

Busting 101: Workplace Bullying Between Men

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Randy, Mac, and Lenny have worked together for over 20 years. They'd say that they're good friends. They joke around with each other all the time. For example, one time during lunch, when Randy got up to get another cup of coffee, Mac and Lenny sprinkled a little water on his seat. Randy came back, sat down, and got his pants wet. Mac said, "Randy, you need some of those diapers that the old geezers wear in the rest homes," and the three of them laughed.

One day, a new guy was assigned to work in their department; he introduced himself as Tony Cavelli. Over the next few weeks, Mac and Lenny began calling Tony "Mario" and putting on a mock Italian accent when they talked to him. Tony didn't say anything; he just kept doing his job.

Tony started hanging out with Jack, another guy in their department. Mac said to Tony, "Hey Mario, you're not going queer on us, are you?" About a week later, while Tony and Jack were meeting in a conference room, Mac locked the door. Mac yelled, "This will give you girls some privacy!" Lenny was standing next to Mac and the two of them walked away laughing; Randy observed all of this from a distance and quietly went back to work.

Tony decided to teach Mac a lesson. He created a fake magazine cover with a photo of Mac and a male lover, and secretly posted copies on bulletin boards throughout the company. A few days later, after some detective work, Mac found out who put up the magazine covers. In the middle of the workday, Mac quietly went out to the parking lot, and let the air out of Tony's car tires. He left a note on the car: "This is for the posters."

Tony didn't come into work for the next week. He told his supervisor that his kid was sick and that he had to stay home. In a phone call with Jack, Tony said, "I'll get Mac. He'll regret this."

In the spring of 1996, I was asked to meet with a group of mid-level managers at a U.S. manufacturing plant. They described a pattern of interactions between production workers called "busting" that involved horseplay – making "jokes" and playing "pranks" – based on age, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, mannerisms, physical appearance, family and friends, and status on the shop floor. For the most part, nothing was off limits. On occasion, busting had escalated to bullying and harassment, including threats, destruction of personal property, and fist fights in the plant and in the parking lot.

Although the characters and events described above are fictional, they fit the pattern of busting at the plant. There were a few "Macs" who initiated busting and were seemingly unaware or uncaring of the impact of their behavior on others. If asked about the impact, they might say things like, "It's all in fun," "You're making a big deal out of nothing," or "Life is tough so get used to it." There were the "Lennys" who played along, also oblivious to the impact, and yet not as overtly hostile as the Macs. There were the "Randys" who might laugh along as the target of the busting, at other times be a bystander, apparently aware of the impact yet doing nothing to challenge the Macs or Lennys. Then there were the "Tonys" who were the targets of busting. They tried to ignore it. When that didn't work, they escalated the busting by trying to get back at

the Macs.

It's not an accident that Mac and his coworkers are white men; in fact, busting was primarily a white male behavior at this plant. On the rare occasions when white women engaged in busting, it was usually in response to the teasing they got from white men. As far as I could tell, white women seldom initiated this type of behavior. In their relationships with coworkers they typically used other forms of communication, such as empathetic listening, sharing of feelings and direct feedback. There were some people of color at the plant who kept a low profile because of overt and covert racism and the dominance of white people.

Managers at the plant knew about some of the incidents, but they suspected that many went unreported and that the emotional damage to the workers was more extensive than anyone realized. Some workers were reporting high levels of stress and were in therapy. In at least one case, a worker had attempted suicide because of the busting directed at him. There was concern that workers might be directing their frustrations at partners and children at home.

In addition to the human costs, managers realized that there were business costs. For example, worker safety was jeopardized, information wasn't shared between feuding workers and some workers had walked off their shifts or taken leaves of absence to avoid contact with other coworkers who had harassed them. There were legal costs associated with law suits claiming that the company wasn't providing a safe environment for workers, and there was a very real chance of violence on the shop floor. I frequently heard concerns about someone "going postal," a reference to the highly-publicized incidents at post offices where postal workers had killed fellow employees.

The plant had a long history of changes in corporate ownership and periods of mass hiring and mass layoffs. There were stories going back two decades of "secrets" and "lies" by corporate owners and plant management, resulting in an atmosphere of distrust by the workers. The union was not particularly strong and there were longstanding conflicts between labor and management; the union had recently "lost" several cases in arbitration and had negotiated a contract that workers didn't particularly like. Workers experienced themselves as simply putting in their time until they could retire. It was an oppressive environment. I sensed a lot of sadness and pain in the plant; there was an air of pessimism and a sense that old hurts had never healed.

Assessing the Problem

Initially, management was looking for an outsider who could "educate" the workers about the problems with busting. This was consistent with the management style of the plant. I resisted this assessment – it sounded to me like "blaming the victim." I wondered if management had clearly communicated its expectations about employee behavior; if supervisors knew how to recognize and deal with busting; if supervisors themselves were involved in busting.

I learned about busting first hand as a teenager playing competitive sports with other guys and in my first jobs in construction. I continued to use it with some friends. I also knew that busting was part of the culture among white men and a way some white men use to communicate with each other. Unless the workers themselves saw a problem with busting, I believed that they would resist management telling them how to conduct their relationships with coworkers.

In this plant, I was clearly an outsider. Although I had held construction jobs as a young man and felt comfortable with blue collar workers, I am an "Ivy-Leaguer" with a master's degree in

education and a consultant for over two decades. When I worked summer construction jobs my nickname was “college boy,” and it was not a compliment. Now, 30 years later, I am a “professional” being hired by management to “fix” the workers. I didn’t want to walk into that trap. I knew that I was capable of thinking that I was “smarter” than the workers which, of course, I was not.

Consequently, I told the mid-level managers that I would only work in this situation if I could have ongoing meetings with them and conduct management training for the first-level supervisors. They agreed to that. I also told them that I would not do anything in the way of an intervention with the workers until I had met with some of them. I wanted to build some relationships with them, hear from them what they thought the problem was and find out if they thought that some kind of training might be useful. The managers agreed to that as well, and so I set up a series of focus groups and met with about 75 workers.

Focus Group Insights

In the focus groups, workers initially told me that busting wasn’t a problem for them, that management was making a big deal out of a few incidents. Workers told me that everyone got along – it was like family – and that joking and pranking was all in good fun. They told me that busting is a good thing: it’s a way to pass time, communicate with coworkers and learn about the people you work with everyday.

They told me that busting is a way to “feel out another guy” and “see what he can take.” Many workers told me that this behavior was widespread and that “you can’t do anything about it. It’s always been there and always will be.” Greetings, casual conversation and feedback about work performance were regularly expressed through busting. Many of the workers had been given nicknames, some of which didn’t sound very complimentary to my ears.

Privately, however, some workers told me that they had personally been hurt or seen friends hurt by others’ jokes and pranks. There was some concern that a few workers were capable of bringing violence to the workplace. Workers also told me that there were few or no options for dealing with offensive behaviors. It was generally agreed that there were no structural solutions; both the union and management were seen as incapable or not interested in resolving conflicts between workers.

Complaining to management or the union was considered “ratting” on a union brother. Telling the offender to “stop” was believed to make it worse, because the offender would then “know your weak spot and really go after you.” Challenging offending coworkers was considered too risky because you might be the next target. That left only three options: laughing along with the busting, ignoring it or reciprocating.

From the workers’ perspective there were both positive and negative qualities of busting. On the one hand, busting was, for some of them, a friendly and playful activity used only with coworkers where a close friendship was well established. It was considered a way to develop and maintain intimacy; if they knew that busting was hurtful, they would usually stop and even apologize. These men worked closely together, supported and sometimes protected one another and were friends both on and off the job. If they could be freed to express it, I believed that many of them would say that they care deeply for one another. However, perhaps because of homophobia and early training to be emotionally and physically tough as working-class men, direct statements of affection would be off-limits. And it would make sense that they would be unwilling to tell each other when busting was hurtful.

On the other hand, some workers seemed to use busting as their primary mode of communication with peers. I was told by some workers that busting was really the only way they interacted with each other. They had learned how to do it as boys and young men, first from being the target of busting and then in male peer groups. As a result, it seemed to me that they weren't able to "read" a coworker's emotional reaction to being busted, even if they claimed that they wouldn't want to hurt his feelings. Or, if they were aware of the hurt they caused, they weren't able to talk about it.

Some malicious workers intentionally tried to make others' lives miserable and didn't seem to care who was hurt in the process. When I met a few of these men, they seemed tough on the surface. I wondered what had happened to them that made them so tough. It was easy for me to imagine that they were still hurting from the experience of being busted when they were younger. If that were the case, then each subsequent experience of being busted inflamed the unhealed emotional wound; simply being at the plant could be enough for them to get defensive. I recall talking with one man whose coworkers claimed that he was one of the malicious busters. As a way to simply make contact with him, I asked him what he thought about the busting at the plant. I just listened to him, and within five minutes his voice rose to an angry pitch as he told me in detail about how some older men had busted him on one of his first jobs as a teenager.

All of this was so familiar to me. I saw myself using busting as a way to keep from appearing vulnerable. I cast it as "just teasing," but I didn't realize that my "teasing" was sometimes hurtful to people I cared about. Sometimes, I didn't like it if others "teased" me. I realized that it was mostly men in my life who used busting, and it was mostly, but not always, men who I busted. Ironically, I was frequently critical of the ways that men communicate, saying that "they" aren't willing to be vulnerable and gentle and don't seem to know how to listen. Like some men, I preferred the company of women because I got attention in a non-judgmental way. Sometimes I was scared to be around other men.

Listening to these men was like holding up a mirror. Although I believed that they were not seeing the whole picture of their behavior, I began to see that there was a lot that I could learn about myself from being around them. I wasn't yet convinced that a "workshop" or a "class" was the way to go, but I was getting excited about the possibility of trying to create something that they would find useful. I asked the workers I met if they might be interested in attending a pilot class on busting. Enough said "yes" to plan three classes of 20 participants each.

Deciding on the Next Step

My next step was to get some help from colleagues. I asked Patti DeRosa, a trainer with many years of experience to co-develop and co-facilitate Busting 101. The result was a one-day class officially called, "Where Do I Draw the Line Between Fun and Harassment?" Informally, it was known as "Busting 101." After several successful pilot classes, I brought in ten more colleagues to co-facilitate the class. Over the next three years, we saw about 2,000 workers, 15-20 at a time, for a day of intense conversation about busting.

Based on feedback from the workers, our observations of the organizational culture and our own thoughts about busting, we decided that we had two primary goals for the class:

- provide a "formal" opportunity for workers to talk about busting and hear from each the difference between "fun" and "harassment;" and

- support workers in speaking out about what is okay and not okay for them when it comes to busting.

Managing Management

Management wanted us to lay down the law to the workers, telling them what was acceptable and unacceptable. But for us to simply tell them that busting was wrong would have discounted their own beliefs and experiences. And, if we tried to stop them from busting and they didn't have something to replace the busting behavior – something that felt appropriate and “real” to them – then they would be left with no way to communicate with one another. For those workers who used busting as a way to seem tough and keep others at a distance, telling them to stop busting would be, in effect, taking away their ability to psychologically defend themselves. That would be irresponsible on our part as consultants.

Instead, we saw our role as facilitating their conversations, rather than teaching them anything about busting. In fact, we assumed that almost all of them knew, in some way, that busting had both positive and negative qualities and that fun to one person could be hurtful to another. That meant that we needed to set up a variety of structures for them to engage with one another and, hopefully, share what they already knew about busting but hadn't yet admitted.

So our design for the class had to include some affirmation of busting as a communication tool. We had to provide some time for them to articulate what was positive about busting, and in effect, support their defensiveness. If we could be respectful of them and compliment them in ways that were “real” and that they could “take in,” then this might encourage them to let down their guard a little and begin to see things differently. If we could do this then we believed they might be willing to talk openly about the hurtful qualities of busting, as they had experienced it personally and seen it in others.

In meetings with managers, we emphasized that our role was to facilitate an educational opportunity for the workers, and that discipline was the responsibility of management. They understood that. We did, however, at the managers' request, agree to remind workers of the company's policies that pertained to busting, by handing out a one-page summary of these policies during the class. Not surprisingly, almost all of the workers indicated that they were aware of these policies.

Design of the Class

We always began each class with comments about how the participants might be feeling, as a way to acknowledge and legitimize their anger at having to attend, their fears about the day or their cynicism that this was a waste of time. Since attendance was mandatory and some workers were assigned to the class upon arrival at work (supervisors believed that some workers would not come to work if they knew in advance) participants often entered the room with resentment. Some were very outspoken about this.

For the first hour participants introduced themselves and we shared something personal about ourselves. We did this as a way to get to know them and to reveal ourselves to them. Although it was highly unusual in this plant for classes or meetings to start by getting to know one another, we saw the building of relationships as critical first steps to dealing with busting. As a colleague of ours said, “the more you know someone, the more likely it is that you will be able to deal with the offenses that occur. You'll be able to understand each other and forgive each other.”

After what probably seemed to some of them like a long preface to the class – but was for us an

integral part of the class – we invited them to talk about their experiences with busting. In structured small-group exercises, we asked them about the positive and negative qualities of busting, the impact of busting on themselves, their coworkers, production and life outside of work. We listened carefully to all of their responses.

We then presented some information about the role of feelings in identifying their own and others' responses to busting. But rather than “teach” them about feelings, we presented this information as if it were a review and used our own personal examples about the use of feelings in our lives. Most of the workers never talked directly about their feelings at work; it was a cultural norm not to. However, we knew they had feelings about busting and we wanted to give them a language to use and permission to talk about their feelings. We wanted to begin to bring the topic a little closer to their hearts.

About four hours into the program, we set up an activity to give them an opportunity to apply all of what we had done so far. Using 16 written hypothetical situations involving busting, we asked them in small groups to make decisions about the “okayness” of each situation and discuss how they might respond if they were in that situation. Typically, these small-group discussions took up to an hour and then we had a large-group conversation about the situations and the different ways that they evaluated the situations. We never tried to get them to reach consensus nor did we suggest what the right or wrong answers were. The objective was to provide an environment where they could hear each others' opinions. For some, this was an important and sometimes first attempt at confronting their coworkers about what they believed was “wrong” with busting.

As a way to bring closure to the class, we invited them to talk about the impact on them personally when they receive positive and negative feedback. This was a way for them to again articulate why busting can be hurtful and why other forms of communication – like compliments – are helpful. We also asked each participant, if they were willing, to say to the group what is personally “over the line” for them – what kind of jokes and teasing they don't want to hear from others. Finally, we asked them to talk about what they liked and didn't like about the class.

The Guidelines We Followed As Facilitators

As facilitators, we had clear guidelines for our own behavior as we interacted with them and we worked hard to follow those guidelines. Our basic principle was to respect them and appreciate the contributions they made to the class. We listened to the feelings they expressed, whether they made sense to us or not. When they told us how angry they were, we listened, thanked them for their comments and told them that we might feel the same way if we had been told to attend a class at the last minute, without any rationale and no chance for input.

We gently encouraged them to participate in spite of their resistance. We asked questions as a way to learn about them and show our interest in them. We learned their names and used them throughout the day. We complimented them on their observations and asked them what they wanted to learn and what kind of relationships they wanted with one another.

We accepted and honored the ways that old friends and veteran coworkers teased one another based on relationships they had developed over many years. Although there was some information we shared with them, we kept our “lectures” to a minimum and interacted with them while we talked to them. We were aware of our temptation to preach to them and resisted this; when we felt the urge to preach, we dramatized that urge by telling them we were going to get on a soapbox and then, literally, standing on a chair and timing ourselves so that our preaching would last no more than 30 to 45 seconds.

Sometimes their behavior was unnerving, and it was difficult for us to not be defensive. They routinely asked questions about our expertise and how much we were getting paid, with the implication that we were just highly-paid consultants who didn't really care about them. They told us that we were just pawns of management; that they had heard from coworkers that the class "sucked." On occasion, participants read newspapers, clowned around or took naps.

It was frustrating when they would try to shift all of the responsibility for the negative impact of busting to management, saying that management was exaggerating the problem or that management knew who was causing the problems and ignored it. But when we tried to get them to see their part in it, they experienced it as us blaming them and not understanding. It was tempting to try to tell them how to fix their problems, but that almost always backfired, because they just needed to talk about it. And, to them, our "solutions" to their "problems" were sometimes simplistic or naïve.

Responses to the Class

The shifts in their behaviors over the course of one day were noticeable and sometimes profound. Some days, there seemed to be some magic in the room. They might tell us when they first came into the room that they were not going to participate at all, even refusing to tell us their names, but after a couple of hours, they would be completely engaged in the discussions. Or they might come in angry, telling us that the class was a waste of time, and then tell us at the end of the class that this had been valuable for them. We were repeatedly told that this was the best, or one of the best, classes that they had ever taken. And, there were some – perhaps 5 percent – who told us at the end of the class that they had learned nothing and that it was a waste of their time and the company's money.

However, their positive reactions to the class outweighed the negative reactions by a long shot. In the first five minutes of the class, when we would talk about the feelings they might bring to the class – anger at having to attend, fear of being busted by another member of the class or having to speak in a group, perhaps some joy at being able to get off the production floor for a day to attend this class – participants would raise their heads and make eye contact with us as if to say, "Thank you for recognizing that we have feelings about this." Their anger dissipated as we provided some space for them to simply express it; their fear subsided as we reassured them that we would not allow people to be mean to each other in the class nor would we force them to talk about something that they didn't want to talk about.

Most people participated in all aspects of the class. They shared their opinions about what's good and hurtful about busting, and shared personal examples of how they had witnessed the harmful impact of busting. When we asked them about their feelings about busting, they were explicit and articulate which showed us that we were right in assuming that they only needed some permission and vocabulary to talk about their feelings. By the time we would get to the hypothetical busting situations, they worked independently in small groups and sometimes we had to encourage them to finish up. In large-group discussion, there were often respectful peer confrontations, where the members of one small group, or an individual, would challenge someone's belief that a particular example of busting wasn't hurtful.

Even though we came to trust that the class would have an impact on the participants, their behavior and comments in the last hour always surprised us. They revealed what was personally hurtful to them, even though they had told us earlier in the class that busting never bothered them. A heavy-set man told the group that he didn't want to be teased ever again about being fat,

and the other members of the group would quietly listen and sympathetically nod their heads. Or, a “tough-acting” man would tell the group that the only type of feedback he really wanted at work was positive – “I want to hear what people like about my work and I want to know that they value what I do and who I am. I don’t want to hear any putdowns or criticisms. I don’t want to hear what you don’t like about me.”

When we asked them to tell us about the class, some said they had a bad attitude at the beginning of the class and had changed their minds; most told us how much they appreciated how respectful we had been and what great teachers we were. As they were leaving the room, participants personally thanked us. Sometimes people stuck around to talk with us further, as if they just wanted to make contact. They would tell us about themselves, ask us questions about our lives or want us to help them solve problems they faced at work or at home.

One Year Later

When all workers had attended the class, we held a half-day session for anyone who wanted to talk about the impact of the class. Those who attended this session had significant things to say about the changes they had seen. There were changes in their coworkers and the work environment:

- "Others have changed, definitely. People are now aware; they're saying to each other, 'you're crossing the line.'"
- "The class has worked. In my area, they have not forgotten the class. It has become part of the language. My work environment feels better."
- "I have noticed that others have changed. The guys are more conscious that I'm the only woman in the room. There's more respect shown to me."
- "There's been an overall increase in the sensitivity of other people. Not a quantum leap but an increase. There's a common understanding of what crossing the line means, because we all went through the class."
- "I see change out there. People have backed off when they have to back off. Some guys still do it, but they know where to stop."

And they had things to say about the changes they saw in themselves:

- "I tell others to 'back off, shut up' if they're hurting others."
- "I've calmed down, I don't say certain things that others could take the wrong way. I still play around, but I'm less nasty."
- "Certain people I don't tease as much, if they don't take it well. I've realized what I already knew, that I was hurting some people when I needed them, and I have to admit that I enjoyed it. I'm more honest with myself now."
- "I've said to others that I didn't think what they were doing was appropriate."
- "I've seen change in myself. I've been tougher. In the past, I've tried to be a pleaser, but now I say, 'Wait a minute, I didn't like that.'"

In Summary

In the end, we believe that we provided a rare opportunity for these men and women to feel respected at work. Our willingness to listen to them and appreciate their struggles could shift their energy in a relatively short time, all the more remarkable given their 20-, 30-, and even 40-year histories of working in a difficult, oppressive environment. We also suspect that we had an impact on their home lives. Although we have no data about this, we believe that it is quite possible that we reduced the amount of verbal and physical abuse in the families of these workers. Several participants told us something like: “I wish that I had taken this class when I

first got married and had kids. It would have improved my family life. I would have been easier to life with.”

Aside from what the workers told us when all the classes were complete, we have no way to determine the long-term impact of this class. Despite our attempts to get management to make changes in the plant that would support the new behaviors that the workers had reported to us, there was no follow-up. Before a year had passed, there were again rumors of massive layoffs. Shortly after that, the layoffs began and the plant eventually closed. And yet we remain hopeful that this small intervention had a major impact on people’s lives.

We do know that the class had a major impact on our lives. Each of us has had some formal education beyond high school and held “professional” jobs as adults. For some of us, our experience at the plant challenged any stereotypes we had of “factory workers.” They understood the meaning and value of feelings better than some faculty members of prestigious universities. They were more cooperative and ready to change their perspectives than some white collar employees in the same company. They were honest and outspoken – we usually knew where they were coming from. These were people who, for the most part, cared deeply about each other and wanted to do a good job.

Hearing their stories and getting to know them a little bit deepened our respect for what they had to sometimes put up with: fear of layoffs, authoritarian managers and demeaning work. For some of us, being in the plant reminded us of our parents’ jobs as blue collar workers: the pride they took in their work and the ways they were oppressed. Driving home from the class, we’d often have long conversations about our parents’ lives and the impact that being in the plant had on us.

Teaching this class strengthened our conviction about the importance of respecting people, supporting them in setting the agenda for what they want. We learned and re-learned that our role was to listen, accept their feelings, and try to see that their reactions were understandable given the culture of the plant, the rules of busting and their socialization as white working class men and women. Teaching the class reminded us that many people already know what they need to know about human behavior. They just need some time to remind themselves, and be reminded, that it comes down to some simple things.

The response of one man, several months after he attended the class, stands out as a particular success story:

“I used to be the #1 person that crossed the line. I've learned a lot. I've learned that busting is hurting people. I don't want to hurt anyone. I've distanced myself from others, tried not to be critical of others. It's made a big difference to me. When I'm clowning around, it's hurting other's feelings. It's easier to be positive. I went cold turkey with my busting. I thought and realized that I wouldn't want my comments said to me. I don't have to be like those other jerks who are always going to be jerks. I accepted that some people are going to be jerks, and once I accepted that, it made it easier for me. This was a practical decision. I didn't want to be terminated. The way I was going, I was headed out the door. How can I be clowning around when I'm attacking someone? I don't want to be in the situation that I'm hurting someone.”

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