

Bully or Strong Manager?

**The ICMF recently launched a survey, inviting perceptions on the prevalence of bullying amongst senior managers and questioning whether there is ever a place for in a style of “strong management” that some would recognise as bullying. The results were revealing.**

The results of the survey show that:

- 30.7% of respondents recognise bullying as a common style amongst senior manager ranks that is regularly displayed, with a further 47.7% saying that
- 79.5% said that they witnessed bullying at all management levels (although around ½ of these commented that this bullying was irregular)
- 56.7% of respondents commented that ‘strong management’ featured in such things as role profiles, personal development plans and training as a necessary quality for achieving great things, or was at least widely accepted as being necessary
- 87% of respondents stated that they thought there was a place for "strong management" in their organisation, including direct styles that some might call blunt or aggressive, although a majority of these considered this appropriate only in particular situations, such as when other approaches had failed.

The survey ran for 4 weeks from 12<sup>th</sup> February 2010. A total of 242 responses were received (the survey was anonymous and demographics weren't collected, however a significant number of respondents indicated that they were in managerial, executive coaching or HR roles; several respondents commented that they did not work for UK-based companies).

### **Survey Coverage**

The survey presented five rated and one open-text questions:

“To what extent is bullying if at all seen amongst the senior ranks of management?”

“Do you observe individuals in management positions displaying what might be regarded by most as 'bullying' behaviour?”

“Is there a place for strong" management in your organisation? (By "strong" we mean a direct style that some might call blunt or even aggressive).”

“How do such things as role profiles, personal development plans, training, etc. recognise the need to display strong management" (as described above) to make progress up the promotion ladder in your organisation and meet targets?”

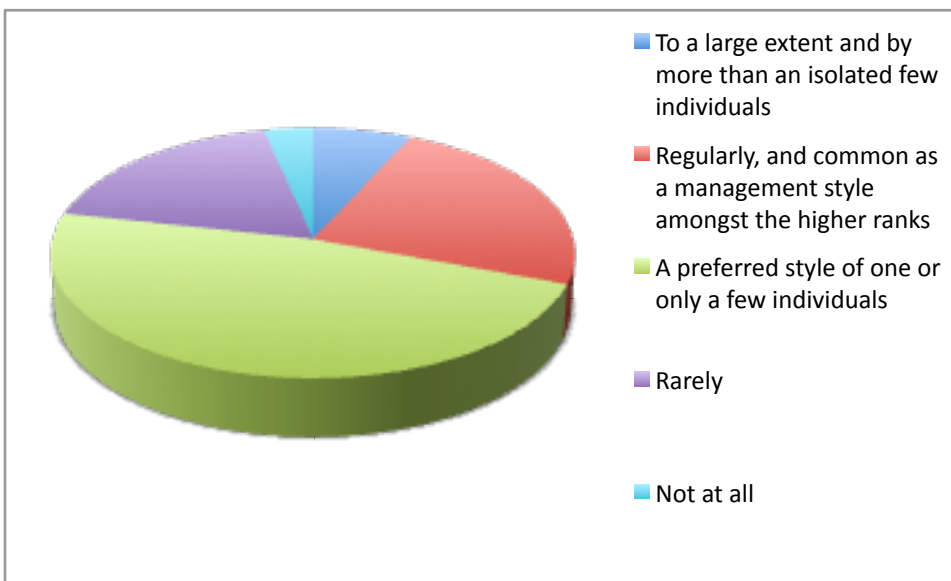
Open-text: “Please feed back any other thoughts or comments relating to the survey topic of bullying v strong management, or any additional thoughts around the questions posed.”

## Responses – Rated Questions

Responses were as follows:

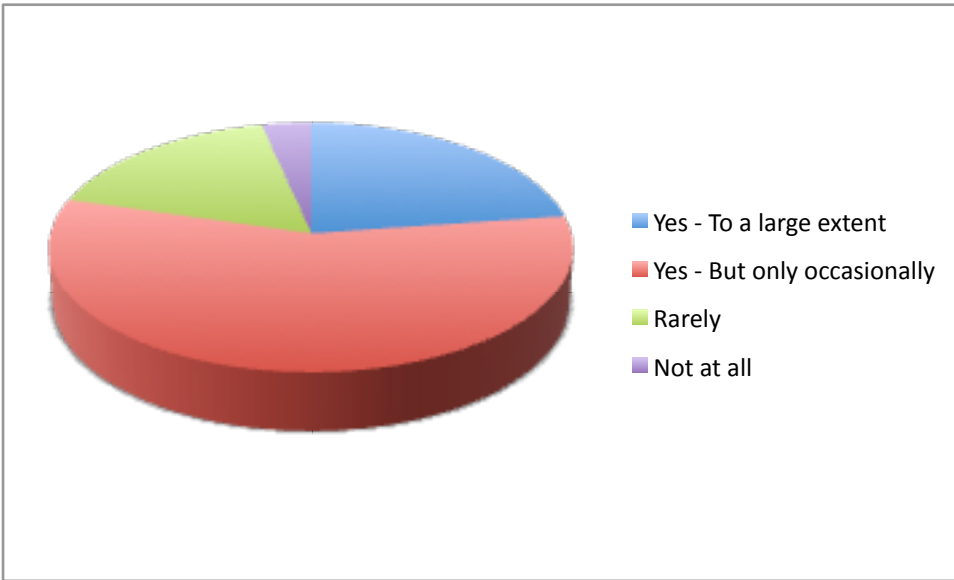
To what extent is bullying if at all seen amongst the senior ranks of management?

To a large extent and by more than an isolated few individuals	6.82%
Regularly, and common as a management style amongst the higher ranks	23.86%
A preferred style of one or only a few individuals	47.73%
Rarely	18.18%
Not at all	3.41%



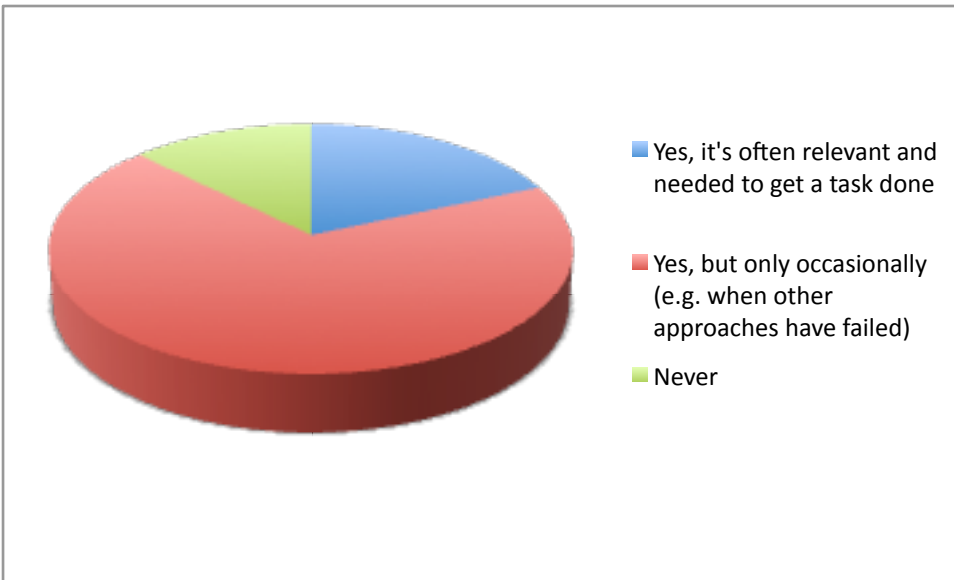
Do you observe individuals in management positions displaying what might be regarded by most as 'bullying' behaviour?

Yes - To a large extent	22.73%
Yes - But only occasionally	56.82%
Rarely	17.05%
Not at all	3.41%



Is there a place for strong" management in your organisation? (By "strong" we mean a direct style that some might call blunt or even aggressive)."

Yes, it's often relevant and needed to get a task done	18.39%
Yes, but only occasionally (e.g. when other approaches have failed)	68.97%
Never	12.64%

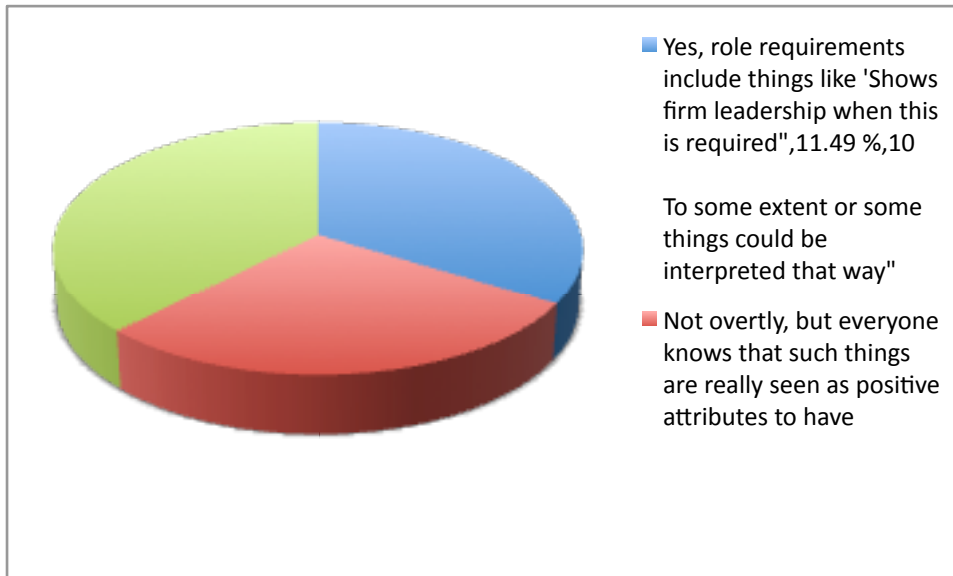


How do such things as role profiles, personal development plans, training, etc. recognise the need to display strong management" (as described above) to make progress up the promotion ladder in your organisation and meet targets?"

Yes, role requirements include things like 'Shows firm leadership when this is required",	11.49 %
To some extent or some things could be interpreted that way"	29.89%

Not overtly, but everyone knows that such things are really seen as positive attributes to have 25.29%

Not at all 33.33%



## Narrative Themes

Respondents to the survey also provided wide-ranging feedback, indicating commonality in most views. The following summarises the common themes arising.

### *Interpretation of what constitutes 'bullying'*

Comments reflected the fact that bullying can be misinterpreted, for example when a change in working practice demands a change in management style, or when directive management is needed to complete a task. Bullying can also be externally (and wrongly) attributed to a manager when a subordinate has been challenged on a performance issue or isn't taking accountability for their own actions; individuals who remain confident and perform well may be less likely to adopt the same perception, even of the same manager.

The perception of staff that they are being bullied when they are being asked (perhaps instructed) just to do their job is a problem. As a result grievances are brought, which are almost impossible to resolve satisfactorily because these usually rely on individual perception and this takes up a lot of management time and causes bad feelings

The term bullying" has been diminished by people misusing it.

Some managers are by nature abrupt and direct to the point and some staff can interpret this as bullying but then other managers just lack tact and this is misinterpreted.

### *Distinction between 'bullying' and 'strong management'*

There is seen to be a very fine line between bullying and strong management, even though in most respondents' minds, these are very different things. Most respondents felt that a distinction between bullying and strong management can be made, although this is often a thin line and by no means all felt that it was easy to make this distinction.

Some believe that strong management can be achieved without any need for bullying, and that there is never a place for aggressive styles of management.

'Strong management' means - being clear on vision, values and objectives, and modelling them.

Strong management can be achieved through assertiveness; there should never be the need to resort to using bullying tactics to achieve the desired end result. When people are more challenging, there is a greater need to find out why they are like this and work on establishing the kind of working relationship that removes the need to demonstrate bullying as a means of achieving the end through fear.

Bullying or strong management are often perceived when a manager to staff relationship has been more directive than using coaching.

It can be highly desirable for managers to be direct, transparent and open in their communication, but not aggressive. One respondent reported that their organisation has more problems with managers who try to be tactful and end up being unclear than managers who are too blunt and aggressive. They observed that this may be a stereotype of English behaviour that managers often tip-toe around difficult conversations and leave the employee confused or with a false impression.

It can be very difficult and sometimes hard to differentiate between strong management and bullying. Often it will come down to perception. The individual on the receiving end can often tell the difference.

Bullies often don't give the employee a voice to be heard, whereas strong management does. Both bullying and strong management go up a notch when the going gets tough so in the current economic climate, there is plenty of both to be found!

Strong management is often a euphemism for bullying. For some, referring to people by their grades is seen as a subtle form of bullying, irrespective of how well they can perform their jobs.

Some interpret strong management more as getting the job done rather than being blunt or aggressive: managers who are not afraid to stick to their goals and expect support from around them.

### *Forms of bullying*

Anecdotal evidence contributed to the survey highlights the many forms that bullying can take, often not overt aggression. Examples given include: shouting, making threats, control-freakery, constantly picked upon, being humiliated in front of colleagues, regularly being unfairly treated, being physically or verbally abused, being blamed for problems caused by others, always being given too much to do, being regularly threatened with the sack and being unfairly passed over for promotion.

Including 'manipulation' or 'political manoeuvring' in the concept of bullying would most likely lead to a far greater perception of the prevalence of bullying behaviour.

Bullying between departments: may result from constant tension and group beliefs held by different teams, or where management approaches differ.

### *Influences that encourage / discourage bullying*

There was a common perception that a bullying culture is often seeded by senior manager role modelling that becomes not only accepted but seen as a desirable behaviour from the top down. Where senior management appears to condone bullying/aggression, it is difficult for others to manage.

The style of the Chief Executive is important, for example, one respondent noted a growing recognition in their organisation that the strongest influencing skills which preclude the need for bullying are rooted in respect, and that this had been strongly influenced by the CEO. Senior managers set the tone in the organisation. if they bully, you can be sure that their staff will do likewise!

There may be a new generation of aspiring leaders who believe that these styles, such as those of Alan Sugar, are the only way to get ahead in business, whilst what they don't see is the high degree of persuasion and amazing communication skills that have to accompany this.

A significant amount of bullying may happen at an intra-team level and by junior management who are inexperienced and use the wrong style.

The survey revealed differing views on the influence of gender: some perceiving bullying to be genderless, whilst others believing that female managers who took a hard line were more likely to be seen as bullies over their male counter-parts, for whom "strength" verging on narcissism was often seen as being a virtue.

Some observed that bullying seems to become more prevalent when an organisation is facing a period of change or otherwise under pressure. Financial pressure especially often triggers more demanding and aggressive styles of management, although the fact that those who don't buy into this style but still seem to perform as well as others seems to be overlooked.

One respondent referred to a personal experienced of bullying and when speaking about this with a senior manager, was told 'Yes, but he get's results'. As a result, they determined to leave the company.

The amount of damage caused by bullying is rarely recognised, people still tend to leave than tackle it.

Several respondents noted that the leadership in their organisations is based around fear, 'naming and shaming' and there is a general atmosphere of distrust.

Culture may be a factor encouraging bullying: southern European managers appearing to be less stressed less than their US and UK counterparts.

## *Managing bullying behaviour*

Many commented that there is often a general reluctance to confront bullies who hold senior roles.

Many commented that strong management is often needed, but that this is also often used as a euphemism for bullying, especially by those who are themselves bullies. Bullies were also thought to see their approach as being positive and justifiable, with fear being a powerful motivator for getting the job done.

Several alluded to the problem of confronting bullies. There is frequently resistance to deal with bullies due to 1) the bullied not being prepared to come forward (for many reasons, common among which is the fear of reprisal or what 'others' may perceive of them. This prevents line managers dealing with the bullies as there is lack of evidence), and 2) line managers of bullies not wanting to deal with them (for many reasons, a common perception being that it's often easier just to ignore the issue, or the process to deal with the bullies is so long winded that it causes stagnation or just move the person on. The problem with this is that it does not deal with the problem only allows the toxin to continue to infect and cause damage to individuals and the organisation).

If people in leadership role show strong/ bullying style management, this often gives licence for those underneath to model that behaviour - it needs to be tackled at the top level. Bullying behaviour at a senior level can be impossible to eradicate in an organisation where it has become the norm. The problem gets worse.

Bullying may result from poor recruitment, a lack of good role models, weak leadership (not dealing with bullies or adopting the style themselves in order to get results).

Those who are being bullied may not recognise that they are being bullied and be reluctant or not know how to push back, so reinforcing the bully's actions as being both acceptable and effective.

Some thought that challenging bullies should be seen as a requirement rather than just a right, and individuals need to be aware of this.

Some commented that it's unlikely that bullies can be changed through training, but that they would continue to use what for them was an acceptable and natural style, even after disciplinary action. Coaching programmes may be making a difference, however according to many executive coaches, bullying is still rife.

Training in one organisation in people management skills and ensuring that managers understand what could be seen as a bullying tactic, has led to only rare problems with this issue.

Increasingly, executive coaches are stepping up to the plate of being challenging, and drawing on psychological underpinnings to work on sustainable behavioural changes with bullying clients, even where these come dragged unwillingly to coaching. Sometimes it is a case of leaders being psychopaths in which case coaching will not work, but often as not, coaching can help people see how their behaviour affects others. Gathering 360 degree feedback and helping the client process this is a useful intervention.

The more senior a manager is the less likely a direct report feels able to complain openly about bullying styles of management - although they may ask for advice in managing it. People worry about the negative impact on their career of being seen as a troublemaker.

### *False attribution of 'bullying'*

People are too quick to say they are being bullied when in fact their manager is trying to bring to their attention areas where their performance is giving concern. The vast majority of managers don't want conflict in the workplace

One distinction suggested is that strong management is intrinsically very positive in approach - "this is what/how we have to achieve 'this goal'", using definite statements with objectives and how to achieve - action plans, etc., whereas bullying offers no praise or recognition, but just criticism if things go wrong, the laying of blame, emotional blackmail, not being allowed to speak out in one's own defence, the manager has 'verbal diarrhoea' .

There is a very fine line between strong management and what could be perceived as bullying. Sometimes it is not the message as much as how the message is delivered.

### *Beliefs held by bullies*

Bullying is seen positively by those who do it (often, the most senior) as: - getting things done (action, not reflecting and listening is a widespread management culture).

Leadership is seen as 'being in control' - making quick decisions is a necessity to deliver on time, cutting through the crap / wimps. This is even seen as being VERY positive as it is focused and achieves results. From these perspectives, bullying managers can't see the point of changing and no reward for doing so.