

# Surviving work abuse without self-destructing

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Many academics will tell you that the worst thing about their job is personal politics. The downside begins with lack of support and proceeds to put-downs, vicious rumours and undermining of colleagues. Sometimes an academic or student comes under attack from a supervisor, suffering petty harassment (slighting comments, loss of files, inconvenient tasks), threats and reprimands.

Individuals may be singled out for attack due to their sex, ethnicity, personal style or good performance, or just because they are a convenient target. Some units are so toxic that virtually everyone suffers in ongoing battles involving tantrums, set-ups and even physical assaults.

In many such toxic workplaces, one person – the scapegoat – becomes a convenient target for everyone's abuse.

The problems are familiar enough, but what to do about them is less obvious. For those who have already been scapegoated, it is often too late. They are either so stigmatised or traumatised as to have little chance of contributing constructively to change, or have been dismissed on a pretext or for poor performance resulting from the attacks.

What should you do if you or one of your colleagues comes under attack?

Doing nothing is not much help, since the abuse usually continues or worsens. Formal complaints often lead nowhere and trigger further abuse.

Books on management and organisations don't give much guidance. There are stacks of books on dynamic leadership, empowerment, the workplace and creating positive change. Unfortunately, these sorts of optimistic writings give little recognition of the terrible dynamics of so many workplaces.

Furthermore, they are invariably oriented to managers, especially top managers. They assume a sincere will to bring about beneficial change. There is virtually nothing directed to middle and lower-level workers who would like to change things but have no support from or are actively sabotaged by their superiors and coworkers.

Given this situation, it is exciting to find a new book that provides some real hope for workplace victims: Judith



Wyatt and Chauncey Hare's *Work Abuse: How to Recognize and Survive It* (Rochester, Vermont: Schenkman Books, 1997).

This book is a comprehensive guide to surviving harassment, scapegoating, humiliation and undermining. It is by far the most helpful manual that I've come across.

The authors have many years' experience in counselling work-abuse victims. They are blunt in stating that most workplaces are abusive and that there's no easy way to change them.

Therefore, they argue, the individual who is a target of abuse needs to develop personal skills to understand the situation, change their emotional response and rehearse new behaviours.

Their underlying premise is that in order to survive, change the situation or leave successfully, one has to change oneself. Although this will not be welcomed by those who seek to confront

and expose management, the approach nevertheless has useful insights for organisational activists, especially in understanding what may be happening to others and learning how to support them.

The authors rely on the concept of shame as the driving force behind organisational dynamics. People are shamed (humiliated) in various ways, for example, by being exposed or criticised for doing an inadequate job, by having suggestions ignored or laughed at and by being revealed as too emotional or caring.

Academics are regularly shamed when students criticise their teaching, when their grant submissions fail or their papers are rejected, when they see colleagues (especially junior ones) being successful and when others imply they are not doing their fair share of the work.

To develop a method of coping with

the dynamics of shame in organisations, the authors examine the psychology of both individuals and groups. They develop the ideas of "cims" (childhood individual maintenance strategies) that shape individual psychology and of "norms" (native organisational maintenance strategies) that shape group dynamics. Both cims and norms are unconscious, and their interaction affects how individuals cope.

Wyatt and Hare's basic strategy for workers is to learn how to analyse people and the organisation (cims and norms) and to develop the capacity to not be affected by shaming, but instead to psychologically distance oneself. In other words, rather than being caught up in toxic behaviours at work, they believe it is possible to emotionally separate oneself, maintaining integrity internally and helping to survive and promote beneficial change.

They are quite clear about how difficult it is to get others to change, especially managers, who have a stake in their power and who are threatened by those who demonstrate competence (not to mention those who mount a direct challenge).

They elaborate two major methods for survival: "empowered awareness" and "strategic utilisation."

Empowered awareness is basically becoming conscious of what is happening, including all the abuse, rather than denying it. It is a process of developing the skills for building one's own inner psychological world. It involves observing one's own feelings, evaluating other people's character styles and observing the organisation's norms and power structure. It includes generating meaning and purpose in one's own life, coping with shaming by others, avoiding self-shaming and avoiding futile power struggles.

Strategic utilisation involves setting goals, planning and preparation, evaluating alternatives and taking action. One important part of this is working out one's own self-interests and also the self-interests of others, and then aligning one's self-interests with those of others, especially superiors, in order to achieve one's own goals while not threatening others.

The authors give some lengthy examples, showing how shaming, abuse and their recommended strategies operate. Their analysis is based

largely on experience with US workplaces, but most of it would apply readily in Australia.

*Work Abuse* is a long book. It is not something to read in a day or even a week. It does not provide a quick fix to urgent problems. Rather, it is best studied slowly and thoughtfully.

The process of changing one's own habitual ways of responding to abuse is not easy. The authors recommend finding either a therapist or a friend to help, especially in recovering from a crisis. But most important is being willing to undertake the process of change and putting in the effort to do so.

The book must be ordered from the US and will cost about A\$60. That's not cheap. But it is a bargain if it gives even a chance of avoiding or overcoming work abuse, which can cause suffering for years, not to mention substantial financial losses.

To a considerable extent, the reader must take what the authors say on trust. There is no detailed justification for the analysis (such as their assumption that shame is the key driving force in abuse), nor any statistics on the effectiveness of their methods compared to other techniques. Their case rests primarily on how well their explanation fits with readers' own experiences and understandings.

In other words, you need to ask, does what they say ring true? To me, having talked to many whistleblowers over the years, it does!

The authors' focus is on surviving personally and developing strategies to move ahead. In most cases, making a formal complaint or a public statement about problems leads only to grief for the person who speaks out and no change in the organisation; the authors argue against any such self-destructive path. They say that justice cannot be expected from top management. In fact, they say, "Justice is a myth, a story; expecting it to happen within a negative-norm workplace is always self-destructive."

*Work Abuse* should be obtained by counselling, equal opportunity and personnel units and recommended to anyone who is targeted for abuse.

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