

Bullying at work: business advice from Mr Miyagi and The Karate Kid

In The Karate Kid, Daniel LaRusso was bullied. He sought Karate training not to win but to defend himself. In business, I have been bullied. You have been bullied. Train to fight, so you won't have to.

Temps de lecture : minute

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There was a time when making business was governed by the law of the strongest. Success was dictated by how much power and how much control you exerted. Software companies that I will not name have made their entire fortune by bullying their customers with tricky usage conditions, changes to terms and conditions, and more. This is what the Cobra Kai sensei John Kreese was teaching his students in Karate Kid, failing to give them the bigger picture.

“We do not train to be merciful here. Mercy is for the weak. Here, in the streets, in competition: a man confronts you, he is the enemy. An enemy deserves no mercy.” - John Kreese

Nevertheless, in an era when the subscription model has become the standard, this attitude is, thankfully, no longer trendy nor acceptable, to anyone. SAAS companies are rising above money-driven bullying tactics, putting the customer experience at the heart of their business strategies,

caring for them to encourage retention and avoid churn. The startup business should and can be one of benevolence and mutual aid. Plus, let's put it bluntly: bullying, even in business, is bad for your Karma, and Karma is a bitch.

"Then why train?" - Mr Miyagi

"So I won't have to fight." - Daniel

"Miyagi have hope for you." - Mr Miyagi

When looking at a situation from the outside it is easy to recognize the persecutor from the persecuted. But, there might be a time when you will be asked to take aggressive actions that are in complete contradiction with your core values. The motivations to make you do so are usually strong and can make you forget the position in which it puts you. You may want to keep your job, offer your company the chance to make it through another quarter, obtain a large investment or hire the people you've dreamed of...

*"Sweep the leg. Do you have a problem with that?"
- Kreese*

"No, Sensei." - Johnny

"No mercy." - Kreese

Bullies have the inner talent of being able to uncover apparent weaknesses and then use them to make you do things you would not

normally do, sometimes even, they can turn you into a bully yourself.

It can be incredibly hard to hide all your weaknesses in business, but you can turn them into strengths by looking at them from another perspective. Imagine you are low on cash and a potential investor is pushing you around? Turn to your most loyal customers for a potential upsell, pre-payment or even investment, tell the truth to your initial investors for support... Maybe you have signed an abusive clause in a contract, you could try to figure out an unseen exit strategy with your most trusted advisors.

"Problem: attitude." - Mr Miyagi

"No the problem is, I'm getting my ass kicked every other day, that's the problem." - Daniel

"Hai, because boys have bad attitude. Karate for defense only." - Mr Miyagi

The more you comply with bullies against your will, the worse your situation will become. Assess and reassess the people you surround yourself with. Sometimes, it takes a while and a situation of high stress before the true nature of people shows.

As a CEO, do not accept your investors just on the cash and timesheet they offer, check their credentials, their reputation, the support they can provide you, seek out stories of how they've backed up some of their startups under high pressure.

As a future co-founder, carefully select who you will be sharing the creation of the company with, a character assessment is not to be

overlooked. As a future new employee, remember that the interview goes both ways, are you completely comfortable about the new leadership you will be joining and working under? As a customer or a partner, can you tell whether the win-win relationship you see will last and grow in time? There are no bad decisions, only poor choices.

*"No such thing as bad student, only bad teacher.
Teacher say, student do." - Mr Miyagi*

Now when you are bullied in business, there are three potential exits:

1. Accept: this can work only temporarily until you find a better solution.
2. Quit: this is the most comfortable option, one that I have taken myself several times. It is not the coward's option when you do not have the strength to do better. However, it is never the long term solution.
3. Improve: in most situations, the people who are bullying have a reason to do so, try to find out the root cause of the problem and fix it. Often, it is rooted in fear of something, fear they made the wrong investment and wish to control you by making you do things a certain way, fear you are not accomplishing things fast enough, fear..., find the root cause, control it, fix it, improve the situation.

"When do I learn how to punch?" - Daniel

"Better learn balance. Balance is key. Balance good, karate good. Everything good. Balance bad, better pack up, go home. Understand?" - Mr Miyagi

And the most important question, can you show your bully the right path?

Can you let go of the offence, of the aggression and offer a collaborative exit, so that maybe, this bully stops bullying not just you, but also anyone else that they used to bully by learning a new path?

"Fighting always last answer to problem." - Mr Miyagi

Note from the author: As a female writer and leader, I had the option to look at the male-female dynamic, and, unfortunately, I have plenty of stories to tell about this. But, as far as bullying goes, a general approach is absolutely necessary. Bullying has no place in business, in the workplace, on the school playground or, in fact anywhere. I am a strong believer that it can stop, and to do so, we need to speak up about it and raise awareness.

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