

# CITYSPEAK

## **Bully or Team Leader: Learning the Difference and Standing Up**

We've heard the story a thousand times, right? You can't give in to a bully. When the bully takes your lunch money one day, he'll be back the next day for more. But what happens when the bully is your boss? Or a person in authority? Or even just a person with power?

What happens when you feel like you have no choice but to give in to the bully?

Fortunately, unlike ten, twenty, or fifty years ago, people are more and more willing to stand up to the pushy, abusive, authoritative behavior so common in powerful figures in government and major corporations. Now, more than ever, we must work hard, stand in our truths, and peacefully persist in the face of this onslaught of overreaching, harmful bullying.

With this approach, we can weed out the bullies, and we can also recognize those well-meaning tough love leaders for their own strengths.

### **Bullying in City Hall**

I have witnessed bullying firsthand, and I have had to come to terms with a very important reality: if each of us who is capable does not stand up when bullying occurs, we are leaving that bully free to take someone else's lunch money, perhaps someone who simply cannot stand up. So in the end, it isn't just about protecting ourselves or about stopping a wrong when we see it; it is also about preventing those less capable from being victimized.

At City Hall, this issue is especially egregious because an entire City can come under sway of a power-hungry individual hell bent on having his own demands met, at the expense of the unwitting taxpayers and those who feel they have no choice but to obey.

During my 30 plus years working for City governments, I have come across a wide array of bullies, from the mean spirited pests who simply want to make trouble, to the full blown power hungry, vicious men who have clawed their way to important positions by stepping on everyone in their path and excusing their behavior as "good business," telling us all to "suck it up," and threatening our jobs, our reputations, and our livelihoods if we dare balk.

Just a few short months ago, I came across yet another heavy-handed bully as I was helping my A/R Clerk to process delinquent invoices. A City Manager of a municipality refused to pay money owed MuniTemps, which would be bad enough on its own, but then brought the full weight of his City down on me, assuring me in no uncertain terms that my company would be destroyed if I did not put my head down and take his abuse. He even threatened to sue me if I persisted in asking for payment for services rendered which were previously approved for payment. I am not a fan of bullies. I have dealt with them my whole life, and I have, for as long as I can remember, dealt with them in the same way. Try to work it out. Be reasonable. Follow the chain of command. And in the end, follow my instincts. I have to trust that I will "know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em." But this recent experience brought the issue of bullies in positions of power to the forefront of my attention.

Why?

There is simply no more room for the heavy-handed men who have no qualms about abusing their authority to intimidate those they perceive as meek, humble, or vulnerable to their bullying at City Hall.

Now, I am sure that women, too, have bullies among them. A female friend of mine recently explained to me that women can be bullies too, what today are referred to as “mean girls.” But I’ll let a woman write about the mean girls; it is simply not in my wheel house.

For men, bullies are all too common. We face them in the sandbox before we even get to school, then in elementary school on the playground, and we face them all the way through high school and into college with hazing and fraternities. Then those same bullies rear their ugly heads again at work. I recognized them right away when I got to work at City Hall in 1989.

How do they last so long?

They are empowered both by those who encourage them, and by those who enable them by not standing up.

This may be hard to believe, but bullies can be found in the City Manager’s office, on the City Council, and even some community stakeholders will push their way to carry out their agenda at City Hall.

Bullies at City Hall come in all shapes and sizes. Some bullies are egomaniacs who feel better when they can control others; other bullies are dangerous sharks who can and will terrorize an entire organization in search of power or money

## **IS THERE A BULLY IN YOUR DEPARTMENT?**

There are bullies across the entire world; they get around. Have they made it to your office yet?

If you find yourself working for or with a bully, don’t panic. There are proactive steps you can take to still do your job and keep yourself safe. In fact, if you play your cards right, you may even be able to turn a potentially ugly relationship around and instead make a friend. That is exactly what happened to me at the City of San Jacinto in 1995.

## **THE ROOKIE IN SAN JACINTO, CALIFORNIA**

In 1995, I had been working as the Administrative Analyst at the neighboring City of Hemet for about six years when Pam Easter, the San Jacinto City Manager, asked me to apply for a job as Finance Director for her city. The job was not given to me; I had to compete for this key department head position. I went up against other more experienced Finance Directors, and even against a talented CPA who had been auditing the City of San Jacinto through the CPA firm of Moreland & Associates (Remember them?).

When Pam Easter offered me the job, she told me she would not likely be staying on as the manager much longer. It was then that I realized that this first-time Finance Director position would be an incredibly challenging job. The expression “baptism by fire” describes my experience at the City of San Jacinto during those politically dark days of this beautiful community in Riverside County.

## **BULLY OR LEADER?**

Within six months, my beloved, benevolent City Manager was gone and an interim City Manager from hell was hired as my boss. I would spend the next few months getting my butt kicked by this interim City

Manager who was focused on making my life a living hell, or so I thought.

For months, I dreaded coming to work. I dreaded every meeting with him. Before the meeting even started, I would picture him sharpening his knife to slice me up 10 different ways. I was so stressed out. I recall getting up one morning with my neck so stiff I couldn't even move it. I called in sick that day and went to see the doctor. The doctor gave me some muscle relaxing pills (which I didn't take), and he told me to take a couple days off work to relax and lessen the stress that was giving me knots in my neck.

It is interesting that my stress at work did not come from the workload back then. It came from the ugly politics and all the pressure put on me and all the other department heads and managers at the City of San Jacinto. Getting the budget done was technically easy. Well, sort of. What was truly stressful was that the Mayor and some of the Council members were recently elected, yet even a year later, they were still constantly campaigning for reelection. This created unnecessary political issues around every public meeting, crucifying Department Heads and other staff to grandstand and show the few members of the public present how funny it was to fry public employees. This display of public ridicule was quite popular in San Jacinto among some Council members back then.

So it was actually some on the Council who were the real bullies at the City at this time. We all watched anxiously as the City Council voted to eliminate positions of long-time fellow staff members, like the Community Development Director position, which was eliminated after the employee had worked at the City for over 20 years. A Senior Planner took over his duties. We were never told why the position was eliminated. One day he just didn't have a job anymore. This created anxiety for all of us.

Back to the interim City Manager, he continued to bear down on me day after day. I got so stressed out that I finally handed him my letter of resignation. I thanked the City Manager for the opportunity to serve as Finance Director, but, as I told him, I could no longer handle the stress of the job.

Because the interim City Manager was not a man who would apologize, much less beg me to stay, he could not bring himself to talk to me about my resignation. He did not want me to go, though, so he asked the Public Works Director to have a talk with me. Needless to say, they convinced me to stay. In the end, the interim City Manager even became my friend, taking me under his wing and teaching me the behind the scenes aspects of public administration that I was not taught in college.

You see, the truth is that sometimes, what we think is a bully is just someone who only knows how to communicate in forceful, aggressive, commanding ways. At the time, I was so afraid, I really thought he was a bully. In the many years since, I have actually learned to tell the difference between someone who imagines himself as practicing "tough love" and someone who is downright abusive and indeed a bully.

### **NOT A BULLY BUT A BLESSING IN DISGUISE**

So while there are certainly truly gross bullies at City Hall, like the one I dealt with recently, this interim City Manager from hell turned out to be a tough love kick in my inexperienced butt mentor. His name was **Lyle W. Alberg**. Yes, he stressed the hell out of me using his Master Sergeant Marine drill routine to help turn me into the City Finance Director that I would need to be to succeed during the next 25 years of my career in City government, but it was exactly what I needed.

As a young 33-year-old all puffed up with college degrees and certifications, I thought I was "all that." Now in retrospect, I realize this City Manager had to kick my ass because I lacked the experience required to speak before the Governing Body of my community, but I didn't know it. Sure, there were members of the City Council who were mean spirited and manipulative, but who was I to think I had the status or standing to speak as I did to the City Council or members of the community that elected the City Council to represent them? Yes, I needed a good ass kicking by this City Manager back then. Lyle was not a bully. He was a team leader. His approach was strong and stalwart, but he was good at what he did, and he was indeed acting in the best interest of the City, and, yes, of me as well.

Thank you, Lyle. May you rest in peace.

## **REAL BULLIES AT CITY HALL**

To be clear, I'm not saying there aren't real bullies at City Hall. There are, and only you will know if you are facing a downright bully or an opportunity to strengthen your leadership skills and improve your professional tool belt. You will have to decide if the person you are facing is focused on making your life difficult or impossible or if they are doing the best they can with what they have to teach you. And the truth is, the most likely way to reveal the true nature of what you may come to think of as your bully, is to stand up to him.

There is great wisdom, and professionalism, in doing all you can to work out your issues with the perceived bully directly, but once you've tried everything you can to partner with a bully, and you find that you have not been able to make things better between you, then you may need to get help from others in your organization. You may need to deal with the issue head on. And yes, as in my case, it may come down to quitting.

Dealing with a bully is not a little thing, and know that there will be consequences to your decisions and your actions. You should be ready, sure, and prepared to see this issue through to resolution. And remember, the decision you make could cost you your job, but that's not only OK, it is necessary. You need to trust yourself and your decisions. The effects of not standing up to this bully will follow you everywhere you go. You will soon find yourself running into bully after bully until you finally deal with him head on.

As the saying goes, "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Yes, dealing with bullies anywhere, but especially at City Hall can be immensely challenging. But hey, **that's why you get paid the big bucks!**

If you are a manager or a director at City Hall, you will run into bullies at some point in your career. You can count on it. But if you plan, prepare for, and deal with the bullies, you will have greater success in partnering with people at all levels of your organization.

As time goes on and our municipal organizations become more open and democratic, the real bullies will truly become a dying breed. I just hope we can still keep the Lyle's around because for me, Lyle was just what I needed as a young public administrator who thought he knew it all!

Sincerely,



**John Herrera, CPA, MPA**  
President / CEO & Municipal Finance Officer  
**MuniTemps – Municipal Staffing Solutions**

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