

Editor's Column: "And We Won't Back Down"

Megan Lowe, University of Louisiana at Monroe



If you read my column regularly, you have likely picked up on the fact that the last few years of my professional life have been very trying. Things are now looking up, and I consider myself to be a very resilient person, meaning that the experiences I have had will likely not linger. I cannot imagine being plagued by the demons and ghosts which have kept me company over the last couple of years going forward. That is not to say that I'm enjoying the benefits of the characters' experiences in "Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind" – quite the opposite. The impact that the deselection project and the profound emotional labor and exhaustion and burnout that have tasked me have left an indelible imprint on who I am as a professional. I have learned important lessons, gained a deeper understanding of my strengths and weaknesses, and found the motivation to co-author and publish my first full-length book – on the emotional dimensions of academic librarianship. At present, my co-author and I are pursuing publication of another book, this one focusing on crises in libraries and the prevention and mitigation of crises.

One of the words that colleagues used to describe my experiences when I shared my experiences with them was *toxic*. The research my co-author and I carried out for our first book involved a lot of examining of topics which relate to toxic work environments, incivility in the workplace, and facets of work which can take physical, emotional, and psychological tolls. One topic we discussed in our book, and which I keep coming back

to again and again, is workplace bullying. It will undoubtedly form part of the discussions which will take place in our next book. The discussion of workplace bullying is one that must continue to take place until it does not occur anymore, and it's a discussion that needs to be had in academia and beyond.

Most people would describe some of the experiences I had in the course of the deselection project as bullying. As I did more research on the topic, I must confess that I agreed with their assessment. Like many people, however, prior to that research, I tended to think of bullying as something that happened on the playground between children, not between adult professionals in the workplace. I did not consider what happened to me as bullying at first. It was easy to just call the people who engaged in those behaviors "crazy." It was easy to dismiss their behaviors as the result of good intentions but misplaced anger. I thought to myself: *How can an adult professional behave this way and not appreciate the impact their actions and words have?* I never thought: *Why is this person bullying me?*

But the reality is that bullying is something that happens between people of all ages, in all professions, and in a variety of ways. In academia the term *incivility* has been used in recent publications on the topic, but this term – while well-meaning – diminishes the experiences of those individuals who have been the target of bullying and makes the behaviors of the bullies seem more tactless and discourteous rather than abusive, aggressive, and sometimes malicious and insidious. If we are going to have these conversations – and we need to have them – we have to be willing to use the term *workplace bullying*. We have to be willing to call out such behaviors and apply for assistance through appropriate channels. This means documenting the behaviors of the

bullies, in order to show patterns of behavior. This means engaging with others and encouraging them to take a stand. This means modeling courteous and work-appropriate behaviors. This means making those behaviors the norm. This means looking to leaders to check their subordinates who engage in these behaviors. This means looking to human resources to offer training on avoiding bullying behaviors and how to support employees who have been bullied. This is not an “us versus them” approach: this is helping others realize the impact of their behaviors and the impropriety of those behaviors in the workplace (and beyond). This means encouraging and supporting a work environment in which civility, courtesy, and collaboration are the norm and are practiced and modelled by *everyone*.

I realize this may sound a little *pie in the sky*. And maybe it is! But that does not mean we can't reach for it. We need not shy away from these conversations. They need to become part of employee onboarding, workplace and organizational culture, professional development, and, most importantly, professional values. Bullying is not something anybody should have to endure. It's not a situation for “suck it up, buttercup!” It's a situation in which a few bad apples are spreading their rot to the whole barrel, slowly but surely, where rot is the equivalent of workplace stress, health problems, burnout, and employee turnover. This is not a scenario in which the problem is limited to the bully and their target; this is a scenario that spreads outward from that dynamic and affects everybody around it, the work environment, and eventually the whole organization. Let's not let it spread to whole *professions*.

One of the ways in which we can combat bullying is to foster encouraging, collaborative, and supportive work environments. If we need to reach out to human

resources management – in terms of both our organizations’ HR departments and in terms of HRM’s practices for facilitating positive work cultures – then that is what we need to do. They may be far better equipped to assist in handling bullying than we are, and that is perfectly fine. It is not necessarily our job as library and information professionals to solve workplace problems. The best we can do is behave professional, courteously, collaboratively, encouragingly, and supportively. We need not be afraid to reach out to others for assistance. We have looked the ‘bullies’ of giant publishers and vendors in the eye and found solutions against them. We promote diversity and value social justice, standing against inequity and promoting equitable access. We need not be afraid to stand up for ourselves against the inequities and challenges closer to home. We need not be afraid to promote equity and diversity and stand for those things firmly within our own workplaces. In short, “we won’t back down.”