

# Episode 31: Bounce Back From Bullying with Megan Carle

**Mandy:** How does a confident, highly experienced senior executive end up in a hotel room bathtub, laying there fully clothed all night, having dragged the desk behind the door, because she certain that someone's going to break in and hurt or kill her. This episode is all about what it's like working for a boss who's a bully and the effects that this can have on your self-esteem, feelings of enoughness and your mental and physical health. Today's guest Megan Carle had a 30 year career at Nike, her last role being the head of basketball for North America. Megan had various experiences of bullying during her Nike career, and she discovered that it can be blatantly obvious, but it can also be administered so darn cunningly, that she started to doubt herself and her own sanity. It can happen gradually. She called it something like boiling a frog. You know, you don't notice how bad it's gotten until someone else points it out.

Plus, it was easy for her to justify the bad behavior because she was so chronically busy with zero time for reflection. And maybe this was just normal, right, in a competitive, highly pressurized industry. That old phrase comes to mind, "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen. Megan's story is so important and so eyeopening because as an overachiever, her instinctive response was to try to fix the situation, double down and work harder. People-please the boss, make herself smaller till she nearly disappeared completely. "It must be", that's what she was thinking. Plus then there was all the shame and embarrassment because on the outside, she was knocking it out of the park. Success after success, after success and inside, she was falling apart. When the bullying took Megan to the brink of mental and physical health, she left her job. She'd come to the conclusion that winning at work could look different.

**Megan:** To stay, would have been to continue to acquiesce to a system that was not built for me and it did not support me. And therefore the win, when talking about winning the win was in walking.

**Mandy:** Megan's going to share some strategies for dealing with a bullying boss, and regrounding firmly back into your good enoughness. But first we're heading to a hotel room in Dallas where Megan had her, "This can't go on" moment. Whether you're new here or a loyal long time listener. Welcome. I'm so glad you were. I'm Dr. Mandy Lehto, Executive coach and creator of this podcast and safe space for overachievers, perfectionists, and anybody who's ready to say enough to wearing themselves down to the nub by trying to prove their worth. Ready? Let's dive in.

**Megan:** The real moment in time for me when I knew the wheels have fallen off. Like we've completely lost the plot is, I am the Head of basketball for North America position, no woman had ever held. I have come full circle moment because I was, I am a coach. I'm a basketball coaches kid. So this is a big, big deal for me and my family.

It's like, but I have landed in the throws of such a significant bully. On every level, every public, private, overt, covert, nuance, outburst bullying behavior that I have, by this time, I've really lost myself. And I remember I was flying into, I flew into Dallas and it was late. I got, I checked in it's after midnight and I have these huge meetings the next day with our largest client, and they're my meetings and I'm fumbling around with my key card. I've got, I got the roller bag, I got the backpack, I've got the complementary apple, and I'm trying to, get into the room. And I notice a movement down the hall and it's an employee who's actually walking the other way, but I, it, you know, the employee catches my eye.

I don't even know male, female have no idea. But I convince myself at that point that my room's going to be broken into that night. I am going to be attacked, hurt, probably killed. All in that, three second glance down

the hallway, apple's shoved in the mouth, fumbling with the key card. So I get into the room and I scan the room to see what piece of furniture I can put in front of the door, because I, I do not feel safe.

And there's a desk across the room and I pick this desk up and I, I still remember, just knocking into the coffee table and welcome to Dallas magazine flying on the floor. And I am sweating and I get that desk in front of the door and then of course, what I realized is to get into the bathroom in and out of the bathroom, now I'm going to have to actually crawl under the desk. So I get it into my head that the safest place for me to be that night is in the bath tub. So I grabbed my pillow. My extra expensive tube of Pringles potato chips, everyone's favorite. And I get into the bathtub, fully closed and I spend the night in the bathtub with a view to the door, double stacking Pringles.

So I have gotten myself into such a state of paranoia and anxiety that I am now laying in a bathtub fully clothed, eyes wide-open, watching a door. I get up the next morning. I get myself ready and I go knock it out of the park with the big customer.

**Mandy:** Megan's upbringing was grounded in sport. Her Stepdad's big day was a winning basketball coach. Her Mom taught history and current affairs. Their kitchen table was Megan's happy place where the family discussed elections and big world topics. She grew up with strong values of fairness, integrity, and giving her best.

She was encouraged to speak up and have opinions. When Megan joined Nike in 1988, co-founder Phil Knight sent her a welcome letter, saying that good ideas could come from anywhere. Megan felt like her voice and her presence mattered in her new job, like they always had at the kitchen table growing up.

For years, Megan was a round peg in a round hole at Nike, but she recalls a moment when the culture at the organization shifted and she no longer felt aligned with the company's vision.

**Megan:** There was a moment when that shifted and the round hole round, round, round peg round hole shifted. And I remember going home, after a particular meeting and particular interaction and talking to my husband and saying, "I no longer see myself at that table. My values are no longer aligned." And, and the values I'm talking about are those that I was raised with, and those had always worked. And then it was clear that there was a significant shift. It's really interesting because you sort of asked that like, "What was the moment?" And there was a moment. I was on this trajectory that few women were on. I was living large. I was contributing. I was feeling valued. I was in control of outcomes, of situations.

I worked with a cross-functional group and we are going to execute that our vision is this, where we're deployed against it and we're going to execute. That's the recipe. And then I coached somebody. I coached a female who was working in my group. And it's something that I always prided myself in my ability to coach. And this was, this was no different. And before I coached her, I went to her functional manager because we had, sort of lying, we had direct manager and then dotted line. And so I made sure that I went to her direct manager and I said, "You know, here's what I'm observing and we're working in a cross-cultural organization, in Holland at this time, we've got teammates from all over Western Europe.

So we've got various approaches to things and a lot of just diverse opinions and diversity in terms of how people take information in, how they've been, spit something back out. And there was a particular person on the team that, was leaving a lot of carnage behind. It was, she was, you know, driving hard. And so I decided to coach her and it went well. I led with the positives cause there were plenty. And then I talked to her about, here are a couple things that I'm observing and you have this long runway here and I'm here to support. And what ended up happening out of that is I got some phone calls.

She was connected within the organization in a way that I stepped into that I didn't realize. And she had some sort of protection. And so even though I had gone to her line manager and gotten that endorsement, when she then raised her hand and basically said, Megan Carle, that's bullshit. I just got coached and it's actually Megan Carle.

And so I was the newer person coming in. I was coming in at a higher level and I was just coming in off of a really successful execution. What ended up happening is senior leadership showed their cards to me and

it was, and what they showed me is that I wasn't supported. And so everything that I knew from growing up and everything that I had ever done, in terms of coaching up people. And I say coaching up, because that's, I'm coaching up. Everything that I had done up to that point, it, felt like it was completely pulled out from under me because I was not supported. And to the point that I got calls from executive leadership to back off what I was doing.

And when I went to talk to the line manager who had endorsed my approach, he came at me. And it was my first experience of profound, scary, incredibly uncomfortable bullying in the workplace, where somebody is actually spewing and yelling and you are in an enclosed office and I was completely on my heels.

And I think as I look back on, how things then played out, I think that was a moment for me of that idea of like, I just didn't have what I thought I did. That kitchen table broke. So what happened then is I over-index and pleasing to the health and that just makes it absolutely worse. And then I'm not at my best. I'm not at my best. And all I'm trying to do is now I'm a fixer. Now I'm just in fixer mode.

**Mandy:** I asked Megan how it started dawning on her that she was being bullied. I mean, it can be hard to know because the higher up the food chain you go at work, there can be a lot of heated exchanges. Is this bullying or is this just working for a very challenging senior person in a highly competitive, really high stakes environment?

What made Megan start going Hmm? Some things really not right here.

**Megan:** I think there were a couple things. One, it was the worst behavior I had ever experienced and it wasn't like I hadn't experienced bad behavior. When you're in that type of high pressure organization, everything's a deadline. You know this, heated exchanges happen often. This really was about power and control and it was such a sort of full throttle offense then coming out of that room after that particular interaction. I remember then getting called to my bosses office, which happened to be the spewers office, boss as well, and being told to back away from this.

And so I guess I knew, this was terrible behavior that was going, that leadership was going to tolerate. And that was different for me. That was, okay this is disrespectful. This is actually scary. And leadership is going to not only tolerate it, but endorse it and encourage it. And then how that turned, that showed up then after that was this particular individual, this particular I'll call public overt bully showed his cards in every interaction. So he might come into a breakfast and there would be six of us sitting around a table and he would say, "Good morning". And he would say every person's name. And when he got to me, he would skip me. Oh and then when I present, he's in the back of the room, on the phone, you know, and snickering.

And now, oh my gosh, I have to present with him and we get through the first round. And we're, you know, it's one of those where you've got groups rotating in. We get through the first round and his comment to me was, "How about you should stop repeating what I say?" And so what I to experience and what I started to understand is this guy was all about the power play.

He had power over me now, and he knew that, and I knew it. And I think I still had enough, you know, Juju in me from coming off, you know, the wonderful I've been working on the London Olympics. We had so much work to do. So I was really just getting my team and myself very focused on the work, but this guy was just on me and it wasn't until somebody within the organization, a female, sits, was in a meeting with us and she saw how he treated me. And she said, "What is the deal with this guy?" And I had been, I had just been suffering in silence because upper management had told me back off. And essentially you are in the wrong and mind your business. And go to your fucking job. So I had just been quiet, but as you're quiet, I was falling apart at the businesses booming. We're crushing it. But this woman then who, made this comment, I opened up to her. I said, "Man, I don't know what I stepped into. This guy is on me".. And she said, "Yeah, I can see that." And, I think just having that one person validate that this was going on because bullying in the workplace is so confusing.

It's so you don't expect to have that kind of experience in a workplace. You don't expect somebody just kind of beating the shit out of you for sport .

**Mandy:** Success can conceal a lot of stuff. So on the outside it looked like Megan was crushing it at work. The reality was she was feeling crushed by the slow, incremental effect of workplace bullying. I asked her to share what was going on for her on the inside. How was all of this affecting her self-worth and her mental and physical health.

**Megan:** I started to really disappear and I did that incrementally. I mean, I remember, so I'd, I'd run home, and then I had an injury, and so now I'm not going to move anymore. So I take that away. So you take, you take away that, you take away movement, fresh air. That's gone because now I'm just, my Achilles... something's going on and I'm so busy. I can't go there's no, there's no physio. It's just okay, I'm going to rest it and then I might try it again. Try running again. No. Good. So I, you know, so you sort of see like, okay, that's out and then, okay. So what do you fill that with? Well, you fill that with more work. You just like that span. Okay. So then you just work longer and then when you get home, when I would get home, I was always the mama. I always opted in. Maybe finish the dinner preparation, help with the homework or the story time or wherever we were at in our particular lives. What I would do then is I would not opt into that. I'm tired. I'm exhausted. I'm going to go upstairs. I'm going to put headphones on and I'm going to watch something.

And usually it was Downtown Abbey. I'm going to watch something beautiful, that just takes me away from how I'm feeling, because how I'm feeling is that I am not enough. My approach is no longer enough and it always had been. My work is good, but I don't have the support that I thought I did. So now I'm paranoid.

I'm starting to become paranoid. You're presenting to a group and I'm not getting, I'm not catching the edge that I used to catch. I'm not getting the, I'm not getting the energy, not getting the interaction, but to be fair, nobody's getting it because when the eye on the prize becomes a revenue target by a year, nobody's that interested in your storytelling anymore.

Let me, tell you a story about this consumer. Let me tell you a story about this run club. Nobody, nobody really cares anymore. So I think I wasn't getting the validation anymore. And so I just became, I just started feeling lesser and lesser and lesser. And how that shows up then is I started to get sick.

I've got, you know, I've got sinus infection all the time, bronchial stuff all the time. I'm irritable. I'm going to, I'm going to start modeling some of this behavior that I'm getting beat with and it also becomes your own protection. Oh, so I see that's, that's what you guys like to your point of, I'm getting closer to the sun here.

So, that's, that's what you like. So now I'm going to start doing that, that's not me. So then you go home and you feel terrible because you've just beat the shit out of some guy about a sneaker? It's like, what are you doing? And I just wasn't myself anymore. And then, then I met, but I'm continuing to have success.

So nobody really knows this. It's, internal my fit. My, husband obviously knows. All right, something's awry. She's not as engaged here. Sex life falls apart. I don't even like who I am. I don't even know who I am anymore, much less to think that anybody else would be interested in anything I have to offer.

So I'm just going to put my headphones on and disappear for a minute and really reset my nervous system is all that is, is it's just, I need to get rid of the noise, block out the noise, and I need to go some, I need some sort of escape. Running had been my escape, so I don't have that anymore. And I think when I realized... I ended up getting a promotion. So, internally I'm falling apart, but externally then, I get a promotion because our work is really good and we, absolutely exponentially grow the business and that's what it's all about. And so I get this promotion and I just continue, to fall apart. And the promotion leads me into an experience with another type of bully again, another type that I really had not experienced. And this type was so nuanced that I really felt like, "Well, I'm going crazy".

**Mandy:** In case you're wondering what Megan was experiencing with this new, more nuanced kind of bully, here's some examples. After being promoted in her very first meeting with a new global group, Megan's boss failed to introduce her during her presentations.

He'd talk on the phone or he'd just let his phone ring. And the ring tone was a barking dog. He'd ask about Megan's family. And she'd think, "Hey, maybe we're finally getting somewhere in this relationship building".

But after Megan shared that she enjoyed bringing her children to school, her boss set up 7:00 AM meetings and made last minute changes to the location of those meetings, meaning Megan would have to run across campus and once found her boss, sitting in Megan's office with the lights out, so there's that bit of creepy feeling there. He'd pronounce her name wrong repeatedly. Then there was the aggressive, disrespectful, bilateral conversations where Megan constantly heard things like, "What do you think I care what you think?" The cumulative effect of all of this is how she found herself in a bathtub in a Dallas hotel room, hanging by a thread. Fortunately, a few days later, Megan had her annual physical exam. Here's what happened.

**Megan:** My weight is up. My blood pressure has skyrocketed and she asks me, what other symptoms are you having? And I was so embarrassed to have to tell somebody, I don't sleep because I hallucinate. So I have hallucinations all the time now. I no longer exercise. I no longer find joy in just darn-near anything and I can see her face and I can see the look of concern.

And I tell her, I told her, I said, "I've got this boss at work". I'm laughing about it now, but it was super not funny. I was in such a world of pain and shame. And I told her about Dallas and she gave me this gift and it was the gift of these words: "You know, you're going to have to find something else to do."

And I just looked at her and I said, "Oh my God. I know". And I had been in that basketball role for a year. And I had raised my hand. I had asked for help, but not as overtly as I now, looking back. No, I would. And I just know an awful lot more about bullying than I ever did then. I know an awful lot more about what it actually is about, but that was a moment then where I did go back to the organization and I raised my hand for help. And unfortunately I didn't get it.

**Mandy:** Megan says bullying is a repeated pattern of humiliation and this humiliation is intended to disappear, diminish, or denigrate an individual. It's all about power and control. I asked her to share some ideas about how you can help yourself if you suspect that you're working for a bully.

**Megan:** The first step is to really evaluate the culture, ask yourself, or better yet find your allies who you trust and have a conversation about the culture in which you work. So what's important to the organization. What behaviors are rewarded? How are problems solved? You know, ask yourself some of those types. How do people, how do employees know their value?

So I might start sort of with this broad stroke and kind of this bigger discussion. And then as you get into, sort of a more focused evaluation, is there an overall climate of fear and intimidation? If you take yourself outside of yourself and just observe, do you observe a climate of fear and intimidation? Are leaders, those making the, those at the executive level, are they bending the rules or bending the values of the organization to serve themselves? So are you, are you seeing the values that you signed up for disappearing? Does everything run through those leaders or is it this you know, climate of collaboration. You know, because bullying isn't about conflict.

It isn't about healthy debate, healthy tension. Bullying is a pattern of abuse. It is repeated health harming mistreatment. It can be verbal behaviors. It can be, behaviors that are perceived as threatening, intimidating. It can be sabotage of work. So I think as people are working through this, evaluate, observe, is there a pattern and frankly, if you're a target of bullying in the workplace, you know, if there's a pattern.

You do, so trust yourself, trust yourself, understand the organization for which you work, understand what their rules and regulations are around the subject, who are the referees. So get the lay of the land, document everything on a device that is not associated with the workplace. Gather your allies because not every one, the conclusion for everyone, frankly, just economically cannot be to walk away.

So you're going to have to figure out if I have to stay here in this organization, how do I make that work? So gather your allies, document everything. Never ever meet one-on-one with the bully. Because I knew that I was dealing with a bully, I mean, very gifted, really gifted bully. And he was my boss.

If I could go back in time, I would never meet with him one-on-one. I would always take somebody from my team. So, and I might just couch that in, "Hey, you know, today we're going to spend so much time talking about XYZ product. I'm going to bring the head of product with me." I just wouldn't put myself in that

position ever again, knowing what I know now. I also would, you know, there's sort of four ways to, I'm going to say, approach a bullying situation or, uh, specifically a bully. And you can ignore. So I'm just gonna, you know what, I'm just going to get through this and I'm going to hope the bully gets moved or I get moved. You can resist, so you can combat it, try to counter it. And generally what that is going to do is escalate the bullying because bully, you're not going to bully the bully.

You can respond to it. So simply reply to the bullying or you can comply so I can obey the bully. And so there's sort of, those are kind of the four options and you got to sort of figure out like, how do I move through these options? And I will say, at the organization I was at, there's no, there's no rule about workplace bullying.

It didn't matter that I had raised my hand for help and I was alone and I didn't help myself out in that. I made sure I was alone because I was so ashamed. I was so ashamed that such a high powered, fricking hot-shot, bad-ass raised in the best way, x's and o's. I was so ashamed because I had the narrative wrong and that was, I thought I had allowed myself to be bullied and it took a fucking long time to get rid of that bullshit story.

As our friend Jim passed a law, calls it because I didn't allow any. I was awesome. I was glorious. I was at guess what that bully was threatened by me. And if you're listening to this and there's any of this stuff, that's resonating, chances are there's a, that bully is threatened by you and just your sheer greatness.

**Mandy:** I always ask a guest to leave a brick of wisdom at the end. And I'm going to ask you to leave a very specific brick for that person who's in that place where their nervous system is strong, as tight as violin strings. They're tired, they're doubting themselves. They're probably an inner turmoil. What brick of wisdom would you leave for that person who kind of can't see the wood for the trees in that moment? What would you say?

**Megan:** You are your first opinion about what is going on with you. For me, there were so many physiological, emotional, physical, all of it was happening to me, inside me. I knew all that. You know, when you don't sleep, you know, if you're hallucinating, you know, if you're laying in a bathtub fully clothed, inhaling pringles.

You dumb ass. Well, why are you so quiet about it? Why do you think you have to suffer in silence? We're here for you. There's so many people here for you. You have people, so trust, trust your own opinion, trust your story. You know this is happening. So trust.

**Mandy:** What I love about this conversation is how pulling back from the situation and giving herself some time and space to reflect and in resting her nervous system, as she puts it, Megan could see that this was never about her or her good enoughness. It was never about having to prove her value in her work again, and again, though, it's so easy to automatically assume that isn't it. This is a huge topic and way more than we can cover in a single episode. So please connect with [megan@megancarle.com](mailto:megan@megancarle.com), that will be in the show notes. This episode feeds so brilliantly into the next one where I have Sarah Norrad.

She's going to teach us about our nervous systems, particularly when we're jammed in the go full throttle gear like, Megan Carle was. Here's a snippet of what you can expect:

**Sarah:** When you're stuck in that shutdown area, everything is going to be colored through the lens of often the amygdala. So, and the amygdala filters and sees, is aware of danger. So that's what it's focused on all the time. So when you're in the shutdown area of the dorsal bay unfortunately, it's really hard. Everything seems really dangerous and overwhelming.

**Mandy:** Thank you so much for listening and sharing this episode. Keep your reviews coming in on apple and Spotify. I'm so deeply grateful for those.

Let's do this all again in two weeks. This is Mandy Lehto signing out for Enough, the Podcast.