

Jean 00:00

Hello, Wendy.

Wendy 00:02

Hi, Jean. How are you?

Jean 00:05

Okay. Wendy Harpur is a versatile Human Resources professional with transformation, talent management and learning and development experience with a lean approach to project management and HR services provision. She is at BKL. She's head of HR at what she calls a lovely accountancy firm called BKL, based in London, and has 20 years experience in the field of HR - human resources. So welcome, Wendy, I'm so happy for you to be here, finally.

Wendy 00:51

Thank you. Me too. Yeah.

Jean 00:53

Here's how Wendy came to us. She did a series of posts on bullying on LinkedIn. And I became fascinated as to how and why she was doing extra work on bullying in a volunteer capacity, in addition to her job. So bullying is a subject near and dear to my heart. I've had several clients who've been bullied, I've been bullied. And I have wondered, I have read about it but I have not engaged in a discussion about it. Nor have I talked with someone who has learned about it and investigated extensively which Wendy has. So because of that, here we are.

Jean 01:40

First, let's talk about you. Tell me about your background, how you came into HR. You know that this blog is focused on racial and social justice, I consider bullying a social justice topic. But if to the extent possible, I'd like to know about your background in terms of race and so forth.

Wendy 02:02

Okay, so I grew up in southeast London, a place called Sidcup in Kent, my parents are both Scottish. So they had moved down there in the late '60s, mainly so that my dad could join the Metropolitan Police Force. He was a policeman up in Scotland before that, so you can't really get much different from the Highlands of Scotland to the central London Metropolitan Police Force. My mother worked as a secretary part time for the Ministry of Defense for many years. So I grew up really in a working class household, not being English and having a different culture to those people around me.

Jean 02:47

But for those who don't know anything, I'm in the US based and most of the people listening are US, tell us what's the difference between the cultural difference between Scottish and English?

Wendy 03:01

Okay, they're completely different types of people. And they're two completely different countries. So I know in the US, you talk about United Kingdom, that's the combination of four different nations, and Scotland and England are two of those. So the Scots are from Celtic backgrounds, very different. And English people are Anglo Saxon by backgrounds. But of course, we're all a bit of a mixed. But the thing is we look the same. We're White, Caucasian people, generally. So although I was of a different culture, I looked pretty much the same, you can't really see much difference. People in Scotland, very, very patriotic to their country, the same as England, and it's just rivalries that you might get the same way you'd see in the States, maybe between states. Those silly little things that happen, where a Scottish people might not support England in a football match, for example. Okay. So yeah, I spoke a little differently. My sister and I spoke a little differently when we were at school, because obviously, my parents speak with broad Scottish accents. And we used to spend our summers up in Scotland, with our grandparents, all of our family, apart from my parents were down south. But all our family was essentially very far away. So we're quite remote and separated from family. So I didn't grow up with that network. Where some people go and they live 10 minutes from their grandparents, whatever. We didn't have that. So we didn't have those kinds of relationships growing up. So yes, we were very much separate. In terms of why I've got into inclusion and HR and that kind of field, I think it's just always been in me, I never really understood why people were treated differently or the unfairness of things. And I did suffer from a little bit of bullying because I was different at school, so I experienced it firsthand at school for being different, you do get treated differently sometimes, which is not easy and childhood is never easy. But that was probably my first experience of that. But I never really understood why that happens. And obviously, I could just see how awful it felt. And to see other people experience that, it's often a very difficult thing to talk about. It's a bit taboo, isn't it, to talk about these things sometimes? I just always wanted to do the right thing. And I think that's kind of why I got into HR in a funny kind of way. I didn't set out in life thinking I'm going to be an HR professional if the opportunity arose.

Jean 06:09

Okay, so let's go back to your childhood. I want to go back there. When you were different. And had a little bit of bullying as you called it, experienced that. It felt awful. How did you respond? What did you do? Did you have sisters and brothers to go through it with or were you alone?

Wendy 06:32

I was very much on my own. My sister is younger and I think different personalities as well react differently. And I've always been quite quiet, and not really somebody to push back, particularly at that age, I had no confidence whatsoever. And of course, that's what a bully will pick on sometimes, isn't it, that's why they do it. So you won't kick back.

Wendy 07:00

So I did have a very miserable school experience, I really didn't enjoy it, I got through it. I turned my attention to becoming very good at sport. So I became a high jumper. And obviously, my parents supported me through that and took me training. My dad in particular to take me training. And that was

kind of my outlet and not sort of focus on what was going on at school and how much I hated it. There was one time somebody used my camera to take some inappropriate photographs of some other colleague or something at the school, you know, somebody at school, they were messing around, and my mother saw the photographs. And that was the only time she knew that I was being bullied because I then had to say where these had come from, because it wasn't me.

Jean 07:56

So you didn't tell your parents?

Wendy 07:58

No, no, you wouldn't, you just wouldn't. And then she did go to the school. And, you know, some action was taken against the people, but it's very, very hard to do. Because at the end of the day, you are the one that has to go into school every day, you have to see these people. And as soon as you raise it as an issue, you're potentially more of a target. Because they've got something really to hold against you then. So I got through school, I was glad to leave. And then I didn't really experience it again like that, in that way. I think workplace bullying is something that I've seen, I've heard quite a lot of stories, I've heard colleagues who've tried to commit suicide because of workplace bullying. So you see it, it's very different though, when you're at work and it's a power dynamic.

Jean 08:55

Contrast. And I've heard a colleague of mine does work in school and she said bullying among children has a different motivation than bullying at work.

Wendy 09:08

Yes, definitely. I can't really say what it is at school, I just think it's something different and they don't like it or they're not comfortable with it, and they pick on it. At work, very often, there is a reason there's usually triggers for it. I did create a graphic actually from this study that we did, which shows what tends to cause bullying. And it's things like usually a change. So there's a change of manager for some reason, there's a promotion opportunity that comes up. So political behavior starts to happen. Somebody feels threatened, because there's somebody who's doing really, really well and they can't compete or they don't feel they can compete. And it's a very successful way of getting rid of people from an organization. So if you are in that position, particularly if you're a manager and you seek to bully somebody cynically, you're going to be successful because more often than not, the individual that you're targeting leaves. I think in our study, I can't remember precisely the numbers, but it's something like 88% of the people who said that they'd been subjected to bullying left, and that was either through resignation, because they couldn't stand it anymore or because they were paid off or sacked more often than not. And non-disclosure agreements are quite common where bullying takes place.

Jean 10:40

One of my clients told me, she said, I think they're trying to get me to leave. And I was skeptical, but you're telling me that's so?

Wendy 10:52

Yeah, why else would they do it? There probably are occasions where it's inadvertent, because somebody has been promoted above their ability, and they really struggled to manage people, for example, and that might result in bullying, but not intentional, not a really cynical attempt to move somebody out. But a lot of the cases I've seen or heard about, particularly through the study that we did, it's deliberate, because they want to get rid of the person and they think they can. And usually, they've got the ear of very senior people in the business. So the senior, the board, for example, might have no clue, may will be horrified if they knew the truth, but because there's quite often complex personal relationships, or they have some kind of interest in the bully, if I just want to label that person with a name, in being in business, because they might bring in lots of money, and they might have lots of client contacts, whatever it is, it becomes a very, very complicated situation to deal with. And the people in power may not actually ever hear properly what's going on. Because that individual can quite successfully get rid of somebody, but can also ruin that person's life. I mean, it's never just one aspect. And bear in mind, this is reported from people who say they've been bullied. So it's their perception of what's going on. But that's all we have to go on. But usually, they report four or five different reasons why the person's doing it. It could be, as I said, it could just be incompetence, it could be that they have an interest in promoting themselves for some reason, and do that by putting someone else down. Sometimes it's harassment. And obviously in the UK, we do have laws that protect people against racial, sex, gender, sexual orientation, things like that, that is protected for in law through the Equality Act. But bullying in itself is not. There's no law to protect people in the UK from that. Countries like Canada and Australia have introduced laws to protect all people from bullying, unwelcomed attention. I think it's something to do with the fact that the lawyers in the UK find it quite difficult to define it, to pin it down, give it a name. But some countries are doing that.

Jean 13:39

In the US, it's called the hostile workplace. And if you create a hostile workplace, it's not against the law, but it can, in many organizations, get you at least in front of HR. Do you have some kind of designation like that? In the UK?

Wendy 14:00

If somebody was suffering from bullying, usually they would go to the HR team, if they don't go to the individual directly. The problem happens, and it's probably the same in the US. When someone from HR then goes to manage this, because bear in mind, they don't know what the rights or wrongs of this situation is. And sometimes people do make things up or sometimes people go through performance management, and then they start saying they're being bullied. And we don't know what the right or wrong of it is until an investigation is done. However, as soon as you, as an HR professional, go and talk to the alleged bully about it, it can become very awkward for the HR person because very often it's you who is accusing that person. That's how the bully sees it.

Jean 14:53

Yeah, HR did it to me.

Wendy 14:55

Yeah. And the trust and relationship there can be very easily damaged just through raising it and trying to resolve it. And so it's a very problematic and very difficult area. And I personally really hope I don't come across too many more bullying issues in my career, because it's horrible to deal with. Nobody really comes out of it happy very often. Because you have to, I think, the only way to really deal with it, objectively is to get someone outside of the company to come and investigate it for you. Because then there is no compromise of any relationships. When HR is involved, and they're investigating it, you become part of it.

Jean 15:46

Whoa, I had not thought about it from HR perspective. A situation that I was involved with, HR was involved. And I know HR in many companies has a bad name. And now I see that having to investigate things like this would contribute to people's lack of trust.

Wendy 16:07

Exactly. And particularly if it's someone who's very senior in the organization. And quite often HR might report to that person. That's not unheard of either. As you may have seen from the survey we did, a lot of the people that were accused of bullying were indeed on the board with directors.

Jean 16:27

That was a big shock. Most of the people who are accused of bullying are very senior people. I would have thought it would have been middle managers, supervisors. But that's not what you found.

Wendy 16:42

It does happen. But bear in mind that in our survey, it was made for some reason and I think it's probably because the reason that this whole survey came up is because an HR director posted on LinkedIn that she had been bullied, and she was being open about it and sharing her experience. So when we then started working on this whole area together, most of the respondents were actually from within HR. So most of the people who responded, I think it was 50% or something around that, were actually HR professionals who responded mainly probably because they're in our networks, on LinkedIn, or whatever and they saw that we were doing this and they shared their experience. And if you do work in HR, more often than not, you report to an MD or somebody on the board. So you know, what I'm saying is our study is only as relevant as it is to the people that actually responded. So 50% of them were from HR backgrounds. Very often they reach a settlement because there's a complete breach of trust and confidence once these kind of issues come out. And it can be very uncomfortable for all kinds of reasons for either party to stay. And more often than not, it's the person who raises the allegation of bullying who leaves. I mean, when I was doing this work with my fellow HR directors on bullying, we spoke to 300 people in total between us who were going through bullying at work, and just needed to talk to somebody and some of the stories were awful. I spoke to someone, for example, she'd been in a job for 20 years, had done a fantastic job and was always getting the top pay increases, all of these things. Her boss loved this sort of thing. He retired, her boss retired. And as this was happening, the company had spoken to her about the person she would be reporting to. And before that happened, the individual raised concern about this, saying that this

person has a reputation for bullying and being very, very difficult to work with. And I actually really don't want to do it, because I've seen what's happened. And to cut a long story short, she ended up having to work for this person. And within a year, her and her two colleagues or at least one other colleague had gone off, signed off sick through stress. And they had tried to raise it the right way internally. They were signed off for six months and there was a disciplinary that happened and the person got a warning. But she was expected to go back to work for that person again. And again, there was a personal relationship between the bully and the top person in the company who also was involved, funnily enough, in the disciplinary, which probably shouldn't have happened because it should be somebody completely independent. But this is fairly typical of what happens. And now that individual and her colleague are again, being spoken to by HR about a settlement agreement, money to leave the company, which is such a shame.

Jean 20:11

Oh, it's horrendous. Now before I go there, in my experience, they are usually some diversity dimension involved. Now, this is a narrow, this is narrow, I haven't done all the work you've done. But there's usually a gender discrepancy, male/female; it's often race, White/person of color. I've seen one instance where it wasn't gay/straight, per se, because my client was in the closet, but the boss suspected it and so there was some bullying going on. Do you know of examples of bullying where there's not a diversity dimension involved? Or is your experience like mine where there usually is one?

Wendy 21:11

I've been around for 20 odd years in HR, and I've seen all kinds. So in the UK, anything that relates to what we would call a protected characteristic, so gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. It's typically called harassment. And that is protected under the Equality Act. So yeah, so if you want to call it that way, but if someone's bullied, because they're Black or whatever, that would be a race discrimination claim. And companies pay very, very highly if that goes to an employment tribunal, and the company is found to have been negligent in that regard. And what tends to happen, I think bullying is a little bit more, what's the word, it's not as overt. Often why somebody is doing it, but what I would say with my inclusion and as you would have seen from the survey results, exclusion is a factor of bullying. But that's part of the behavior that a bully might exhibit, they exclude somebody. Now, the person may not know why that is. And that could be they're not invited to lunches for some reason, or they're not invited to go for a promotion, or they're not afforded the opportunity to work with certain types of clients to develop their skill sets and experience, they're not giving opportunities to a woman, for example, because they feel that the clients might be typically male, or want to go and socialize down the pub at lunchtime to do business. So somebody might unconsciously send Fred instead of Jane.

Jean 21:32

Yeah, so it is overt discrimination. People can handle that; they know what to do. And it's straightforward. They can file a complaint. What I have experienced is what I would call bullying. That is those ambiguous situations where you can't say it's because of race; there's no evidence. You can't say it's because of gender; there's no evidence. But you can't even say it's bullying, because it's so subtle. And so the person

is already feeling worn down by whatever diversity that exists. And then on top of that comes this covert, subtle behavior. So people say, Well, are you making this up? Well maybe have you tried to play nice?

Wendy 23:56

As you may have seen again in the survey, a lot of people said I didn't actually realize I was being bullied until it was too late. I didn't realize what was going on. And then suddenly, it just crept up on me that suddenly I'm out of the business, or I'm going through very serious medical problems, because I don't know what's going on. And it's affected my mental health or whatever it is, physical health as well. Yes, that's why it's such a difficult issue. And that's why so many people are struggling to actually deal with it and resolve it. So I think that one of the big areas where you can help is actually to air it. What does this look like? What is bullying? How might you see it? What would you see in someone else if they were being bullied?

Jean 24:48

That was one of my questions. How do you distinguish bullying from a gruff behavior or sticking up to standards or whatever?

Wendy 25:00

I think, we in the UK, we don't have a definition. But I think if it's kind of systemic, and it's always directed at one person unfairly. So if it's unwelcomed and it's unfair, then that could be bullying. So if somebody is being overly critical, as you'll see that's typical of what someone might experience, their manager suddenly becomes overly critical about everything they do. But someone else might do it in exactly the same way and nothing is said. I think it's systemic, personal to you. And you're being treated differently to somebody else in the same situation. That's how I would say it.

Jean 25:42

Beautiful. Let's say it again. Okay, systemic.

Wendy 25:51

Yeah.

Jean 25:52

Personal to you.

Wendy 25:53

Yes, personal to you. And you're being treated differently from other people who are doing more or less the same as you, but you're being treated differently.

Jean 26:04

Okay. Okay, so I was in a situation like that. And I have gone back and forth as to whether or not it was bullying. But it was serious enough that my colleagues came to me and said, so and so has something against you, you better watch out. I had several people. And what I did, this is a different situation,

because in university settings, tenured faculty have some protections that is not in your regular workplace. What I did was I went to so and so, and I said, people are telling me this. "So there's something that you are doing that's causing alarm among my colleagues", and the person changed on a dime.

Wendy 26:55

That's brilliant. I mean, it's very difficult for most people to do that. But in an ideal world, the key to stopping bullying is to nip it in the bud, as we say, in England, stop it as early as you can. When you bring out to somebody that you're aware of what they're doing or just having that open conversation, they're less likely to continue doing it. It doesn't mean they won't, but that's very, very difficult for a lot of people to do for very many reasons. Quite often people are quite junior, it is that it could be their career, they're frightened of being disadvantaged in terms of pay decisions, whatever it is, opportunities. It's a very, very difficult thing to do. But I think it's amazing that you did that.

Jean 27:47

I'm going around coaching other people and suddenly it's happening to me. Oh, I don't think so. I'm teaching leadership. No, I don't think it's gonna happen to me. So I had stuff in my head that helped protect me. I couldn't be me and do what I do and then let it continue. So I understand that's an advantage I had.

Jean 28:16

My question then is, following up from that, do you find that most of the people who don't speak up or handle it, don't know how? They haven't had a history of doing it in other places?

Wendy 28:30

Yeah, you just don't know. It's a very unnatural, horrible situation to find yourself in at work. And, yes, I mean, some companies do have policies, and they will say usually talk to the individual directly, or if you can't do that come and talk to HR. But more often than not, people just won't. Managers sometimes who've been in jobs for years and years struggled to have open and honest conversations with their colleagues that they've worked with for years. So if you had that other dynamic that you feel you're being unfairly treated by raising it, you're worried about compromising the relationship, the power dynamic, could shift against you even further. You're essentially accusing somebody of something very nasty. Nobody wants to be called a bully. Not that you should use that word, I think. But that's essentially why people won't do it, and they'd be more likely to leave than face up to the situation. And quite often, I heard as you would have seen in the survey again, some people put up with that for five years or more. The average length for somebody being bullied from start to finish is two years before they leave. But can you imagine dealing with that every day and the effect that that would have and then if you raise it formally those feelings are intensified even more. It can have an even worse effect on your mental health. And that's why people don't tend to raise it formally, because they know that they're going to really struggle to cope with the emotion, the trauma, basically, that they go through. It just gets worse.

Jean 30:25

I'm slowly recalling the situation that I was in. In the beginning, I wasn't sure if what I was thinking was happening was actually happening. Is that familiar?

Wendy 30:40

Yes, people don't know that they're being bullied or they can't believe it, or they don't want to believe it, because nobody would want to believe that. It's horrible. And, yeah, that's why it's so difficult to tackle really. But the problem is that when people don't tackle it, you tend to end up with you called it a hostile environment, I think we use the term toxic culture. And then there are some academics that I've been talking to in the UK who say there's no point in dealing with it at an individual level, you have to actually tackle the company and the company culture. Because nothing will ever change unless you deal with it at that level. And that's why boards need to be very aware of this and to tackle each other.

Jean 31:25

I want to go to the system but let's stay with the individual a little bit longer before we move into solution. So, what happened with me, what I just remembered, was a friend called me up who had observed it in a meeting with me and this person. And she said, Jean, you will lose respect if you don't address it. And if my friend had not done that, that's what gave me the courage to go and talk to her. I want to emphasize this, because those of you who are listening, if you know someone is being bullied, you could be the nudge just as my friend was to me, to encourage that person. Because she was adamant, she said you will lose respect, you will lose credibility if you allow this to continue. So I had a choice between my credibility or confronting the person. Actually, when I think about it, that's what happened.

Wendy 32:23

Yeah. And I've done it in my survey, when the survey we did I asked that question, when you've seen a colleague being bullied, what have you done about it? And what have you observed in that person? And a lot of times, it is just exactly as you've said, it's somebody else that has raised it, or is actually even taking it further and reported it on behalf of the person because they felt so strongly about what they'd seen or heard or observed. Quite often, there's a lot of gossip, as you were saying, that's very typical. Lots of people are talking about it. But not actually talking to the poor individual themselves about it and if you've got nice, responsible colleagues, there's some very nice colleagues at work who will actually try and support individuals in that circumstance, and who will actually go and try and tackle it sometimes as well.

Jean 33:21

So what would you say to the colleague who says it's none of my business and all of that?

Wendy 33:29

Well, we're all part of society, aren't we? It's a social injustice, work is a representation of society. And you're going to get that sadly. There will be people who won't take notice of it. Hopefully, they're not bullies themselves, but they're just somebody who for whatever reason, doesn't want to get involved. But if they understood the full impact that bullying can have on individuals and how it can drive people to

suicide, it can destroy relationships, it can have long term detrimental impact on someone's mental health, they might feel differently about it. They might just not understand that that's actually what it can do.

Jean 34:16

In my experience, it affects the culture. It affects the culture because the colleagues who came to me, they were basically not liking watching it. Watching this and feeling empathy for me affected their ability to do their work. It was uncomfortable. Is that something you've seen in your experience?

Wendy 34:47

Yes, where people will come and sit down, I'm talking from an HR angle now. Where people will come in and say I've seen this what do you think? And then you have to ask lots of questions, around what they've observed, how frequent it is, the typical things. I've seen this person crying in a room quite regularly, they just go off on their own. And I'm worried that something's happened. Or I've heard this rumor about this person. Because quite often, as I said at the beginning, if it's done by a senior person, they can engage in, what we call, negative briefing. So they start spreading rumors about the individual, particularly with very senior people. Because they're trying to control the narrative of what's happening in that situation. So what a colleague might observe is that kind of behavior, somebody's going off crying alone in a meeting room, or quite frequently with a friend, colleague in meeting rooms, which is unusual that they're having a powwow about something. You hear rumors, all of those kinds of things are signs that bullying might be happening.

Jean 36:01

Wait, what's negative briefing again? Explain that again.

Wendy 36:04

So say I'm a director, and I'm bullying somebody, I would seek to influence the rest of the board, for example, that this individual that I've targeted, is not very good at their job, or has a poor attitude, or just say something to basically undermine the individual, and the individual probably doesn't even know anything about it. They don't know that this is going on.

Jean 36:06

So I, the bully, am now trashing the target, basically.

Wendy 36:41

Exactly. Yes.

Jean 36:43

Whoa. And that's done very deliberately. So that if the target speaks up, nobody will give them credibility.

Wendy 36:50

Exactly. They've already got in their own mind that this person is an issue, a problem, and poor, whoever it is, is trying to have to work with this individual.

Jean 37:03

I don't like to think people are that mean.

Wendy 37:06

Neither do I but it happens. And, you know, 140 people who responded to the survey have given lots of examples of precisely that. And some of those people are very, very senior. You're talking director level people also complaining about that treatment and then they find out, like you, they find out because someone comes and tells them that somebody said x and you're like, What? Well, I didn't. Where did that idea come from?

Jean 37:36

And so this whole idea of deliberately targeting and hurting. I'm thinking now of my former clients, including one person who said they are doing it on purpose. And I'm thinking, well, but they may not. And so now I know I was just being naive.

Wendy 37:57

No, they might not be. As I said, I am going on what people have told me. I don't know the other side, because I haven't spoken to the person that they're alleging has been bullying. I only know one side, but it just seems highly probable that with so many similar stories and so many people being made to sign NDA non disclosure agreements, there must be something in it.

Jean 38:24

Okay, so let's move to solutions, of what people can do. I'd like you to address what the person can do, what the observer can do. This is what I call my colleagues who came to me; what the observer can do, what you say, the system, what the system can do. So let's talk me through. And then we'll go to your infographic as a summary of what we've talked about.

Wendy 38:50

Okay. So I think if like you did, the best solution for somebody who thinks they're being bullied is to actually go and have an open and honest conversation as early as possible. And it doesn't need to be a threatening conversation. It doesn't need to be accusatory, but all it can be is, "Your behavior has started to make me feel uncomfortable. And these are examples of where I've been made to feel like this. I don't really understand why I'm feeling like this. Can we talk about it?" And you know, if the person's just--

Jean 39:30

Wait, wait a sec. Let's take those three steps.

Wendy 39:33

Yeah.

Jean 39:35

Your behavior is making me feel uncomfortable. Here are examples of where it happened. And then what's very interesting to me is that I don't understand why I'm feeling that way. You did not say I don't understand why you're doing this to me.

Wendy 39:54

I don't think it ever helps to be confrontational. There's very few stages in life and in career where you need to be confrontational and it works. But I think this is one where if you go into it with an open mindset at that stage, that I don't want to believe this person's really like this, but I'm gonna give them a really nice opportunity to either reflect on what I'm experiencing, and maybe their behavior will change. Or maybe they might admit it and then they might come out and say, Oh, actually, my wife left me last night or whatever it was, or you know, there's something else going on. At least then they can have some kind of understanding or a basis for understanding without making an accusation. And it might just nip the behavior in the bud immediately. If it continues, I mean, quite a few people have said that they've had that conversation a few times, but it didn't go anywhere. And I think that's when you then need to start thinking about, do I actually say to this person? Now look, I've really tried, I've had this conversation with you, but this behavior is continuing. And I noticed that you even did this the other day as well, which is making me feel even more excluded, or whatever it is that the person is experiencing. And now I feel that I have to go and talk to either your boss or HR and I don't want to do that. So can we please try to resolve this?

Jean 41:30

I love that.

Wendy 41:33

Yeah, I think once you go to HR, it's like the nuclear option almost. And as I said, it then becomes very, very difficult to resolve. So once it's got to that point, you want to avoid that stage at all costs, unless somebody has really, really got in for you. And is clearly set on this way of behaving and isn't going to change, then quite frankly, if they ended up going in front of HR or whatever, somebody very senior in the organization, and you've tried everything you can to prevent it, then you can feel good about that.

Jean 42:08

Yeah. So I've given the first step, an open, honest conversation, and the behavior continues, and then go back and say, I'm being backed into a corner here. I don't want to use the nuclear option, can we please see a change? So you go give them fair warning. Basically, it's either you or me. And it's not going to be me. So you give them warning that I'm being backed into a corner.

Wendy 42:45

I've tried, really tried to sort this out. But the reality is, you've seen and this is why most people won't go to HR, they'd rather leave. Because once it goes formal, once there's a formal complaint, if we want to use that word, it becomes even more difficult for the alleged victim and the alleged bully because for

obvious reasons. So I would say before you make that decision, really think about, do you want to continue in the company? Is it really what you want to do, because at the end of the day, you've got to have a happy life, life is living and enjoying. And you've got to really think about your priorities before you do that. Because I like to believe as well that most companies will do the right thing. But as you saw from the survey, more often than not, people end up leaving the organization anyway. Which is very sad. So my take on it is try and resolve it in a non confrontational but clear and assertive way. If it goes on for a long time, you have to rethink your priorities. If you are going to make it formal, make sure you've got support, psychological support: friends, family, who are backing you don't do it on your own, because it can become very stressful. And you may not get the outcome that you want, or that you think is right. That's the reality in all these situations. You know, not everybody will agree with the decision that's made. But as long as you can make sure or do your best to ensure that the company is behaving as objectively as it can. So it's not somebody who's involved in this situation. It's not somebody who has a personal relationship with the alleged bully or the alleged victim. It's completely neutral, then at least whatever decision comes out, you can have some kind of faith in. And companies very often will try their best to -- if they can't resolve it to everyone's satisfaction, they try to reallocate people so they're not working together. You know, all those kinds of things. I will say possible too, because irrespective of what happens once it goes formal, there's going to be a breakdown in trust and confidence. So it's going to be very difficult for those people to work together. I'm not saying it's impossible for them to resolve it and work through it, but it's always going to feel different, isn't it?

Jean 45:35

Oh, yes, I can, I can see that. Okay. So that's the person, the colleague.

Wendy 45:43

Yeah. So I think I would say to anybody who sees somebody change, because that's the first signal that you'll see that someone's being bullied. One of the symptoms is that they change, they might become more quiet, reserved and they might not be quite so well groomed, they might be off sick a lot, they will change, something will change. Go and talk to them, just ask them what's going on, be a friend. Point out that you've seen a change, be there and support them. If the person may not open up but if they've heard things like you did, that people are talking about the individual, you might want to go and talk to someone about that in the company, someone neutral and objective. If you've got proper procedures in the company, if you think somebody is being treated badly, and they're suffering as a result of it, go and explore with the HR team.

Wendy 46:48

Not all HR people about I know they have bad reputation. It's an easy target, often because of the nature of the work that we do. But there are some very professional and very caring people out there. Go and talk to them, look for the procedure, make sure that the individual themselves is aware of the procedure. And they are saying I think I'm not being treated well. Some people might even go and talk to the person. So they've observed say, for example, they've observed a manager, treating somebody very badly in a meeting, not just once, maybe two or three times. I've known where colleagues go and actually talked to that person directly to the manager and say, I've seen this, I don't like it, I don't

understand why you're behaving this way with that particular person. That's really powerful, actually, because then the individual themselves hasn't done anything hasn't said anything. But that could really help that person. And you never know. I have seen that happen. Yeah, where the manager might even then go and apologize to the person who was being subjected to the behavior and saying, I'm really sorry. I don't know why I was behaving like that. And if they ever behave like that again, please come and talk to me.

Jean 48:13

The colleague went to talk about it with themselves. That's wonderful. Okay, organization. So prevention, because that's where you were until a while ago. What can the organization do to prevent it? How should the organization be set up to receive it? So let's do prevention first.

Wendy 48:37

That has come from the top and a zero tolerance policy, where they live and breathe that is kind of the starting point. And that means that they have to educate themselves about the board. Usually people at the top have to educate themselves about bullying, what that looks like, what kinds of situations may arise and challenge each other's behavior if they see something that they don't quite like, or if somebody is bad mouthing somebody, for example, which I've said already is quite a common feature of bullying, to start asking the questions, why are they doing that? Where's that come from? That's unusual. That person's worked for us for 20 years, for example, why suddenly is that person being bad mouthed? Is it to do with your relationship or how you feel about that individual? What's going on there? Very robust policies which they share routinely with people. Managers need to be taught about this as well, how to manage people professionally. I think the biggest thing is not to promote people into positions where they're supervising or managing somebody unless they have the right behaviors, attitude, and approach to dealing with people and can show some leadership. So if you have poor managers, you tend to have poor engagement, very high turnover of staff, people are not terribly productive, they're not giving their all because they don't really care. So engagement surveys are actually quite another way of maybe highlighting where there are some problems, or there might be some inequity somewhere, because people will say. And if each manager is being held accountable, or a group leader or whatever you want to call them. a director, looking after a director, they're all held accountable for their engagement scores and the comments that people make about the quality of management. And that's another way of preventing it too. There has to be sort of leadership from the top.

Jean 50:49

Okay, what about the people who say I am scared to reprimand my employees, I'm scared to talk to them, because they're gonna run and complain about me to HR.

Wendy 51:02

Again, it all comes down to how do you communicate, and that's where some of these problems do arise. And that's why in an HR context, again, I have to be quite circumspect, when somebody says they're

being bullied, because quite often, it could be that they're a known poor performer, and then the manager has been a bit rubbish, and actually dealing with it. And when they do suddenly start to tackle the issue, then it becomes labeled as bullying, which is not bullying, it's just they've not dealt with the issue. And then suddenly, they've dealt with it, and the individual doesn't like it.

Jean 51:41

So what shows up as bullying could be the manager has avoided an issue, finally faces the issue with the force of all that repression.

Wendy 51:58

It doesn't necessarily need to be delivered in a harsh way. It's just that suddenly, somebody who, and I've seen this numerous times, someone who might have been scoring the top appraisal mark every year, for years, there's a known performance issue. But the manager is weak and won't address it and won't talk about it, either in routine performance management or during an appraisal. And then suddenly, it gets dealt with. Maybe that manager leaves and a new manager comes in, and then suddenly, like, oh, this person's quality of writing is always really poor. And I've looked back, and then suddenly, they start dealing with that in the right way. And it gets labeled as bullying, for example, because now this person believes that they're bullying. I've seen that happen as well. So what I was saying before is, just to finish off, managers need to be trained how to manage people properly, and how to communicate properly, so that you don't get into these dynamics, and to also have honest conversations in a timely manner.

Jean 53:06

Okay, so in other words, if you let it slide, if you have a performance issue, if you let it slide, you don't deal with it and when you finally deal with it, the employee is going to say, Where is this coming from? And they're going to feel bullied, because you delayed doing anything about it? That's excellent. Okay, so I'm about to share screen. Okay. Okay. Let me know what you see.

Wendy 53:32

I can see it. That's my infographic. So this, essentially, I pulled together, looking at all the responses to the big survey that we did the Beat Bullying collective. And I tried to do something visual because there's nothing much out there to actually explain bullying. And this kind of went a bit viral on LinkedIn and loads of people shared it, so I don't know how many people have actually got a copy of this now, but it's out there. And I'm happy for people to use it. Okay, so causes, the key things that I think in terms of causing bullying is cliques. So it's usually groups of people working together to actually cause the bullying to support the bullying. So it's looking out for cliques. And generally, the overriding one is insecurity and self interest as somebody is doing this because they want to promote themselves in some way or to improve their standing at the expense of somebody else. And in terms of the most common tactics, it could be suddenly unfair criticism, being very excessive in the scrutiny and monitoring. It's very rarely outward aggression, it's usually quite subtle. But as I said before, it's systematic, personal and targeted and repeated in most cases.

Jean 54:55

Where is systematic?

Wendy 55:00

I just mean by that, that it happens. Yeah, but the exclusion is a big one as well because you find yourself isolated. That's what people were saying.

Jean 55:14

Exclusion is the one that I've seen most with my clients, they're just on the outside.

Wendy 55:24

Okay. And then the typical health impact of bullying is anxiety, panic attacks, and depression, basically mental health issues. But it can go right through to suicidal thoughts and post traumatic stress disorder. I personally have known several colleagues in 20 years, who have been pushed to the brink of suicide, because of workplace bullying, which is awful.

Wendy 55:52

Signs: So this is what I say what a colleague might see in somebody. And as I said, the key thing here is change. They are not the same person they were, something has happened to them. They could be anxious, on edge, but basically, they're just not the same individual. And that's a cue if you like to go and ask more questions, to find out a bit more.

Jean 56:16

Actually under the change, all the others are form of change you notice.

Wendy 56:28

Prevention. So as I said, it really has to come within the culture of the company and has to come from the top. So that's zero tolerance, with the board level committing to actually not tolerating or not bullying people themselves and holding each other accountable for that. Early intervention like you did, Jean, is the best way. Because when it becomes systemic, and it goes on for a long time, the impact on the individual's health and career can be quite considerable, and extremely detrimental. So early intervention helps, whether that's a colleague speaking up or the individual themselves speaking up in a non confrontational way. And the other thing is, companies should and this is a key point. And I've been working with liaising with a colleague who is really into bullying. For a long time, she's much more of an expert on it than I am, Nakia in the UK, and she believes very strongly that when somebody is at that point that they're so ill through bullying, you actually need to offer someone who is a specialist in trauma, dealing with trauma, psychological trauma to help them because it is a form of psychological trauma. And normal counselors might not give the right kind of advice or support that that person would need.

Jean 57:52

That's fascinating. Can you tell me one difference in what a trauma informed specialist would do versus a regular counselor?

Wendy 58:02

They would be somebody who's used to dealing with individuals who may have been in a war zone or something like that. So they've seen absolutely horrific things, dealing with somebody who's been abused perhaps, mentally, physically, sexually. And that's very different, because I'm not an expert in this field. But someone who's just falling out with somebody at work is very different to someone who is now mentally ill, and is suffering from, stop the thoughts going through their head. They're not sleeping, their view of the world has become warped. So they would be somebody who is an expert at understanding and showing understanding as to why they're experiencing that, and how they can actually help them recover from that overtime, which is very different, I believe, to you know, somebody who's going through a little bit of stress or depression. This is quite an extreme, you know, somebody who's been dealing with bullying, being on the receiving end of bullying for, as I said, it can be two to five years, some people have even put up with it for 10 years.

Jean 59:17

Okay, yeah, so I get that. Okay. So what I'm understanding from that is that the trauma informed person is used to dealing with someone who is even questioning their own judgment, and whose perceptions are so distorted that they're not even sure what they're doing.

Wendy 59:43

They could be suicidal.

Jean 59:50

Right. Okay. So, this has been, this has been great and informative. I have learned a lot. I have been surprised. I thought I knew by this stage, everybody knows what bullying is. So I thought I knew what bullying was. But you've given it a depth and things for me to think about that aspect. Well, the thing that I think I'm most blown about is the senior managers, that it's more people at the upper levels than the lower level. And what I keep reflecting about that is what power does to people. Power messes with people's minds. People want it and then they get it and then it literally goes to their head as the expression says. So do you have any closing thoughts, anything you want to really reinforce?

Wendy 1:00:42

I think I just want to thank you for giving me the opportunity to talk about this, I think talking about it is the key really, educating people about this, particularly in the States, where as I understand it, from some of the American people who spoke to me, there's not as much support perhaps, for people who go through bullying in the workplace, as there might be in Europe and the UK. Look after your colleagues, treat them like you would your friends. I am not saying you don't need to be friends with them, but just you know, they're human beings and they're deserving of respect. And if you see something, then just go and have a

chat to them and call out people who are behaving in a bullying manner overtly in the workplace and to try and prevent it. Because it's such a horrible thing and it shouldn't be happening. We're all adults, aren't we? You'd think it wouldn't happen when you're adult, that the school grounds are different but yeah, workplace is where you should be happy.

Jean 1:01:47

But you know, many of us really are not taught how to be human beings. And so it takes people like you who are willing to come forward and do something about a situation and to help people learn how to handle them. So thank you, Wendy.

Wendy 1:02:07

My pleasure.

Jean 1:02:08

I've enjoyed it and we will be talking.