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Seeking the '*Magis*': A Pathway to Enhancing Civility in Higher Education

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Abstract

Despite growing international attention to the negative and long-term consequences of workplace bullying, it continues to expand in settings worldwide. Published literature highlights the troubling influence of bullying on well-being and productivity not only of targeted victims but also, bystanders and workplaces as wholes. A paucity of research addresses effective workplace bullying interventions. This paper describes the utility of the Jesuit notion of the *magis* in building an academic culture that can anticipate and forestall workplace bullying behaviors and that can serve to structure interventions in cases where bullying behaviors actually get a foothold.

Academic settings are complex, not only in terms of the work to be done there, but also in terms of their inherent interpersonal aspects. Like all workplaces, academic workplaces are inherently social.¹ Ambiguity, opportunity, and challenge characterize our day-to-day interactions in academic workplaces, making the teaching activities that are so carefully defined in our policies, standards and syllabi variably engaging, motivating and, if truth be told, sometimes disheartening.

For faculty in religious or secular institutions, Catholic Jesuit tradition offers a concept central to enhanced interpersonal understanding. St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491 – 1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, believed in a practical spirituality intended for a wide audience of believers and seekers.² Fundamental to that practicality is the Ignatian

notion of '*magis*'. The term '*magis*' comes from Latin, meaning '*more*.' To that end, *magis* refers not to things additional or extra, but to strengthened sensitivity to those things around us,³ to self-examination of how our behaviors affect others⁴ and to discerning choices that have the widest positive impact on others.⁵ Through day-to-day pursuit of the *magis*, faculty establish an atmosphere of sustenance and care that endorses our personal well-being, and the well-being of co-workers; that supports the successes of our teaching efforts; and that sustains the overall quality of our academic institutions.

In this paper, we address ways to seek and find the *magis* in our workplace dealings. Seeking and finding the *magis* offers a foundation for authentic interpersonal relations, particularly as we are faced with a problem that is intensifying

internationally—workplace bullying. Increasingly, workplace bullying commands serious attention, especially in higher education⁶ and in healthcare,⁷ where it is noted to be particularly prevalent. The heightened sensitivity encouraged through the *magis* supports workplace interactions that will strengthen faculty, staff, administrators and students individually and collectively, as we do the work of higher education - to educate people with world-competitive skills, to promote citizenship, and to prepare people to be good human beings.⁸

Background

In workplace settings internationally, bullying has been marked by a meteoric rise that has defied active intervention for decades. Findings of a recent national study of nurse faculty indicated that an astounding 68% of study participants experienced moderate or serious faculty-to-faculty incivility in their workplaces.⁹ In a separate report, study authors noted that participants described uncivil faculty-to-faculty encounters as incorporating berating and insulting remarks or gestures that were allowed to occur, often in front of others, including students.¹⁰

Generally, bullying in the workplace is subtle in nature, manifested through bullies' combination of verbal and nonverbal behaviors, rather than through physical action. Defined across multiple sources as the repeated, unreasonable actions of individuals or groups, workplace bullying is intended to intimidate, degrade, humiliate, or undermine targeted victims. Bullying should not be confused with maintaining standards, which is an objective process. Those who maintain standards set high expectations and provide emotional support to the employees whose job it is to meet them. Alternatively, bullying is not objective; instead, it involves emotional threats directed towards seemingly vulnerable or threatening targets over whom bullies seek power. Workplace bullying seldom involves physical acts such as hitting or throwing things. More likely, especially in white collar workplaces, workplace bullying will involve subtle, interpersonal acts.

Bullies who use subtle aggression, such as that typically seen in white collar workplaces, have been identified as 'clever' (and dangerous).¹¹ The most damaging kinds of bullying acts may, in fact,

be those that are unspoken, acts that, without words, encourage vulnerable targets to feel shame.¹² Bullying's escalating occurrence typically is promulgated by individuals or groups—whether peer, superior, or subordinate—who personally struggle with self-esteem and who seek personal power through broad peer support and interpersonal acknowledgement.¹³ Bullying is tacitly encouraged in environments in which demonstrations of personal social power are required if one is to be viewed as effective. When bullying is in effect, day to day discourse becomes abusive, often incorporating bullies' efforts to shame intended victims.¹⁴

Most higher education faculty and leaders would likely agree that bullying ought to be addressed and stopped. Workplace bullying, however, is paradoxical. For example, across workplace settings, people tend to disavow workplace bullying's occurrence because its inherent behaviors are not immediately visible involving actions that do not include physical force. Instead, workplace bullying typically is enacted through subtle and hard-to-interpret affronts whose full meaning is clear only to the bully and often lost to the intended victim. Victims relate "how they were beginning to feel a little crazy" as bullies find their weak spots and continually attack them there.¹⁵ The power invoked through the social invisibility of workplace bullying tends to challenge intervention and mediation.¹⁶ Moreover, in many academic environments, bullying serves to establish order and regularity to faculty and student actions, through forced control, albeit inappropriate, on the parts of administrators who sometimes are the perpetrators of workplace bullying.¹⁷ Consequently, the underlying mechanisms of workplace bullying challenge intervention, even as those same mechanisms baffle the victims they target.¹⁸ When bullying is in force, control rests in the hands of a perpetrator, whether administrator, faculty, student, or staff, who appears legitimate, but is clandestinely toxic.

Our recent metasynthesis of published reports of bullying¹⁹ illustrated that through subtle mechanisms of provocation, workplace bullies prestidigitate (work their magic), effectively 'recontextualizing'²⁰ targeted victims' ambient circumstances to suggest their inadequacy. We found that the victim inadequacy implied through

bullies' actions suggested, for example, victims' corruptness of action; their lack of preparation for their academic roles; or their social inappropriateness. In most circumstances, this implied inadequacy reflected the need of the bully to misrepresent and socially exclude the victim, so as to increase personal power and social status. Bullies' implied affronts seldom reflected an accurate and objective depiction of victims' situations. Although victim behaviors may have challenged or threatened the bully in the first place, targeted victims in our study seemed to be, for all intents and purposes, simply the instruments by which the bullies demonstrated their relative power.

Bullies' communications described in the studies used in our metasynthesis²¹ tended toward one-way rather than complementary and mutual interactions. Their communicative styles appeared to be structured to significantly limit opportunity for targets' refutation or rectification. As a consequence, targets reporting in the studies we reviewed tended to struggle to find voice through which to right the biased assertions of their bully counterparts. As the relative and unassailable power of workplace bullies was established and maintained over time through this relational control process, victims described finding themselves beginning to accept and acknowledge the transformed narrative that their bully counterparts ascribed to them. A pattern of voicelessness is described repeatedly in studies of the victims of workplace bullying.²²

Not every target of a bully becomes a victim. Some research²³ suggests that individuals may be 'wired' to respond in submissive ways to bullies' subtle affronts. The subtle, interpersonal acts of workplace bullying yield long-term demoralizing and damaging effects. In fact, workplace bullying has been called a "more crippling and devastating problem for employees than all other kinds of work-related stress put together."²⁴ When workplace bullies' efforts are tacitly or implicitly encouraged by repeated failure to recognize and intervene, bullies' influence will expand.²⁵ The resultant fear, stress and dissatisfaction²⁶ are toxic to individuals and to the work setting itself. Many factors, including personal histories of the individuals involved; psychological state of individual targets; communication styles of

workers in interaction; and character of the workplace context itself, influence the likelihood of individuals 'falling victim' to bullies' subtly aggressive tactics.

Over the years, many academics and administrators have erected walls of silence around commonplace incivility in the workplace as a consequence of its complexity.²⁷ After all, it makes sense that targeted victims would simply refuse their bully counterparts' confusing and seemingly demeaning communications and walk away. The mantle of shame they accept, however, seems to significantly complicate victims' ability to disengage from their bully counterparts.

Bringing the inherent intricacy of workplace bullying dynamics to the forefront, the 2005 National League for Nursing Education Summit included an expert panel discussion on incivility in academe.²⁸ From betrayal to silencing to setting up for embarrassment or failure, summit participants described unsettling encounters characterized as ten "joy stealing games."²⁹ Only eighty-three participants, 24% of all participants, described atmospheres of civility in their academic settings.³⁰

In academic workplaces, faculty incivility promulgates student dissatisfaction,³¹ faculty turnover³² and employee intent to leave the institution.³³ Those targeted individuals who fall victim to the threats of their bully counterparts report shame,³⁴ depression, alienation, self-blame, and overcompensating³⁵ along with a sense of powerlessness,³⁶ in addition to significant physical ailments. Clearly, the prevalence and implications of workplace bullying call for intervention. To date, most efforts described in lay literature and in research address ways to change the behaviors of victims.³⁷

Our program of research suggests the importance of a broader intervention, one aimed at the contexts within which workplace bullying occurs. Through pursuit of the *magis*, faculty can begin to reconfigure the academic environments in which workplace bullying has become so commonplace to forestall a perception that power resides in shaming. Seeking the *magis* fosters courage among all workplace stakeholders. As Clare Luce Booth once noted, 'courage is the ladder on which all other virtues mount.' Courage on the parts of

victims, organizational administrators, and bullies themselves may lead to - and result from - the strengthened sensitivity of the *magis*. That sensitivity is a strong foundation for action to prevent, address, and stem workplace bullying acts. Our research suggests that the way we *are* on college campuses, as reflected in curricula, campus life, traditions, and language, sets the stage for opportunities to stem workplace bullying. Habits of mind and heart fostered by the *magis*, serve to configure the context for the way we could be, optimally.

Context for Seeking the *Magis*

In their text, *Silence Kills*,³⁸ authors described the quality of 'crucial' conversations—those that recognize inherent sensitivities—to forestalling medical error and healthcare setting turnover, and to supporting patient care quality and safety, and employee satisfaction. Yet, authors of this text reported that as participants observed ongoing problematic behaviors of colleagues, fewer than ten percent discussed their concerns with the offenders. They attributed study participants' reticence to confront their offenders to lack of confidence in how to approach the conversations and/or to beliefs on the part of study participants that they were not responsible for calling out the matter.³⁹

Feelings and emotions, rather than information, often drive difficult conversations in workplace bullying situations. Despite their prevalence in bullying situations, however, feelings typically are left to dangle, unacknowledged and ignored. Seldom will anyone admit that bullying is taking place. To bystanders and administrators, bullying communications may even appear silly and inconsequential.⁴⁰

As feelings of resentment and isolation emerge in contexts where bullying predominates, a sense of risk simultaneously evolves. Targeted victims slowly begin to perceive threat as they recognize gaps between speakers' verbal and nonverbal messages, between what the bully is saying and what the bully really means. Even if they are not brought to conscious awareness, these gaps challenge victims' sense of truth, intention, ultimate responsibility and personal identity.

Through communications in the workplace and elsewhere, we tend to consciously address the verbal channel of conversation; at a deeper and more meaningful level, however, what we hear and respond to is what is implied.⁴¹ The strengthened sensitivity suggested by the *magis* supports individual and collective recognition of the subjective power of nonverbal communication, the crucial element of difficult, workplace bullying conversations that can be directly addressed and managed.

The *Magis* and Its Power for Strengthening Academic Cultures of Civility

When participants in a national study⁴² were asked to describe effective ways to address faculty-to-faculty incivility, the most frequent responses were: direct face-to-face communication, effective competent leadership, measurement strategies, education, transforming the organizational culture, and relationship building. An Ignatian approach to building workplace culture—seeking and implementing the *magis*—expands possibilities for constraining workplace bullying by encouraging coworkers collectively to find the best in each of us and in our workplace dealings. This search does not imply an unctuous manner; rather, it implies recognizing and expanding authentic feelings and action to differentiate 'being' from 'behaving'. While individuals may behave in ways that are inappropriate, they remain worthy of respect as human beings. A child, for instance, who has misbehaved is not a 'bad boy'. It is the misbehavior, not the child, that is bad. Bullies take advantage of a common misunderstanding to confuse 'being' with 'doing'. Thus, as our research suggests, in bullying situations, victims tend to feel like 'bad people' readily engaging in the shame intended by the perpetrator.⁴³ Through the *magis*, we are invited to more closely focus on our ways of being together and to maximize the best parts of our subjectivity in regard to each other.

Based on our knowledge of characteristics typical of workplace environments that support workplace bullying behaviors, and on the findings of our previous research, we propose three key strategies to promote pursuit of the *magis* with its resultant enhanced sensitivity to ourselves and those around us.

- First, at the administrative level, it is essential to establish policies that describe and prohibit bullying and other disruptive behaviors that threaten the safety of our academic workplaces and the well-being of students, faculty and staff.⁴⁴
- Second, at the interpersonal level, colleagues must develop and strengthen team building and conflict resolution skills that will support their seeking the *magis* as they engage in just, evenhanded communication.
- Third, at the individual level, we all must hone our skills in honest self-assessment about the extent to which we contribute to the resolution or the problem of workplace bullying.

These three strategies represent hallmarks of the Jesuit 'way of proceeding' that fulfills the academic mission of Jesuit institutions.⁴⁵ Additionally, they have broader applicability that may strengthen the subjective quality of our workplaces, helping us avoid the many temptations for commonly-experienced interpersonal rifts that interfere with the intellectual honesty, integrity, critical inquiry, and mutual respect essential to quality teaching and learning.⁴⁶ We discuss each of these three strategies separately here.

Developing and Supporting Relevant Policy

Our review of literature and our own research suggest that, at the organizational level, it is essential that a multidisciplinary team of employees of all levels develop and support policies that both define and prohibit workplace bullying acts. In organizations, policies set the standard for 'the way we do things here.' Generally, however, policies address objective aspects of workplace activities: performance expectations, role descriptions, or other discrete procedures. Even when policies address topics like 'professional behaviors,' they focus on overt activities. However, workplace bullying seldom involves activities as blatant as hitting, kicking or biting. Thus, appropriate anti-bullying policies in the workplace should address the subtle, often-nonverbal aspects of workplace bullying that our research has shown to be so damaging and that tends to be absent in existing workplace bullying policy.⁴⁷ For instance, anti-bullying policy would

limit language that aims to shame the target, behaviors that involve lying about the target and about his or her performance, and comments disparaging the target so as to negatively influence others' opinions of him or her. As they shape the conduct of day-to-day activities, formal policies provide the foundation for efforts of individuals and employees to seek the *magis*. Well-crafted policy can help each individual, and employees as a whole, to attend to practical values and expectations that inform their everyday actions and, as a consequence, strengthen their professional insight.⁴⁸

Policies that will especially support strengthened sensitivity to workplace bullying are those that recognize the subtle, subjective character of workplace bullying. They will recognize the difficulties inherent in reporting incidences of bullying, as bullying affronts are typically largely nonverbal in character, and conceptually empty to those external to the bullying incident. Finally, effective policies will incorporate formal mechanisms by which individuals are encouraged to actively challenge bullies' affronts.⁴⁹

Encouraging Respectful Relationships within an Atmosphere of Trust

As Arrupe noted, "to be just, it is not enough to refrain from injustice. One must go further and refuse to play its game..."⁵⁰ Injustice represents a perception that the rights of another have been bypassed. Since, generally speaking, workplaces are not democracies and resources cannot be distributed equally to all, a sense of injustice can readily emerge between and among co-workers. Feelings of injustice play an important role in the evolution of workplace bullying.⁵¹ Moreover, perceptions of injustice are complex in their evolution. They readily yield a sense of winners and losers that promotes reactive bullying.

Managers and administrators have great opportunity to redress employees' sense of winning and losing, especially when employees perceive themselves to be on the losing side. When the decisions administrators make are seen as consistent and fair, recognized to be made with care and concern, and known to incorporate employee input, administrators cultivate a culture of justice that precludes the need for individuals to

establish a power base through acts of bullying. As co-workers find access to formal channels for open expression of their individual views and for making contributions to administrative decisions, they are able to see themselves as part of their employing organizations, rather than perceiving themselves simply as people who work there.

As transparent, unbiased processes become evident, clarity in the communication of decisions is enhanced. Faculty come to understand that personal biases do not finally determine organizational outcomes. As fully-participating partners in the evolution of their employing organizations, individuals develop a sense of pride that supports their commitment to the organization and to each other. These processes illustrate how administrators, whose role is so vitally important to organizational success, can seek and implement the *magis* in their day-to-day work with their peers, subordinates, and their own superiors. The processes are not difficult; they simply involve a continuous quest for openness, honesty, consistency, and care as tough decisions are made and outcomes of those decisions are enacted.

Developing Skills for Respectful Dialogue

Through formal, organizational-level policy and implementation of practices that support open, honest, and safe communication to promote a sense of organizational justice, the groundwork for healthy work environments is established. Through these actions, administrators and co-workers can establish a context within which seeking the *magis* becomes second nature. "Having a consensus of 'how we work here' can be a useful tool to managing difficult behaviors and situations and for establishing a more constructive work environment in which bullying is antithetical."⁵² As the notion of bullying becomes antithetical, strengthened skill in the conduct of day-to-day interactions will further enhance interpersonal interactions in the workplace, supporting recognition of 'the more' that tends to feed us all emotionally and psychologically.

Jesuit spirituality has always incorporated a spirituality of reflection,⁵³ important not only for individuals but also, organizations as wholes, as discretely and collectively coworkers address blind

spots or weaknesses in their interactions that can derail well-intentioned efforts to move the organization forward.⁵⁴ Derived from Fagin's work⁵⁵ on reflective practices within a Jesuit value system, the following cue questions may be useful for individual or group evaluation and problem-solving efforts to seek the *magis* as it pertains to enhancing the culture of civility.

- What difficult conversations have I/we engaged in or avoided today?
- How have I/we attended to the unspoken messages of interpersonal exchanges?
- How have I/we modeled civil intentionality in my/our interactions?
- What actions will I/we stop that dampen my/our collective ability to cultivate civility in everyday encounters?
- How have I/we placed the organization's mission above personal agendas?


Building on the foundation established, as faculty consider their own communication patterns and styles, individuals and groups can refine skills in communicating that encourage us to listen with the intent to understand the message, rather than the desire to frame our response.⁵⁶ Developing skill in reflective practice, crucial conversations, and anti-bullying intervention does not automatically happen. Therefore, it behooves workplaces to provide opportunities for professional development training focused on 'how to' aspects of civil intentionality and respectful discourse. Attending to the *magis* provides a context within which co-workers are encouraged to reflect on workplace interactions to interact from a place of respect and concern as they cultivate a climate of civility.

Summary

In an April 2010 address on Jesuit higher education in the 21st Century, Fr. General Adolfo Nicolás argued that, "One can 'cut and paste' without the need to think critically."⁵⁷ As we, as academicians, seek the *magis* in our day-to-day activities, whether we are in religious or secular institutions, we move beyond cutting and pasting and instead move toward building a comprehensive, intentional approach to our work. The Superior General's April 2010 address called

educators to work with their students, to engage in the world, and to imagine new ways to be for and with others. Considering Fr. Nicolás's observations in light of the ambiguities, challenges, and opportunities that characterize our collaborations and discussions in university communities, one can recognize that the call for being for and with others extends far beyond situations that reflect faculty/student relations. Rather, Fr. Nicolás's reflections lend themselves to enhanced understanding of the culture of the 'magis' that Jesuit Colleges and Universities attempt to foster throughout their communities.

As we seek the 'magis' through careful reflection and openness to God glorified in our behaviors, we are strengthened in addressing the complex issues that tend to characterize university life, especially that workplace bullying is on the rise internationally. Against the backdrop of the better course of action available to us through focused efforts to seek the *magis*, three strategies: developing relevant policies; fostering open, honest and safe communication; and honing individual skills in respectful dialogue, can help stem a problem that, left unaddressed, will undermine individuals in the workplace and the workplace as a whole.

In attempting to create a culture through which we seek the *magis*, we simultaneously engage in 'cura personalis'—care for the entire person—advancing a culture that promotes a greater connection among the entire university community and models behaviors of caring communities that remain a hallmark of the 400 year Jesuit educational tradition. As faculty of Jesuit institutions, we derive insight and guidance from St. Ignatius of Loyola who prompted us to seek the greater glory of God. In response to everyday interactions and conflicts, Ignatius called us to respond in ways that promote civility. As we implement relevant policies, take advantage of reflective self-assessment, and hone our skills in open dialogue, we begin to establish pathways to enhancing civility in our workplaces. "Jesuit universities foster within students, faculty, staff and administrators a virtuous life characterized by personal responsibility, respect, forgiveness, compassion [and] a habit of reflection...."⁵⁸ 

Notes

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