




Under the Radar: Weeding Out Workplace Aggression

Indirect, covert aggression can impede the teaching and learning going on in schools.

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Organizational malfunction can be attributed to structural factors such as lack of resources or lack of staff capacity and readiness. Or it could be due, in part, to staff aggression occurring covertly and “under the radar” of the principal. Where does this invisible aggression come from and how does it affect principals and their schools? To answer this question, I conducted a study examining the effects of indirect, covert aggression on individuals in a variety of different occupations and organizational cultures.

Adult patterns of indirect, covert aggression are rooted in childhood behavior like bullying. Overt childhood bullying has been well-studied and schools are increasingly sensitive to its effects on students’ emotional health. However, even with specific policies and programs designed to address and prevent bullying, students and their parents continue to report its existence as a poisonous part of school life.

Recent research has focused on indirect, or relational, aggression as a subset of bullying behavior. In such aggression patterns, the value of the relationship itself becomes the “capital” by which aggressors manipulate targets. Relational aggression is indirect and covert, and often those in charge fail to notice its occurrence. Studies of relational aggression define it as primarily a female form of aggression, at least in childhood. Forms of indirect, covert aggression include:

- **Dyads.** These are unhealthy paired friendships where one individual dominates the other.
- **Double-voicing and Gossiping.** Double-voicing occurs when participants in the aggression promote their own causes with apologies and excuses, while at the same time preserving relationships by advocating for their rivals.
- **Humor and Labeling.** The use of humor is a way to harm another person and then proclaim that it was just a joke. Targets of such teasing are required to take the joke and laugh along for fear of being labeled as hypersensitive.
- **Alliance and Cliques.** Social networks serve to facilitate the usage of indirect, covert aggression as the means for inflicting pain on enemies. Cliques become agents for harm and coercion as individuals form and discard alliances.
- **Middlegirls or Messengers.** These are individuals who participate in conflict by mediating or carrying messages between combatants. These individuals dwell in a risky place, living with the fear of being seen as allied with one side more than the other.

Research examining indirect, covert aggression patterns among adults supports my suspicion that childhood patterns of aggression continue to persist into adulthood—with increased sophistication—and include some additional forms. The more advanced forms of aggression are:

- **Incivility.** Incivility is a violation—through rudeness and a lack of regard and respect for others’ feelings—of cultural norms of civil behavior. Such behavior includes failing to say “please” and “thank you,” leaving just a bit of coffee in the break room so the next person must brew the pot, standing over a person impatiently while he or she tries to finish a phone conversation, subjecting others to personal conversations or phone calls, and carelessly leaving trash around.
- **Status Degradation and Mobbing.** When an individual, previously regarded by all as competent, becomes systematically reconstituted as no longer competent, this individual has been the object of status degradation or mobbing. More than “paying for a mistake,” an individual thus treated is utterly redefined, and is now seen by the group

as never having been competent to begin with. Such individuals generally leave or are “mobbed” out of their organizations.

- **Double-Binds.** Double-bind messages are regularly sent on two levels that contradict each other. Recipients of double-bind messages are powerless to comment on their confusion or seek clarification—increasing the pain of the double-bind.

Based upon these and other examples from the research, I developed a limited online survey that asked participants to think of a specific organizational situation in which interpersonal aggressive behaviors occurred, and then to situate themselves in one of three categories as they described this specific event:

1. As an expresser—one who is or has been deliberately aggressive toward another individual;
2. As a receiver—one who is or has been the recipient of deliberate aggression from one or more persons; or
3. As a witness—one who is or has been aware of incidents of aggression.

Of the 35 participants who met the requirements for the study, three identified themselves as expressers, eight as witnesses, and 17 as receivers.

Expressers employed ostracism, shunning, and double-voicing. In all cases they reported feeling justified, although troubled, by their aggression due to the breaking of cultural norms.

Witnesses saw various forms of indirect aggression such as ostracism and shunning, manipulation through false promises or threats, sabotage, and gossip and rumors enacted against receivers. Some witnesses reported the aggression to “higher ups” but saw no effective action taken. One witness tried to intervene on the behalf of a receiver, only to find himself become a target of aggression.

Receivers of indirect aggression reported various levels of pain, humiliation, and trauma, offering descriptions of their emotional responses to ongoing indirect aggression, confirming Loring’s (1994) characterization of “erosion of the self.” Often, their stories held evidence of isolation, shutting down, or seeking escape.

Taking Charge of Workplace Aggression

A proactive approach to remedying indirect, covert aggression can help organizations and their members become healthier. As school leaders seek solutions to these problems, they must be wary of falling prey to what Ronald Heifetz describes as seeking a mechanical answer to an adaptive problem. Instead, school leaders must be aware that adaptive problems “call for leadership that induces learning . . . both to define problems and implement solutions” (Heifetz, 1994).

Other solutions to patterns of workplace aggression (*e.g.*, in-services on organizational communications skills or structured mediation meetings) need to be examined for overly simplistic goals. Many such solutions may only serve to drive the aggression underground, at the same time deluding well-intentioned leaders into believing they have fixed the problem. Organizational culture is generally an unacknowledged factor in patterns of workplace indirect aggression, and because culture is deep and often invisible, where cultural norms of indirect aggression are present, superficial solutions provide little hope for long-term cures.

This is not to say that training in interpersonal communication and conflict resolution is not valuable for organizational leaders and employees—but such training is best framed within the context of an organization’s culture. Indirect, covert aggression is a form of adult aggression that is a cultural norm for many schools, but awareness can help replace such a negative norm with that of civility and teamwork. Just as schools no longer accept childhood bullying as simply a part of youth—something to be tolerated until it resolves itself—school leaders must understand how adult patterns of indirect, covert aggression are harming the emotional health of individuals and the vitality of schools and school districts. Until and unless school leaders are willing to confront the presence of patterns of indirect, covert

aggression that flourish in some school cultures, such aggression will continue as a cultural norm and will continue to cause harm.

References

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On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussions about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. How does indirect, covert aggression differ from obvious and direct forms of aggression?
2. What are examples of workplace aggression that have been enacted in our school?
3. How can teachers' childhood bullying experiences affect them as adults in their work relationships?
4. How does workplace aggression that occurs among teachers affect the teaching and learning going on in schools?
5. How can schools remedy workplace aggression?