

CHAPTER

12

Dealing with an Emotional Tyrant

Juliann C. Scholl

TEXAS TECH UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

Kevin is an office supply sales representative who has enjoyed a reputation as a top performer in company. But lately, it's been getting hard to reach his quota while he's been under the watchful eye of Sylvia, the new sales manager who seems to enjoy tyrannizing him whenever he's in the office. Sylvia's bullying reaches a new low when she makes a comment about Kevin at a weekly staff meeting that completely humiliates him in front of his colleagues. Is this the final straw that motivates Kevin to confront Sylvia's bullying once and for all?



A WORKPLACE BULLY

It is 8:18 AM on Monday. Kevin Wilkins sits motionless in his office cubicle. He has no desire to get up and pour his routine cup of strong coffee. He's fighting a stress headache and is wondering how he's going to muster up enough energy to go out and do the cold calls he had scheduled for that day. He's remembering the argument he had with Julia, his wife, the previous evening. He has since deeply regretted raising his voice to her; he obviously hasn't been himself lately.

In stark contrast to his irritable mood the previous evening, Kevin now feels unenergetic as he hides in his cubicle this particular morning. Except for a phone, desk pad, a few scattered papers, and a pencil cup, Kevin's cubicle is mostly bare. His sales awards are the only decorative artifacts

hanging on his cubicle wall. He supposes he needs to see them to remember how successful he was in previous years, but they are of little comfort to him today.

For five years Kevin has been a sales rep for Office Craft, the second-largest supplier of office products in the metropolitan area. The sales manager of the department lured Kevin away from his previous company and mentored him well. It didn't take long for Kevin to earn a place among the top ten percent of the sales force, and then the branch Salesperson of the Year title three years in a row. Until recently, Kevin thrived easily in his work environment. Although he has always loved doing outside cold calls, he treasured "checking in" at the office at the start and end of each day, and he looked forward to bumping into the other sales reps to "shoot the bull" with them. He and his colleagues enjoyed a healthy competitive—yet supportive—spirit, and he was friends with many of the other reps. His best friend at work is Janine Chatterjee. She came to work for Office Craft two years after Kevin and has recently become one of the department's top performers. Kevin and Janine became fast friends, and only with Janine does Kevin feel comfortable discussing his personal life, especially the difficulties he and Julia are currently having with their marriage.

Despite the friendly spirit the department had enjoyed over the years, the tone of the office climate seems to have changed overnight. About four-and-a-half years into Kevin's employment at Office Craft the company hired a new sales manager, Sylvia Flores. She rarely hides her aggressive and domineering managerial style. Most of the staff, especially upper management, thought at first that her style would be a refreshing change, since Office Craft needed to do something about the slumping profits they experienced the previous fiscal year. In the beginning, the staff and sales force, including Kevin, welcomed Sylvia's competitive and no-bull attitude. She was rigid in her expectations as manager, and the company's profits appeared to be on the rise as a result.

Soon, however, Sylvia's attitude turned toxic. At weekly sales meetings, it becomes increasingly obvious who Sylvia's "stars" are, as well as who are her "targets"—usually the lowest-performing reps. The "stars" for a given week are typically showered with verbal praise in front of the entire team and asked to share their secrets of success. Outside of meetings, Sylvia's stars are often invited to join Sylvia for lunch and hang out in her office to chat or share gossip. Conversely, Sylvia has a sarcastic way of singling out the low performers. Sylvia seems most venomous when she has an audience. Moreover, she often alludes to her targets' personal problems during staff meetings or whenever there are other employees within hearing range. Kevin still hadn't forgiven her when, about two weeks earlier, in front of three other workers in the break room she wisecracked, "Why so glum, Wilkins? You and your wife talking divorce again?" Kevin has always been sensitive about references to his personal life, especially his marriage.

These embarrassment tactics appear to be Sylvia's primary method of motivation. Few people in the department are immune to this form of treatment. During the third of Sylvia's weekly meetings, Janine, who was in remission from ovarian cancer, once bore the brunt of this venom when Sylvia quipped, "Janine, I noticed your numbers were a little low last week. We all know about and sympathize with your health problems, but you don't want to let your 'girl-part' cancer get in the way of what you're capable of doing, okay?" Some of the other reps chuckled nervously,

but Janine was mortified. As usual, Janine did her best to shrug it off because she reasoned that bullying from the boss was quite common.

BREACH OF PRIVACY

Kevin looks at his watch. 8:27 AM He sighs, and then groans quietly. Every Monday morning at 8:30 the outside sales reps convene for their weekly meeting. Kevin figures he should get moving toward the conference room before his tardiness would be noticed by Sylvia and the other reps.

The weekly meetings are intended to brief the team on new products, go over sales strategies, discuss office policies as needed, and recognize reps who performed well the previous week. Now that Sylvia has been managing the team, the meetings have become less about briefings and policies and more about singling out the top and low performers. These weekly meetings are a source of stress for almost everyone in the department, not only for those who don't meet their quotas, but also for the top performing reps who hope their numbers would keep them safe from Sylvia's embarrassing remarks for yet another week.

When Kevin enters the conference room, he encounters half a dozen of his colleagues lazily finding their chairs on all sides of the conference table and mumbling quietly in side conversations. Kevin finds a seat next to Lamandre Kaffee, who has been with the company for about ten years. Kevin still doesn't know him all that well, but has admired his work ethic and his cunning sales techniques. He wants to say "hi" to Lamandre, but instead just nods his head to him. Kevin also spots Charles Tudor, one of Sylvia's latest stars. Charles was becoming one of the most successful reps on the team, quickly surpassing Kevin's highest numbers. Kevin has always resented the way Charles feeds off of Sylvia's taunts and how he parrots her so-called motivational phrases. But today Kevin does his best to stay out of his way; Charles is known to spread gossip, and Kevin suspects that he often repeats employees' comments to Sylvia.

At exactly 8:30 Sylvia marches into the room with a painted-on smile. The mumbling in the room instantly stops and everyone finds a seat around the big conference table. Just as Sylvia sets down her notepad at the head of the table, Anthony Feldstein rushes in, fully aware that Sylvia is staring him down all the way to his seat. When she doesn't supplement the stare with a comment, Anthony and the rest of the team are silently relieved.

Sylvia begins, "Okay, kids, this meeting is gonna be short. I know you all are just anxious to get out there and grab more business for us." As she says this, her eyes meet Kevin's. Kevin gulps; he begins taking a quick inventory of the rejections he got from prospects the previous week. Sylvia continues, "Okay ... please check your emails with my attachment on the updated specs on the new color laser printer we're pushing. I'll leave you to read that on your own. I don't want to waste time here going over it with you."

Without missing a beat, Sylvia's tone turns pleasant. "I'm proud to point out that Charles' numbers were at the top again this week. Good job, Chuck. You more than surpassed our quota this month."

Charles beams, but adds a humble head nod, saying, “Well, it was a tough month . . . post-holiday season, you know.” The other reps politely clap for him, maintaining neutral faces.

After recognizing two other top performers, Sylvia maintains her pleasant tone and admonishes, “Now, for some of you, your numbers have been lower than I would have expected.” Kevin’s dread of the morning quickly intensifies. He barely made last month’s quota. What he laments more than his low performance is the unwanted attention from Sylvia.

“Okay, I hate to come down on you, but you all know what it means to miss your quota more than two months in a row, right?” Sylvia continues. Turning her head toward Kevin, Sylvia remarks, “Kevin, you scraped by again last month.”

Kevin could sense that Sylvia’s tone is becoming more patronizing. He decides simply to placate her to save face. He’s afraid of what she’s going to say next. Nodding, he responds, “Yeah, I hear you, Sylvia. I’m pushing to get those numbers back up.”

Sylvia puts both elbows on the conference table, leans forward and says, “Now, Kevin, I’m pulling for you to get those numbers back up to where I know they can be . . . Any trouble at home?”

Time seems to stop for Kevin. His face becomes flushed. “Excuse me?”

“If there’s anything we can do to help you and Julia with your difficulties, you need to let us know. But trouble in paradise will lead to trouble elsewhere, including your job performance. Okay?”

Kevin is in such shock that all he can say is, “Uh, okay.”

The rest of that meeting, although brief, becomes a blur. Kevin’s thoughts sway from embarrassment about the reference to his troubled marriage to the dismay of having his private business being the source of gossip among the team. He darts a piercing glance at Janine, who looks as stunned as he feels. As if to read his mind, Jasmine slightly shrugs her shoulders and conveys an expression that seems to say, *I don’t know how she got that idea. I’m as shocked as you are.* Kevin turns front and takes a mental inventory to figure out when he might have said anything about Julia, other than the late afternoon when he and Janine talked in the break room with the door closed. After a few minutes, Kevin begins to stare at the wipe-off board on the front wall, slumps in his chair, and tunes out the rest of the meeting.

ASSESSING THE SITUATION

The second the meeting ends, Kevin makes a beeline for Janine. They both have important prospects to visit that morning, but Kevin decides he cannot leave without talking to her about what happened at the meeting. He is anxious about what he told Janine and what may have been leaked from their previous conversation about his marriage. When Kevin reaches Janine, he puts his hand on her arm and sputters, “Parking lot. Now!” Janine is hesitant, but then nods. She grabs her jacket and briefcase, and follows him out of the building.

They make it as far as the front of Janine’s car when Kevin angrily whispers, “What happened? How did she know about Julia and me?”

Janine defensively replies, “Don’t look at me! It’s not like I walked up to Sylvia and said, ‘Hey, did you know that Kevin and his wife are having marital problems?’”

“Well, she got it from someone!” Kevin insists.

Trying to calm Kevin’s tone, Janine says, “And I don’t know who that could be. Look, you know that what we say in confidence stays between us. I would never gossip about you, or about anyone else, even Charles. And what Sylvia did to you just then was just appalling. She had no right.” Janine feels herself become increasingly angry.

“I don’t even have the energy to get angry anymore. She’s already watching me like a hawk since my new sales dropped two months ago. And the way she always has an audience when she makes her snarky comments drives me nuts! This marriage comment is just one more thing I don’t need hanging over my head. If Julia finds out I’ve been airing our dirty laundry—even to you—I might as well start shopping for a divorce lawyer!” Kevin sighs in exasperation. “Why did she go and do that? I was so humiliated. Not only am I sucking as a salesman, but now it’s apparent to everyone that I can’t keep my marriage together ... Honestly, if I were heading up that team I would never dream of berating someone like that.”

“I know, I know. But for the moment,” Janine advises, “just walk it off and move on. I’m sure Sylvia’s spying on us right now, wondering why we haven’t dashed off to our appointments. But someone’s going to have to do stand up to Sylvia, or go above her head and complain. As for you, this stress can’t be helping you sell copiers.”

“You think I should do it? Why? Besides, what good would it do? She would probably come down on me even harder. I wouldn’t put it past her to switch me to a different territory just to punish me. I can’t afford to stick my neck out anymore. Besides, I’d rather put up with her snide comments than discover what she’s really made of if I complain.” Kevin then looks directly at Janine. “Why not you? You seem to be back in her good graces.” Kevin almost sounds resentful with his last comment.

“Hey, don’t be mad at me. I’m keeping my nose clean around here like anyone else would. Maybe we both can do something, like go to Sylvia’s boss. Do you think we can couch this under some kind of harassment?”

With a little more hope in his voice, Kevin offers, “Well, it certainly feels like harassment. All I know is I won’t have the guts to do anything without you to back me up. What do you think?”

“I think we need to decide what’s in our best interest. We can confront Sylvia, go above her head and complain, or plow on and improve our sales performance so she doesn’t target us at all.”

“What I *really* want to do,” says Kevin, “is tell Sylvia off in front of the whole team, at one of her precious weekly meetings.”

Janine nods. They give each other a look implying that Kevin’s dream would not likely be an optimal strategy.

CONFRONTING THE BULLY

As Janine drives off to her first client meeting of the day, Kevin realizes that he has to go back in and get his briefcase. He dreads running into anyone else on the way to his cubicle, but he decides to make it quick. When he gets to his desk, Kevin has an idea. He makes a quiet phone call to the prospect he was meeting that morning and reschedules the appointment. Bypassing Sylvia's office without incident, Kevin goes to Human Resources. He asks to see Pamela Routledge, who handles EEO issues.

"Hi, Kevin," says Pamela, warmly greeting Kevin with a handshake. "What can I do for you today?"

"Hi, Pamela," says Kevin. "Thanks for fitting me in on short notice." Kevin sits down, exhales as if to gather his thoughts, and then says, "I have a problem in my department. I don't know if there's anything that can be done at the organizational level, but I'd sure like to find out what my options are."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Kevin. What's the problem?" Pamela sits more alert in her chair.

"Well, I wish it were just one problem ..." Kevin then tells Pamela about Sylvia's treatment of some of the reps over the previous six months, and about the incident that humiliated him at the meeting that morning. Pamela slowly nods her head and jots a few notes in her notebook. Kevin takes notice of this and elaborates on Sylvia's tendency to reward her favorites as well as "punish" employees who disagreed with her or exhibited low performance. When Kevin concludes his story he waits for Pamela to finish writing. "So, what are my options if I don't want to confront her directly?"

"Hmmm ... Well, would you consider any of her comments or behavior as sexual harassment?"

Kevin pauses. "No, can't say that applies to any of it."

"What about off-color jokes, or racial slurs? What I'm looking for are blatant violations to our discrimination clause. It would be much easier to identify those kinds of things. You would then have reason to bring up some kind of formal charge or complaint, and then we could address it with training, something constructive ..."

"Why?" asks Kevin in exasperation. "Why can't you, or someone, do something to protect me and my fellow employees? You're telling me she's not breaking the law. But I'm walking around on egg shells around here. I can't look some of my colleagues in the eye. I get a stomach ache thinking about coming into this building. And I get so worked up sometimes that my wife avoids me when I come home."

"Look, Kevin," replies Pamela, "you're not the first person to complain to me about Sylvia. I do believe what you're saying, and I feel for you. Really, I do. Right now it's an uphill battle because I know for a fact that management likes what Sylvia's doing for Office Craft. I heard that their numbers are up from last quarter, so it would take a lot for Sylvia to get some negative attention from upper management."

Kevin just looks at Pamela. “But what do I do?” His energy is completely drained, and it isn’t even 10:00.

“You do have some power. Try to document all the problem exchanges that already happened, and encourage others to do the same. Continue to log your interactions with her, or anyone else that is causing problems. Perhaps this documentation can be helpful to you if you decide to confront her directly.”

Confront her. Kevin thinks about the other times he was advised to do just that. If he never confronts her, he thought, who knows if and when these abuses would be addressed? He reasons to himself that HR is impotent to do anything about it right now.

Kevin slowly gets up, thanks Pamela for her time, and walks calmly out of her office. As he’s walking past his cubicle to leave the building, he notices that Sylvia spots him. He recognizes the look on her face—*Why is he still here?* Kevin asks again, but to himself, *What do I do?*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you define workplace bullying? What examples in this case suggest that workplace bullying is occurring?
2. Kevin is apparently upset about the comments Sylvia makes toward him at the staff meeting. What could be the reason(s) for Kevin’s emotional reaction?
3. In what ways might Kevin, his colleagues, or the company be helping to perpetuate the incidences of workplace bullying?
4. What effects does workplace bullying have on its victims? Identify examples from the case study.
5. What advice would you offer Kevin to help him cope with his situation?

KEY TERMS

Emotional tyranny, workplace bullying, productivity

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