



Bullying or Boundaries? Rethinking How We Handle Conflict.

Bullying is often defined as repeated and unreasonable behaviour directed at a person or group, causing physical or psychological harm. However, perception plays a significant role – what one person finds acceptable, another may find deeply hurtful.

One of the biggest challenges in addressing bullying is that its definition often depends on the recipient's experience.

When people feel bullied, emotions can escalate, and in some cases, those who feel bullied may inadvertently become bullies themselves when confronting perceived mistreatment. It's no surprise that relationships break down in these situations.

Workplace dynamics have changed over the decades. Many of us who rose through male-dominated industries in the 1980s were trained differently. Assertiveness skills were a key focus – teaching women to express their needs confidently, without aggression, emotional escalation or resorting to passive-aggressive behaviour. These approaches don't seem as common today, but they might be worth revisiting.

In my career, I tackled challenges directly – without conflict. I stopped the men in the factory from whistling at me, removed girlie calendars from engineers' workbenches, and made it clear that I was in meetings for my expertise, not to fetch coffee. These moments shaped my confidence and set clear professional boundaries.

I sometimes wonder if we've lost essential communication skills. Do we need to return to teaching people (not just women) how to express concerns respectfully and call out unacceptable behaviour effectively? Perhaps this should start in schools. After all, well-meaning intervention can sometimes turn into a form of bullying itself.

How do you think we could better equip people - both children and adults - to handle difficult interactions with confidence and respect?

Cadence Consulting specialises in leader, team and capability development. We use Prodigie assessment tools that include Psychological Safety and Inclusion indices.

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