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# Workplace Mobbing: Individual and Family Health Consequences

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*In this article, the concept of workplace mobbing is introduced and described. The health consequences for the individuals who have been mobbed and for their families are identified and discussed. The contribution of organizational and personality dynamics to workplace mobbing is examined, and possible counseling interventions are presented. The article concludes with two clinical case studies of workplace mobbing in academia.*

**Keywords:** workplace mobbing; bullying; family; organizational dynamics; health consequences

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Mobbing is the nonsexual harassment of a coworker by a group of other workers or other members of an organization designed to secure the removal from the organization of the one who is targeted. Mobbing results in the humiliation, devaluation, discrediting, degradation, loss of professional reputation and, usually, the removal of the target from the organization with all the concomitant financial, career, health, and psychosocial implications that one might expect from a protracted traumatizing experience. Professionals providing individuals, couples, and family counseling, especially those who working with career issues, job loss, acute depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), need to be aware of the phenomenon of workplace mobbing. This article describes the phenomenon of mobbing, the impact of organizational and personality dynamics on it, its health consequences, with a brief note about counseling interventions. Two clinical examples illustrate this phenomenon.

## WHAT EXACTLY IS WORKPLACE MOBBIING?

Workplace mobbing is a phenomenon that has really only been identified since the 1990s and is the subject of scientific and legal attention, particularly in Europe, but has recently

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become the subject of increasing attention in the United States and Canada (Cottone & Tarvydas, 2002; Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 1999; Westhues, 2005, 2006). The term *mobbing* was first used by Leymann (1990) to describe abusive workplace behavior. He borrowed the term from the ethologist Konrad Lorenz (1963) whose discipline was the study of animal behavior. In the animal world, mobbing is a behavior in which a group of animals single out another animal and gang up on it to eliminate it from the group. Evolutionary psychology regards mobbing, as did Lorenz, as a Darwinian struggle to survive—attempting to annihilate one who is seen as a threat. In the work world, Davenport et al. (1999) describe mobbing as follows:

A malicious attempt to force a person out of the workplace through unjustified accusations, humiliation, general harassment, emotional abuse, and/or terror. It is a “ganging up” by the leader(s)—organization, superior, co-worker, or subordinate—who rallies others into systematic and frequent “mob-like” behavior . . . The result is always injury—physical or mental distress or illness and social misery and, most often, expulsion from the workplace. (p. 40)

They also point out that the victims of mobbing are usually individuals who have demonstrated exceptional accomplishment, commitment to work, integrity, innovation, and intelligence and competence. Mobbing behavior is identified with increasing frequency in the organizational world and in the workplace, and is called by different names in different countries. The term *psychological terrorism* is also used to describe workplace mobbing because, like political terrorism, the victim knows that another wave of terror will come but does not know when or from what angle. Although the term *bullying* is more commonly used in the United States, it does not capture the particular grievousness of mobbing that refers to a group attack on a worker rather than an attack by a single individual which is described as bullying.

Being mobbed can result in a profound sense of shame and powerlessness on the part of the victim who may not know the language of mobbing and therefore does not know how to name what has happened. Instead of understanding mobbing as a

reversion to a more primitive aggressive state common to all animals, the person who has been mobbed most often has received little support, has been isolated, and has constructed the meaning of the experience as that of shameful personal failure. Mobbing victims will need support, appropriate treatment, and sometimes career rehabilitation from their counselors. However, as counselors have discovered in working with bullying issues in the schools, bullying cannot just be handled by helping the child who has been its victim. Reducing bullying requires increased consciousness raising, and awareness and schoolwide prevention programs. The exact same is needed to combat mobbing to prevent the wreckage of lives and families from its effects.

### PHASES IN A MOBBING EPISODE

Leymann and Gustaffson (1996) provided a chilling but descriptive outline of the five phases of a mobbing episode. One of the hallmarks of a mobbing is the length of time that the episode can go on for and the psychological and physical wear and tear on the victim that occurs during a protracted period, usually lasting from between 6 and 18 months. Phase 1 is the "conflict phase" in which some difference or problem functions as the trigger for the mobbing. Phase 2 consists of aggressive acts and psychological assaults against the victim. By this time, more people have been co-opted into participating in the humiliation and discrediting of the victim. Phase 3 is the period in which administration or management seriously enters into the mobbing, usually after having ignored or minimized it in the earlier phases. Characteristically, the involvement of administration or management is detrimental to the victim and amplifies the already mounting psychological and health injuries resulting from the ongoing mobbing. Phase 4 is the period in which administration or management ally with the mobbers by sharing in the construction of the victim as somehow deficient and troublesome and often label the victim as "difficult," "under extreme stress," or "mentally ill." Phase 5 is the expulsion phase in which the victim is forced to leave the organization or institution either by being proactively terminated or through constructive dismissal because working conditions are so intolerable that the victim must leave to preserve mental and physical health.

In any mobbing episode, all the people involved in the episode in any way can be classified as mobbers, victim(s), or those who stood by and watched the mobbing. The fabric of relationships within the organization has been damaged and the victim has suffered an injury that can be life threatening. Davenport et al. (1999) emphasize that damage done to a person through workplace mobbing is an injury, not an illness, and is a workplace safety and health issue—not an individual mental health issue.

### ORGANIZATIONAL AND PERSONALITY DYNAMICS THAT FOSTER WORKPLACE MOBBING

Although the research on organizational and personality profiles of those who mob and those who are victims of

mobbing is in its infancy, the extant literature on bullying may offer some understanding of mobbing but should be interpreted cautiously. We do not, yet, know whether the organizational and personality profiles of the dynamics in mobbing and bullying are the same or similar. There is no question, however, that organizational dynamics and personality dynamics exert significant influence on individuals and groups in organizational settings.

### Organizational Dynamics

Organizational dynamics, particularly an organization's culture and leadership, fosters and reinforces workplace mobbing. Culture consists of the values, beliefs, and rituals that uniquely define an organization. The organization's culture may be sufficiently offensive, intimidating, or hostile that it interferes with the ability of certain employees to perform their jobs effectively. For mobbing to occur in a sustained fashion in an organization, the organization's culture must "allow" and sanction such harassment, that is, a bully-prone culture. A key ingredient in such an organization is a pervading sense of "permission to act aggressively." Without this sense of permission, individuals who undertake to harass others will themselves become the victims of ostracism by other coworkers.

In addition, mobbing also requires some level of acquiescence by management. Even in a bully-prone culture, mobbing will not occur, at least in a sustained fashion, in a particular unit of an organization if the manager does not permit it. Needless to say, organizational dynamics may be so strong that only the rare manager with incredible integrity and courage can and will resist these dynamics. Sometimes a manager will participate in or actually initiate the mobbing, or may know that a lower-level manager is harassing employees but will not intervene, believing that to put an end to it would undermine his or her authority (Brotsky, 1976).

Low satisfaction with manager's leadership style, that is, either too aggressive or too laissez-faire has also been noted (Leymann, 1993). Besides these culture and management dynamics, other organizational dynamics have been noted to be operative in organizations that are bully-prone. These include low job satisfaction, deficiencies in work design, and a low moral standard in the unit of the organization (Leymann, 1993). Finally, it should be noted that it is not uncommon for workplace mobbing to begin at the top of the bully-prone organization, with top management and trickle down through the ranks.

So in what types of organizations is workplace mobbing most likely to occur? What is it about the culture and management that permits and sustains mobbing? Although there is a growing literature on workplace mobbing, there is relatively little research data to answer these questions. Nevertheless, a typology that maps some of the cultural and managerial dynamics of bully-prone organizations offers some insight into these questions (Ferris, 2004). This typology profiles three types of organizations of which two foster mobbing and one no longer does. These three are briefly described here.

The first type of organizational culture and management that commonly fosters mobbing involves organizations that emphasize both achievement and profits, but focus their accountability primarily toward shareholders, rather than toward employees. Employees in such organizations experience high levels of work stress and considerable pressure to achieve and meet tight deadlines. Such organizations are characterized by high job strain, meaning that although employees are faced with high demands for job performance, they perceive themselves as having little control over the manner in which they perform their job.

Needless to say turnover is high, morale tends to be low, and benefit use for medical and behavioral health services is high. Management in such organizations, including human resources, tends to be defensive about mobbing. They may even be willing to admit that such negative behavior is considered acceptable in their organization. Nevertheless, they attribute the cause of mobbing to "weakness" on the part of the targeted employee. Accordingly, they are likely to be dismissive of such complaints. If and when these managers do intervene it would consist of advising the targeted employee to toughen up and increase his or her resilience. Thus, it is not surprising then that targeted employees tend to quit rather than request assistance from the organization (Ferris, 2004).

The second type of organizational culture and management that commonly fosters mobbing involves organizations that are bureaucratic and/or rule oriented. Typically, these are educational and governmental institutions. A large percentage of their employees may serve in professional job classifications, and job expectations and reporting relations are usually clearly specified. Often these organizations have respectful workplace policies, and typically they have codes of conduct. These are unlikely to include provisions about mobbing because it is not considered protected by federal statute as are sexual harassment and racial discrimination. Accordingly, employees expect that their organization will implement anti-mobbing policies and codes and are surprised or shocked when they are not enforced. Management in such organizations is hierarchical, and accountability is primarily directed to meeting annual indices as well as statutory or accreditation standards, whereas concern for the well-being of employees is secondary.

When queried about mobbing, these managers would most likely attribute it to "personality conflict" between two employees. Typically, these managers would say that they held both parties responsible for the conflict but would often blame the targeted employee for having the type of personality that aggravated the bully. If and when these managers intervene, it would be to tell the parties to solve the problem themselves. Mediation is often available in such organizations but is unlikely to result in a change to organizational dynamics. After aggrieved employees conclude that the organization is unlikely to actively support them, legal action is considered. Suggestive of the extent to which bullied employees were negatively affected, Ferris (2004) points out that these employees required longer courses of therapy than employees from the other two types of organizations.

The third type of organization is one which had previously taken action on an allegation of mobbing, mismanaged it, and subsequently effected changes in the organization's culture, structure, and management, which for all practical purposes eliminated mobbing. These organizations tend to be medium-sized, for-profit organizations. Their culture is characterized by respect, and their management style reflects a support for employees. They have revised their nonharassment policy to include mobbing, require nonharassment training for managers, and provide coaching and counseling to bullied employees, while investigating and resolving the issue (Ferris, 2004).

### Personality Dynamics

Although corporate culture is one of the most critical factors in determining if and to what extent mobbing will occur within a given organization, it does not mean that all employees in an organization with a bully-prone culture will engage in harassing behavior. Although corporate culture affects employees differentially, an employee's personality style and level of psychological maturity interacts with the organization's culture and differentially affects that employee's behavior (Mantell, 1994). Clinical observation suggests that hostile, nonsupportive organizational cultures are more likely to foster workplace mobbing in personality-disordered and immature employees than in more psychologically healthy employees. Although some find this organizational-personality interactional view useful, others would hold that mobbing can be explained largely in terms of personality dynamics of both perpetrator and target. Unfortunately, there is little empirical support for this point of view. There is some research profiling both the target and the bully, and this is briefly reviewed in this section.

Studies on the targets of mobbing suggest that personality factors may play a role (Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2001). Three different profiles are reported. One profile indicated an extreme range of severe psychological problems and personality disturbances, that is, depressive, anxious, suspicious, uncertain, and confused. A second profile was characterized by depression and suspiciousness, whereas the third profile reflected a quite normal personality, despite having experienced mobbing behaviors. The researchers conclude that specific vulnerabilities and hardness factors exist among some targets.

There is also little research on the psychological profile of those engaging in workplace mobbing. In one study, bullies described themselves as being high on aggressiveness and were found to be low on social competence and high on social anxiety (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). Based on survey data and clinical observation, Namie (2003) suggests that all bullies are narcissistic and egocentric, although not necessarily meeting all the criteria for *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.) narcissistic personality disorder but rather that they exhibit some narcissistic features.

Still others speculate that some bullies exhibit malignant narcissism. Malignant narcissism is a variant of the narcissistic

personality with the additional feature of sadism, that is, taking pleasure from another's pain. In the workplace, malignant narcissists achieve and get promoted by abusing and exploiting peers and underlings. Although they get ahead by terrorizing their subordinates, they act reverentially and obsequiously, that is, kiss up to their superiors. They are convincing "yes men" to their superiors, while at the same secretly despising them, convinced that they are far superior to and more important than their bosses.

### VICTIM AND FAMILY HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF MOBBING

Mobbing and bullying at work results in a number of health consequences or injuries (Davenport et al., 1999) as they are referred to in recent literature. The health consequences extend to both the victim and the victim's family and include a wide swath of physical, psychological, and interpersonal insults. Leymann (1990) reported that PTSD symptoms were more acute in mobbing victims than in victims of accidents or traumatic events lasting for short periods of time. He related the intensity of the PTSD symptoms to the length of a typical mobbing episode, which can go on for up to 18 months or longer. O'Brien (1997) in his research suggested that prolonged stress, as occurs in mobbing, can actually cause brain damage. Danish researchers (Hansen et al., 2006) found that those who were targets of workplace mobbing showed higher physiological stress responses as measured by saliva cortisol and more symptoms of somatization, depression, anxiety, and negative effect than did nonbullied controls. Westhues (2005) recounts a sad litany of premature death, illness, suicide, and job loss among the academics in his qualitative case study series of professors who had been mobbed. These health injuries have been documented in research.

Anecdotal evidence of health injuries includes all of the above and a host of other physical, emotional, and relational symptoms. Mobbing victims commonly become so preoccupied with what has happened to them that they cease to be able to function effectively, causing derivative injuries of job loss and financial loss. They may experience profound feelings of self-doubt, shame, and humiliation, leading to increased self-imposed isolation from their natural web of social contacts. Reduced immunity to disease, and increased likelihood of heart disease and stroke are also associated with long-term stress such as is experienced in workplace mobbing.

In the workplace, which has its own web of social connections and contacts, mobbing victims tend to become ostracized and isolated. Colleagues and workmates who stood by and watched the mobbing occur tend to shy away from the victim as if somehow there is guilt by association, even if they previously had cordial relations with the victim. One colleague of a mobbing victim described the reactions of others as similar to the not uncommon reactions of friends and family of someone who is dying—they begin to

withdraw and move away from the person, as if the person is already dead. In many ways, feeling dead, wanting to be dead, feeling invisible, and abandoned are accurate descriptions of the psychological and interpersonal injuries suffered by victims of workplace mobbing.

Family members of mobbing victims, of course, are significantly affected. Changes in communication patterns, changes in affect, increased irritability, and negativity are inevitably going to strain even the best of relations. The victim's preoccupation with the mobbing experience is likely to result in both obsessive preoccupation and general lack of communication or in a need to constantly talk about the mobbing as if it were the only aspect of the victim's life. The mobbing experience, left untreated, can take over the identity of the victim and rob the victim of a sense of self and rob the family of the multidimensional person they knew and cared for. If the victim is forced out of a job, the resulting loss of income causes financial stresses and the ensuing strain of shame and humiliation of not being the provider he or she once was.

Depending on the circumstances of a mobbing victim's expulsion from the workplace, questions about reemployability may surface, affecting the entire family in a profound way. The victim's shame and humiliation may then come to encompass other members of the family. Marriages in which one spouse was a mobbing victim will be affected at every level of the relationship. Communication, intimacy and sex, work, demonstration of affection, parenting, and household management are all likely to be affected. It is likely that future research on the impact of mobbing on marriage will show an increase in marital tension and perhaps in the divorce rate. Workplace mobbing extracts a huge price that is paid by the victim and the family. For intervention to be successful it must include the victim, the family, and the organization. Italian researchers recently found that in all cases of workplace mobbing studied, dysfunctional organizational practices played a significant role (Albini, Benedetti, Giordano, Punzi, & Cassito, 2003). The health injuries caused by workplace mobbing are catastrophic and leave their mark for a long time. Effective counseling intervention will be discussed later in the article, but as must be evident, it is far from a simple process because it must include so many layers—the victim, the family, and the organization.

### CLINICAL CASE EXAMPLES OF WORKPLACE MOBBING

Two clinical examples of workplace mobbings, both in university settings, will be presented based on Leymann and Gustaffson's (1996) five phases described above.

#### Case 1: Susan

*Phase 1: The triggering event.* Susan was an assistant professor in an educational research department. Two of her closest friends in the department were men, one an associate

professor and the other a full-time professor. All three were involved in supervising doctoral dissertations and were part of a doctoral oversight group. They were concerned about the lowering of standards in the department and cited examples like occasional student plagiarism without apparent penalty, rampant grade inflation, and ultimately their frustration at what they saw as the dean turning a blind eye to the problems. Finally they put their concerns in writing and sent them to the dean and to the provost.

*Phase 2: Aggressive acts and psychological assaults against the victim.* Susan's male friends in the department left the university in disgust during a spring break because they did not foresee any of their desired changes to be forthcoming and because both were able to relocate, unlike Susan, and easily found other positions. Susan became increasingly ostracized by other members of her fairly large department and was regularly assigned the courses she least liked teaching and in which she was least skilled. Her annual evaluation contained very negative comments about her working style and her collegiality, even though all previous evaluations had been positive and never mentioned these problems. Word was getting around that "there were problems with Susan" and at faculty meetings she often found herself sitting alone and people shying away from her because they did not want to be seen associating with her.

*Phase 3: Active involvement of the administration.* About 8 months had passed by this time, and Susan was suffering, although steadfastly completing her responsibilities to her students and department. She kept thinking that things would change and the situation for her would improve. Meanwhile she was experiencing unexplained rashes all over her body and was lapsing into a fairly significant depression characterized also by generalized anxiety and fear. Being a single mom, the thought of losing her job was terrifying to her. Susan had pulled herself up by her bootstraps and did not want her twins to have to return to the kind of financial pressures that Susan had known all her life.

All the while Susan was hoping for the best, the mobbing was intensifying, and the provost organized and led what could only be described as kangaroo courts. Susan, her associate dean, and all the other members of her department were required to attend two of these meetings. At the first meeting, the provost posed one question that everyone was asked to answer in Susan's presence: Do you trust Susan? At the second meeting, the question was "Is Susan collegial?" Almost all her department members, many of whom Susan had regarded as trustworthy and supportive before the mobbing had begun, answered "no" to both questions. A couple of colleagues hemmed and hawed and tried to hedge by saying they really did not have much involvement with Susan and could not answer the question fairly.

*Phase 4: Labeling of the victim.* Susan was labeled as noncollegial and difficult to work with and was given a written memo to this effect, signed by her dean and by the

provost. She was put on a probationary contract. Her physical and mental health injuries and her sense of betrayal and powerlessness continued to escalate.

*Phase 5: Expulsion.* Susan's contract was not renewed and she was terminated. Legal proceedings began in which Susan prevailed years later. Her reentry into the work world was difficult and marked by a lot of starts and stops. She was treated for her injuries sustained during the mobbing—eczema, depression, and PTSD.

## Case 2: Alina

*Phase 1: The triggering event.* Alina was the longtime chairperson of the literature department at her small college. Her program had both a research and a theory track. A long-time colleague began to behave differently in terms of showing up later and later for work, keeping irregular office hours, and asking for rather odd shifts to count as official office hours. One afternoon, he railed at Alina for allowing postmodern approaches to literary criticism to be taught in the department. He felt they were subversive and had taken over the academy. Alina explained that contemporary postmodern and deconstructionist approaches to literary criticism and textual analysis were important trends that students should be exposed to, given the current state of literary criticism. She also added that academic freedom would require her to permit a legitimate approach to be taught by a professor skilled in it.

*Phase 2: Aggressive acts and psychological assaults against the victim.* The professor who had complained to Alina started to secretly organize a group of students to write in complaints about Alina and the other professor who taught postmodern approaches. He developed an "attack" sheet in which he outlined several questions or suggestions that a student who wanted to write a complaint might include. Some students joined in voluntarily, and other students were pressured by both the professor and the student mobbing leaders who had affiliated with him. The pressure to join the attacks was quite significant, and students who did not were ostracized by the mobbing students and subject to loss of favor from the professor. Later, the student listserv was used to publicly attack Alina. This phase lasted several months causing Alina and her colleague who was also being mobbed to become injured both psychologically and physically, and both ended up taking extended medical leave.

*Phase 3: Active involvement of the administration.* The orchestrated attacks against Alina and her colleague culminated in the student mobbing leaders delivering a package of written complaints to the associate dean who would not tell Alina or her colleague what the nature of the complaints were, how many there were, or what the procedure for handling them might be. The associate dean said that anonymity was promised to the students who feared retaliation and just because the complaints were orchestrated did not mean that they were not true. Alina became increasingly vocal about

the unfairness of the handling of the complaints and the utter lack of due process. By this time 6 months had gone by, and neither Alina nor her colleague knew what was in the complaints—they only knew that complaints about them were sitting in the dean's office. Finally a formal investigation was begun and both Alina and her colleague were subject to aggressive questioning by the faculty member identified to serve as the investigator. Nine months later, the complaints against Alina and her colleague were all dismissed as unfounded. But the mobbing and the injuries were not over.

*Phase 4: Labeling of the victim.* Alina had been quite vocal during the 9-month period of the mobbing and was now beginning to be frozen out of important meetings that she needed to be involved in as the department chair. The department faculty had become demoralized as a result of the mobbing, and a general lack of trust set in that remained and worsened. When Alina received her annual evaluation, she was not surprised to see the multiple negative comments her dean had included in the evaluation. Like in the case of Susan, none of the comments had appeared in any previous evaluation. She was labeled as perfectionistic and holding to exacting standards and later referred to the Employee Assistance Program over an incident that was a deliberate distortion and in which Alina was held responsible for what someone else had said. Alina was never given an opportunity to know who her accuser was or to even respond to the allegation. Alina felt that if she breathed it would be wrong. The dean removed Alina from her position as longtime chair of the program subjecting her to even further injury.

*Phase 5: Expulsion.* Alina left the college because her working conditions had become intolerable and were only going to get worse. Colleagues told her she had no choice but to leave. Alina was so profoundly injured by the workplace mobbing she experienced that she was never able to reenter academia. Being a widow, the financial impact of the loss of her career was severe. She never trusted organizations again but had to find some job to receive health benefits. Her former strength and capacity for coping with stress all but disappeared. She contemplated suicide but never attempted it and ended up taking a menial job at a local hospital, turning her back on her decades of work as a literature professor and on her history of innovation as a department chair.

(Note: The above clinical cases are based on actual events; however, names and some details have been changed to protect the injured victims)

### COUNSELING INTERVENTIONS IN WORKPLACE MOBBING

Clearly, the impact of workplace mobbing can result in significant psychological and medical consequences for both the target of the mobbing and the target's family. Referral for individual and family counseling is common. Because of the

organizational dynamics that are operative, conventional counseling interventions aimed at client symptoms and functioning are seldom sufficient, that is to say that even if counseling interventions succeed in reducing the client's symptomatic distress, such interventions are unlikely to affect the organization's culture and management dynamics.

Generally, what is needed is organizational change, both short-term and long-term. Short-term changes include a review and revision of the organization's code of ethics and conduct to include a zero tolerance policy on mobbing and upholding of the ethical values of beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice. Among the long-term changes would be a shift in the culture and management style from one that supports mobbing and harassment to one that does not.

Specifically, the counselor begins with an assessment and plans interventions accordingly. In terms of the organizational typology described earlier, the first two organizations will require considerable consultation with representatives of the organization, that is, his client's manager and/or human resources personnel. These organizations may also need additional interventions such as mediation, nonharassment training programs, and other organizational change initiatives, compared to the third organization type. Knowledge of the dynamics of such organizations should guide decisions about interventions. Even apparently straightforward ones like encouraging a bullied employee—client to file a complaint in a bully-prone organization can be fraught with danger, that is, it may result in even greater harm to the employee.

Scope of practice is a key consideration in situations like these. It may well be that counselors with systemic training can work credibly with representatives of such organization and offer the kind of needed organizational interventions described above. For other counselors, involving competent consultants may be necessary. A fuller discussion of counseling for such organizational change is beyond the scope of this article. However, assuming the client wishes to remain in the same organization, a recurrence of mobbing is likely unless and until such organizational changes are instituted.

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