily through antisocial media. (Remind me why we tolerate cyber-anonymity?) But [bullying by bosses](#) at work has its own history.

Workplace bullying can take many forms, [according to the](#) government-funded arbitration service, Acas, whether “offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour” or the abuse or misuse of power “through means that undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient”.

How widespread is it? A [Danish study showed](#) that 8.3 per cent of employees said they had been bullied in the past year, and one-third of the time managers and supervisors were the perpetrators. In [another study](#), of 4,500 German employees aged between 31-60, 13.3 per cent reported being bullied by their boss (5 per cent said it was severe). The authors found no gender differences between those being bullied and those doing the bullying.

At best, too many cooks slow up a broth. That's why organisations contain a hierarchy of decision makers. With that form of organisation, workers are vulnerable to the moods of their specific superiors. The emotional ramifications of this inherent powerlessness may not be widely appreciated by managers.

Worse, misbehaving bosses have the strongest negative impact on employee job satisfaction, as I found in [joint research](#) on UK and US data with Andrew Oswald from Warwick University and Benjamin Artz at the University of Wisconsin. The effect is much worse than that of badly behaved colleagues or customers. The tetchy boss needs to understand that humans never forget. US data showed us that unpleasant behaviour by a boss lasts longest in workers' memories. This is probably because abuse of hierarchical power, where the victim has no recourse to a right of reply — the essence of bullying — is considered unforgivable.

Bullying bosses are expensive. Non-disclosure agreements are regularly used to placate (and silence) employees, such as the [£25,000 pay out](#) to an official in the Department for Work and Pensions allegedly bullied by Ms Patel. In the National Health Service, bullying and harassment is estimated to cost [about £2.3bn a year](#) in staff absence, compensation and legal costs.

This is important for both business and government to grasp. Unhappy workers are unproductive. Job satisfaction levels in a company are [a powerful predictor](#) of higher future stock market returns. Unhappy workers are also more likely to quit. Happiness makes [workers more productive](#).

In my work with Agnes Bäker, at the University of Zurich, [we found that managers](#) who are highly rated core business experts are more likely to raise employee job satisfaction and lower intentions to leave. Our research consistently shows that if you are a manager or a leader it is imperative that you have a deep knowledge about the nature of the work your subordinates are doing.

There are many reasons bosses turn into bullies, but “aggression among the powerful is typically the result of a threatened ego”, say Nathanael Fast and Serena Chen, who [asked in a study](#) “when and why do power holders seek to harm other people?” In four separate studies they showed that people with power become aggressive when they feel incompetent in the domain of power – in other words, when they lack adequate expert knowledge.

Managing your ego is central to becoming a boss. At Cass Business School I run an executive [masters in medical leadership](#) for doctors. In our opening module, which I teach alongside a professional leadership coach, we encourage doctors to hold a mirror up to themselves. We need to be aware of our own behaviour, biases and prejudices. Might you be penalising tall people because your mother said you were short when you were 12?

Leadership development is a global enterprise with an annual [spend of about \\$50bn](#). The UK government supports two such organisations – the National Leadership Centre and Civil Service Leadership Academy. Most senior civil servants receive some leadership development in their careers.

How many senior politicians take any formal leadership training before taking office? Shouldn't we ask this question about all those who move into these extremely powerful positions? I think we should.

---

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2022. All rights reserved.

---