The Colleague Who Would Not Take "No" for an Answer

There are many reasons people do not speak up about unacceptable behavior. Most people need a range of options for action.

By Mary Rowe

News websites are often full of stories about unacceptable behavior that was known to many people who did not take action to surface the information. Why did they not do something? Conventional wisdom about why individuals within organizations do not speak up in a timely manner when they have a serious concern—or even a good idea—is that they fear retaliation. And conventional wisdom about why bystanders who witness or learn of unacceptable behavior often do not speak up is because of "diffusion of responsibility."[1] The following story, which has been de-identified by changing many details from the ombuds case, illustrates how I came to learn that conventional wisdom about inaction is much too limited.

I came to MIT in 1973 as an early prototype of what is now called an organizational ombuds.[2] In 1973, "fear of retaliation" was my first thought when people came into my office long after their complaint, concern, or good idea arose, although I began to look at other motivations. And in 1973, I thought immediately about "diffusion of responsibility" when I learned of bystanders who learned of concerning behavior but did not act or come forward in a timely way. It took me a while to realize that major research on

[1] John M. Darley and Bibb Latané, "Bystander Intervention in Emergencies: Diffusion of Responsibility," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 8, no. 4p1 (1968): 377–383.
[2] See Mary P. Rowe, "Research and Publications Biography," 2021.

bystanders had focused perhaps too much on a singular event of violence overheard by strangers[3] —and that ongoing, real-life situations among people who know each other might be very different.

It *is* true that retaliation, as a form of mean behavior, is a real, pervasive, and painful problem in the workplace. In my ombuds office, complaints about bullying and retaliation were even more common than identity-based harassment. In addition, retaliation is hard to pin down in part because much of it is covert or indirect, and micro-retaliations may be involved that are hard to identify, assess, or manage.[4]

However, I came to realize that there are a great many barriers to speaking up or taking action, and many motivations in play when people consider taking action. The notion that there are many barriers and many motivations—with respect to targets of unacceptable behavior and bystanders—became a lifetime research focus for me.[5]

I began to keep notes about the multitude of barriers to speaking up and coming forward; I tried to understand these barriers. And I kept notes about what people told me about their motivations when they did decide to act. Occasionally, I took a few notes

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[3] Darley and Latané, "Bystander Intervention in Emergencies."
[4] See Mary Rowe, "Cumulative Effects of Apparently Small Events," *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, April/May 2002.
[5] See, for example, Mary Rowe, Linda Wilcox, and Howard Gadlin, "Dealing with—or Reporting—'Unacceptable' Behavior," *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter 2009):52-64; Mary Rowe, "Helping Hesitant Bystanders Identify Their Options: A Checklist with Examples and Ideas to Consider," *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Mary Rowe special issue, 2023-2024); and Mary Rowe, "Consider Generic Options When Complainants and Bystanders Are Fearful," *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* Vol. 16, No. 2 (Mary Rowe special issue, 2023-2024).

when a target of unacceptable behavior or bystander did not act. I would then ask my office visitor if I could change many identifying details and write up an anonymized story—as I am doing now, with permission.

In the early 1970s, I got a very unusual phone call from abroad. It was from a scientist who traveled a lot and often worked far away from MIT. He said he was “being plagued” by someone or possibly by more than one person, but he was pretty sure it was just one person. He thought he knew who was plaguing him, but the person denied it, and he “could not prove anything.” He said it was a long story. I invited him to come talk with me in person the next time he was back at MIT.

He did call the next month. Faced with a long story to come, I asked this man who felt he was being plagued if he would like to bring a sandwich and come by at one o’clock for lunch in my office. I would offer coffee; it was a relatively light day for me, and he could talk for as long as he liked. We were still there at five o’clock talking about his situation.

At first, he said, he had quite liked a brilliant colleague, a woman who worked in a nearby department in a field close to his own. They ate their home-packed lunches together occasionally, in a faculty lounge. They talked about work. He felt no romantic connection, but he respected her as a colleague, and he was happy to discuss his work. However, he said, she began to ask him about personal things and then asked him to dinner. He gently refused, saying he was not interested in romance.

He told me he'd lost his wife to cancer a year earlier. It had been a very happy marriage; they had been childhood sweethearts. He was now totally engaged in his work… "to manage my life," he said, and "also I've been happy to continue a 24/7 lifetime in the lab."

His colleague would not, however, listen to his refusal to date and began to call. He stopped eating lunch in the lounge and ate instead in his lab, standing—looking out the window, he said, just contentedly thinking about his work. She then called a few times at night. He got an answering machine. She sat across the hall from his office occasionally, sitting outside his office door on stairs going up to the next floor, waiting for him to come in. Another colleague asked him about her, and offered to speak to her, but he shrugged it off, and began to come in very early or very late.

Two months later, he saw her out the window of his home, sitting on the curb. He closed the blind. Thereafter, she continued to find ways to cross paths with him. One evening, when he left the office, she followed him down the street, talking winsomely as he replied in monosyllables. She several times intercepted his office mail from the employee who delivered the mail at MIT and brought it to him. And then having done this successfully—she was very charming—she did the same outside his home on a Saturday, intercepting mail from the U.S. Post Office person, as if she lived at his home and was just about to walk in. Once when he was away in another country, she called

him at nighttime, his time. On the next trip, he changed hotels at the last moment. Again, she found him somehow and telephoned him in the new hotel.

He described perhaps a dozen more such vignettes. Throughout all this, each time they were in contact, he said he asked her politely to stop. He was, he said, puzzled and bewildered. He could not fathom why she was interested in him; her behavior made absolutely no sense to him. He said knew he could “turn her in to somebody” at MIT, but just thought it was all a waste of time, irrational and absurd.

Finally, after several months, it seemed that she had stopped. Then he woke up one night, at home in the middle of the night, to find police at the door. The police said she had called to report a break-in as if she lived at his home; she had used her own name. The police were annoyed when they discovered that he was single and had made no call. They offered to call her down to the police station. He, in turn, said he was now “very uncomfortable.” However, he asked the police not to go back to her. He told the police he was leaving immediately on a trip outside the U.S.

Nearly half a year later he returned, hoping that all was well. He had gotten no unwanted calls or mail, and he thought things might be okay. But a day after his return he found a large dead houseplant on his home doorstep. He thought of course about the erstwhile persistent colleague but concluded that the plant could have gotten there in many ways.

A month later the fire department came to his door, having been called about “billows of smoke over his roof.” Firefighters said that they had been called by “the next-door neighbor.” Over the following week, his two neighbors said they had made no such call.

By now it had been many months since he had heard from his colleague. He was hesitant to reopen contact. He felt he had “no *proof* that it was she who now was harassing” him. He was well-known in his field after all, he said, and many people knew where he lived.

He thought perhaps he was getting a bit paranoid.

But then, soon after our lunch, he brought a personal letter to my office; it had been misdelivered to his neighbors and returned by them. We examined the envelope’s slightly unclear address—and concluded that it was possible that the Post Office had misdelivered the letter. He was also concerned because he had just had a flat tire while his car was parked in the garage at work. But, he said, his car had old tires, and the auto shop said the tire was just worn out.

However, the following week he called again; another letter was misdelivered. And the *new* tire went flat. He wondered if he should just accept one of the many positions he was regularly being offered at other universities. I said, as I had before, that I thought he had many options; he readily agreed to come back in to think more about taking action.

Over the following week, he and I talked at length about possible options that I offered, and other ideas he came up with. He could write the woman a private letter, detailing the facts of their acquaintance, and ask her, in writing, if she had started again to seek contact with him. If so, he could put—in writing this time—a request to stop.[6] He could go see her, with or without the private letter. He could ask me to talk with her privately. He could ask me to ask her for a possible facilitation of a discussion with her. He could "sit it out for a another month" (since perhaps she *had* given up) while checking in with me once a week.

He had long-term warm relationships at MIT; he could involve one or more kind and trustworthy colleagues in their School. He could talk with his—or her—department head; each department head knew them both.

I asked if he wished to talk this over with family or friends outside MIT, or with a Chaplain? Might he wish for professional advice from Employee Assistance, or the head of the psychology section in the Medical Department, or the Chief of Police? He came up with several options himself. He could install surveillance cameras outside his lab and his house and put up a poster about it. He could call around for a housemate to live with him—or move to another place near MIT. He briefly touched on the possibility of his marrying someone else; he had met someone abroad "but did not really know this other

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[6] Mary Rowe, "'Drafting a Letter' for People Dealing with Harassment or Bullying," *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* Vol. 16, No. 2 (Mary Rowe special issue, 2023-2024).

woman very well." We agreed that we had just scratched the surface of possibilities and agreed to keep thinking over the coming weekend.

The following Monday he called. He had decided to leave MIT for a position in California and had just arranged to do so over the weekend. "Fleeing," he said. As far as I know, this was the only option he undertook.

It was one of several cases that came to my office—out of dozens of stalking cases over 42 years[7]—where the target of concerns like these decided to flee. Except for this person, all those who decided to disappear were women. And this was the only person who left without trying options available locally. (There were a few cases—when local options were tried and did not work despite MIT's having adopted strong policies—where the targets disappeared, including changing their names and, with MIT support, hiding their academic records from outside inquiry.)

Years later, I spent a decade querying ombuds colleagues about their experiences with people who would not report or take action about concerns (and even good ideas) that they had brought to the ombuds office.[8] We collected dozens of reasons that organizational ombuds were told had contributed to hesitation. This research showed there are many other barriers, and they are often complex. The most common reasons for not coming forward were fear of loss of relationships, loss of privacy, fear of

[7] Mary Rowe, "People with Delusions or Quasi-Delusions Who 'Won't Let Go,'" Journal of the University and College Ombuds Association, Occasional Paper, Number 1 (Fall 1994).
[8] Mary Rowe, Linda Wilcox, and Howard Gadlin, "Dealing with—or Reporting—'Unacceptable' Behavior," *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* Vol. 2, No. 1 (Winter 2009): 52-64.

unspecified “bad consequences” or retaliation, and insufficient evidence. Perceptions of the organization and of supervisors are important, as is a complaint system that is seen to be safe, accessible, and credible.[9] I also spent years learning from visitors to my office who were bystanders to unacceptable behavior about the similar barriers *they* faced in speaking up.[10]

It was important for me to understand that there are cases where the reasons for hesitation are nearly unique, or simply unknown, as in the case here. As I write this story, I realize that my visitor may have had private reasons not to complain. Or he might just have decided that the job or the team elsewhere was preferable anyway, and that leaving would end this upsetting situation.

It also is important to recognize that hesitating to act can be well-founded and prudent. Talking things over with a trusted resource is wise. Taking action can, in some cases, be very inappropriate. Where hesitation is deep, targets of unacceptable behavior sometimes find it helpful to draft a letter about the issues, whether or not they ever decide to send it.[11] Bystanders are sometimes helped by a checklist that helps them sort out their interests and options and avoid making mistakes.[12]

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Mary Rowe, “Fostering Constructive Action by Peers and Bystanders in Organizations and Communities,” *Negotiation Journal* 34, No. 2 (April 2018): 137-163.
[11] Rowe, “Drafting a Letter.”
[12] Mary Rowe, “Helping Hesitant Bystanders Identify Their Options: A Checklist with Examples, and Ideas to Consider,” *Journal of the International Ombudsman Association* Vol. 16, No. 2 (Mary Rowe special issue, 2023-2024).

I kept thinking about hesitation in the face of serious concerns. One strong conclusion I reached was that an ombuds often learns only some of the facts that are relevant in a situation. And then, in 2011, I read Daniel Kahneman's very accessible book *Thinking, Fast and Slow.*[13] I already knew by that time that it can be hard to understand the motivations of others, which are numerous and can be complex and changeable. *Thinking, Fast and Slow* taught me that it is often hard or impossible to discern motivations in ourselves, let alone in others. Many decisions are made below the level of conscious thought in our brains. And at the level of conscious thought, our brains often simply rationalize explanations for our having already made up our minds.

This case, and others like it, slowed me down when I caught myself wanting to offer advice to my visitors. Puzzling cases gave me a renewed and powerful reason to believe in the importance of offering options to those with concerns and helping them develop and assess options on their own.[14]

My office visitor's choice to leave the university was not among the first options I might have guessed he would choose. I would have thought that, like many others, he would have taken further action on his own, like writing a letter. Or that he might have asked for MIT action to stop the unwanted attention. However, it was clear that it mattered a great deal to him to control his own choice. (One of the functions of organizational

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[13] Daniel Kahneman, "Thinking, Fast and Slow" (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
[14] Brian Bloch, David Miller, and Mary Rowe, "Systems for Dealing with Conflict and Learning from Conflict−Options for Complaint-Handling: An Illustrative Case," *Harvard Negotiation Law Review* 14 (2009): 239-247; and Mary Rowe, "Options and Choice for Conflict Resolution in the Workplace," in *Negotiation Strategies for Mutual Gain: The Basic Seminar of the Program on Negotiation at Harvard Law School*, ed. Lavinia Hall (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1993), 105-119.

ombuds is to help people help themselves (with responsible actions) if they wish to do so.[15]) In the end, I felt okay about having supported him to make a reasonably informed choice, in the sense of his having discussed other paths he could have taken—and I wished him warmly well.

[15] Mary Rowe, Timothy Hedeen, Jennifer Schneider, and Hector Escalante, "What Do Organizational Ombuds Do? And *Not* Do?" International Ombuds Association working paper, 2024.