

Jennifer Hancock: On a Mission to Stop Bullying

Interview by Temma Ehrenfeld

Jennifer Hancock has had a fascinating life: born in Los Angeles, she trained dolphins in Hawaii, studied Mandarin in Shanghai, and advised a Florida bio-tech company on how to spend \$25 million a week.

She has now turned her formidable talents and communication skills into a mission to put an end to bullies. Drawing on her experience with dolphins, she teaches children, teenagers, and adults how to apply successful animal-training methods to stop bullying in school, online, and in the office. She teaches human resources professionals how to stop workplace bullying through her company, Humanist Learning Systems. And more than 13,000 people have downloaded her book, *The Bully Vaccine*, which is currently being used in two school districts.

“Kids are being bullied to death,” she says. “I saw news stories about suicides and realized I needed to share my knowledge.”

How common is bullying?

Bullying is seen in every culture all over the world. Certain personalities are probably more prone to experiment with aggression than others, and if it works, they will continue.

Workplace bullies tend to get away with it and even be rewarded because they are in a position of power over their victim most of the time. According to research by the [Workplace Bullying Institute](#), 90 percent of employees have worked with a “toxic” coworker at some point in their career, and 60 percent are working with a toxic coworker right now. Also, 75 percent of the time the victims of workplace bullying either leave, or are demoted or fired as a result--and the bullies get their way. Those are sobering statistics.

How did you arrive at your approach to retrain bullies?

The skills I teach are based on training techniques with animals, called [operant conditioning](#). Humans respond pretty much the same way to stimulus, response, rewards, and punishment that all animals do. This is the science behind most successful weight loss programs, smoking cessation programs, and more. That doesn’t mean it’s not controversial. It is. The first critiques were that while this works on rats, humans aren’t rats so you can’t extrapolate. Turns out--you can.

Psychologists who read my book know the science behind what I teach is solid. They also know that it is precisely my practical experience as an animal trainer that makes me qualified to teach these skills to others. Animal trainers learn primarily through apprenticeship and hands-on experience.

**You have a long history of working with animals, but describe yourself as a “Humanist.”
Do Humanists think that human beings are more important than animals?**

No. Humans are animals. How can we be more important than any of our fellow creatures? Humanism is a philosophy. It's an approach to living life fully, ethically, compassionately, and responsibly. It means that I personally strive to be the best human I can be. I wouldn't make a very good alligator or tiger. But I can be an awesome human. To say that Humanists are by and large extraordinary people is an understatement.

If I'm being bullied on the job, what can I do?

Start documenting everything that is happening: Who is doing it, when they did it, who witnessed it, and so forth. There are laws against harassment and this documentation will help you later if you need to file a lawsuit. It will also help you in the present. Find out if you have support from managers above the bully. I hate to be blunt, but I don't recommend trying to get a bully to stop harassing you on the job unless you have support from upper management. Decide whether this is a fight worth having. You have to assume that the bully will retaliate.

How can we create a world without bullies?

It doesn't take a lot of people to stop a bully. It only takes one or two dedicated individuals in each group. We have to start in the schools. Bullying is a learned behavior. If kids learn that bullying works in school, they will continue to bully in the workplace. If they learn that it doesn't work, they will carry that lesson to the workplace as well. The choice is ours as a society.

Imagine if two kids in every kindergarten class knew how to stop bullies. Imagine that they successfully prevented any of their classmates from being bullied. Imagine that none of their classmates became bullies because they learned early on that it didn't work. What are those kids like 15 years from now when they graduate from school?

Want to Know More?

The Workplace Bullying Institute offers a [list](#) of useful books. For more information on bullying among children, see the [list of resources](#) at stopbullying.gov. Consider [donating](#) *The Bully Vaccine* to a school library or [download](#) Jennifer's free e-book.