



Go Beyond Anti-Bullying: Shift Up to Referent Power

By Michael Bortolotto

"A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination."

—Nelson Mandela

BULLYING BEGINS WELL BEFORE THE workplace.

Over the past 25 years, I have visited hundreds of school and spoken to thousands of students throughout western Canada about bullying. During my presentations, students of all ages ask me different kinds of questions as they relate to its impact in their lives.

There is one question, which is asked more than any of the others. "Why didn't I ever fight back against the kids who were bullying me when I was younger?"

My answer is simple, I tell them I'm fighting back right now, albeit in a more productive and positive way than with my hands or feet. I tell them I am tapping into my referent power—and let them know that it comes in large part directly from them.

Playing Positivity Forward

Referent power is unique amongst the *Five Bases of Social Power* defined by social psychologists Bertram Raven and John French in 1959 as it is the one power bestowed by others on the basis of trust, admiration and loyalty. While it is also more elusive than

legitimate, expert, reward and coercive power—and unstable on its own—referent power brings with it the power to play itself forward.

How does that work? My goal as a person, leader and speaker has always been to earn that referent power and put it to good use helping others overcome their challenges. For me, that has involved taking a principled stand against bullying and coercive power in general—and what goes for the classroom applies to the boardroom.

**"Referent power
can be earned by
every leader at
every step"**

That there is now anti-bullying legislation in place in BC is as welcome a use of legitimate power as imaginable, especially for those seeking to build positive cultures and productive workplaces. However, even with new 'rules' to ensure a mentally healthier workplace, we are talking about a way of being that has existed, and in many cases been rewarded, for a long time.

Learn to Earn by Listening

What is needed to step beyond 'anti-bullying' is for all of us as leaders to accept that the most effective power in this new world needs to be learned and, most importantly, earned.

By using referent power to walk the talk, we learn to listen without judgement. With this accomplished, any teacher or HR manager can lead and persuade other people to not use abusive force, acts of violence, and bullying tactics to solve their problems.

"Education is the most powerful weapon which can use to change the world."

—Nelson Mandela

A Study in Genuine Change

Approximately five years ago, I was reminded how powerful referent power can be when I received a phone call from a police officer calling from a small community in central BC.

He had heard me speak at a school two weeks earlier and wanted to know how I'd done it—in this case, 'fix' a 15-year-old boy who had been bullying other students throughout the community. The officer himself had spent the past six years trying to put an end to the



bullying, but since I had been to speak, the boy had not had a single altercation.

The officer was thrilled, but confused; in a sense, that made two of us, so I called ahead and went over to the boy's house to have a conversation with his mother. As eye openers go, it made me blink. Not only had the boy not showed up for dinner following the presentation, but he had still been missing when his father went out to look for him at about 7:30 pm. Even though both knew he was 'a bit of a troublemaker', this had felt unusual.

Returning home without finding a trace of his son in the community, the father heard a whimpering coming from behind the family boat in the back of the garage. Their son was curled into the corner of the garage—crying.

Kneeling down next to him, the parents had asked what was wrong and the son was clearly trembling, but clear. "I don't want to abuse other students any more by using various violent acts of bullying and force. The guest speaker at our school told us some stories about how painful it was to be bullied and why violent acts of bullying and force will never give you what you want."

Serving a Higher Purpose

The next day after school, the boy went over to the local fire department and signed up to become a junior fire fighter. The fire chief knew his parents and the son as well, and was rightly curious as to why he would be interested.

On that the boy remained clear; he wanted to earn and use his referent power to assist others, rather than using violent acts of bullying and force to hurt them.

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

- Mahatma Gandhi

As I told the police officer that day five years ago, when we act using referent power, our intellect and integrity actually cause other people to feel more confident, competent, and committed following our lead and actions.

On the other hand, every time we choose acts of violence and force, we create mistrust, push people away, and find ourselves dealing with needless consequences and punishments.

Stepping Beyond HR Alone

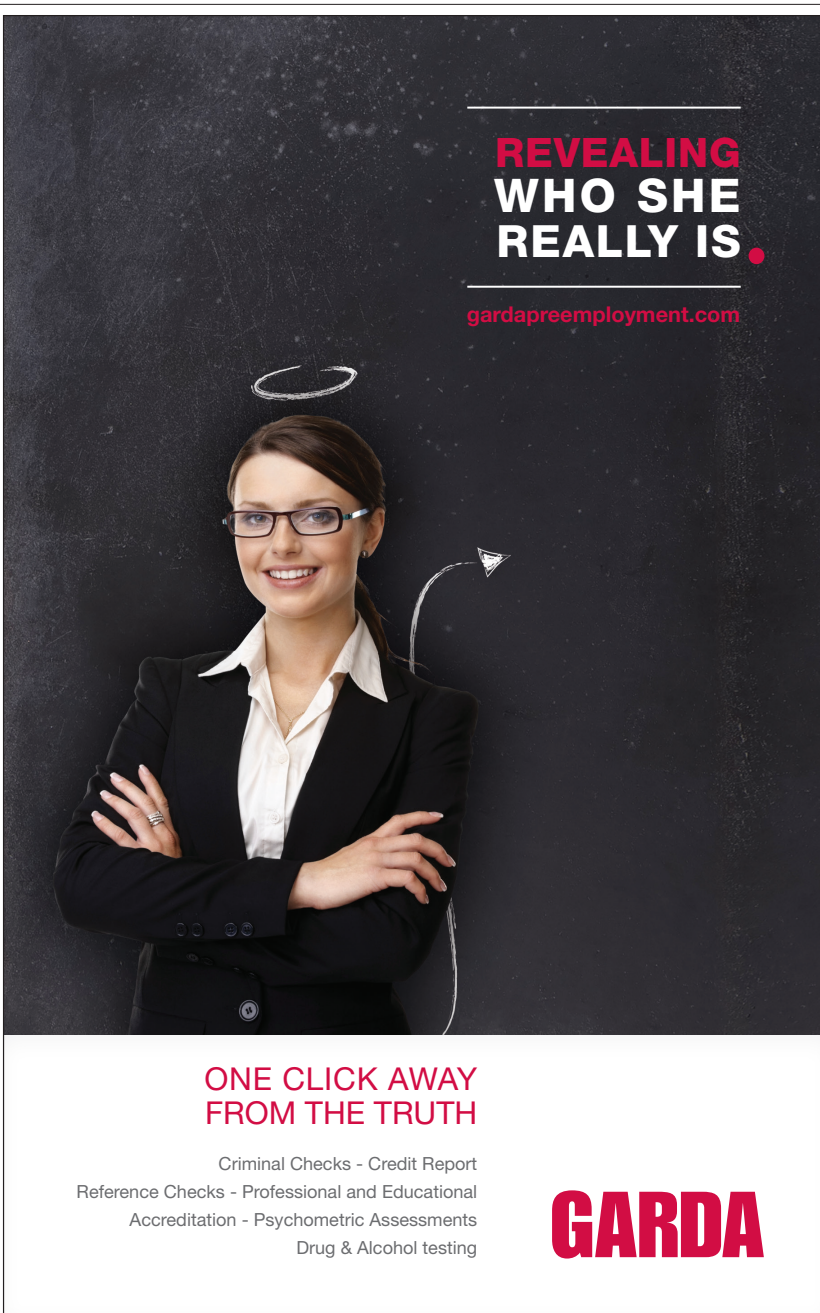
These are not lessons lost on HR professionals, but it is not the responsibility of HR alone to take that step beyond 'anti-bullying' and into true culture building. Referent power can be earned by every leader at every step of their journey—and needs to flow throughout an organization.

When Nelson Mandela passed away in 2013, a torch was passed to all of us seeking to change the world in a positive and

enduring way. That there have always been bullies in the broadest scope of the word imaginable, is a fact of world history with which we are all unfortunately acquainted.

That said, the past is not something designed to be escaped or covered over, but brought to the light and reflected upon for the lessons of better futures yet. **P**

Michael Bortolotto, (www.positiverebel.ca) is a professional speaker who inspires confidence in classrooms—and boardrooms too.



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