
What Can Be Done About Bullies at Work?



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Stamping out bullying is an uphill battle for everyone involved.

Ted, a senior VP at a large media company, was famous for publicly deriding and humiliating others. Working for him was like walking on eggshells, as he could fly into a rage over the most trivial matters. He would also impose deadlines designed to set his staff up for failure. To top off his bullying behaviour, he expected his staff to work 24/7, leading many to complain about stress-related problems. Ted's management style sapped the morale of his division, which was afflicted by a disturbing absenteeism rate and high turnover.

When we think of bullies, we tend to remember the ones we knew as kids. Unfortunately, bullying doesn't end in high school. Some of these bullies-in-training turn into full-fledged ones in adulthood. Although there can be a fine line between a tough boss and an abusive one, bullying generally refers to being subjected to *repeated* emotional or even physical abuse. Bullies deliberately manipulate, belittle, intimidate, control or undermine their victims. And in our digital age, the bully's playing field has now extended to

cyberspace.

To determine if you work for a bully, ask yourself the following questions: Do I regularly feel intimidated, criticised and insulted? Have there been occasions when I have been humiliated in front of my colleagues? Have I been called names? Are my efforts constantly undervalued? Do I dread going to work? Is working for my boss making me feel sick? If your answers to these questions are affirmative, there is a good possibility that you are working for a bully.

Many organisations have a “resident bully”, someone who’s often (but not always) in a position of authority. According to a 2017 [survey](#) by the Workplace Bullying Institute, 19 percent of adult Americans have experienced abuse at work and another 19 percent have witnessed it. Bullying is a silent epidemic, causing stress-related health problems, including debilitating feelings of anxiety, panic attacks and clinical depression. In some instances, bullying can even lead to suicide.

The bullying personality

The personality makeup of the bully is difficult to pin down. There may be a relationship between bullying and narcissistic personality disorder, the latter characterised by an exploitative way of dealing with the world and the perception that one is entitled to special treatment. Given bullies’ frequent lack of empathy and remorse, some even ascribe psychopathic characteristics to them. Furthermore, it is fair to say that most bullies fall among the autocratic personality types which include a strong need to control and dominate others.

Motivations

Why do bullies behave the way they do? One explanation is that they’re looking for attention. Being noticed makes them feel important. In addition, they may be motivated by feelings of envy and resentment. Bullies are typically insecure and don’t need very much to see other people as threats. They may also be projecting their own feelings of vulnerability onto their victims. In order to avoid feeling ashamed and humiliated for their own shortcomings, they go to great lengths to shame and humiliate others.

Developmental observations

Many bullies had a disturbed childhood. They often grew up in homes with little warmth and positive adult attention, raised by emotionally and physically abusive caretakers. Such an environment would have quickly taught them that vulnerability leads to abuse and that the best defence is to lash out. By becoming bullies themselves, they gain more control over their lives and compensate for the lack of attention (or the abuse) they experienced at home.

Managing the bully

Despite the prevalence of workplace bullying, surveys show that the majority of employers do **far too little** or even resist taking action when bullying behaviour is identified. Why is that? The easiest answer is that culprits could be in top management. But even when that's not the case, a fair amount of denial, rationalisation and even tacit acceptance of bullying can be observed.

Those in power may turn a blind eye because many bullies are perceived as "rainmakers" contributing to profitability. In such cases, bullies are tolerated so long as they ensure short-term company success. But this neglects the potential costs in terms of an organisation's culture, not to mention that health deterioration, stress reactions and depression among employees can all impact the organisation's long-term bottom line and survival.

Top executives who realise the danger of bullying and want to do something about it are in for a challenge. It may be difficult for bullies to unlearn what has become ingrained behaviour over time. And if bullying has already become part of the organisational culture, the challenge is even more formidable.

Role of executive coaching

If coaching is sought as a way to deal with bullies, coaches should note that bullies have limited self-insight and empathy, which makes changing their behaviour all the more problematic. Coaches would do well to start with a surface-level discussion of simple actions that warrant change before exploring the underlying dynamics for the dysfunctional behaviour.

Equally challenging is putting some kind of "treatment plan" in place. For example, coaches may consider a behavioural carrot-and-stick approach: The bully should be made aware of the consequences that will follow if their dysfunctional way of relating to others doesn't change. Another approach

could be to agree on one negative behaviour pattern that needs to be replaced with more positive behaviour. Once this change has occurred, other seemingly harder to modify behaviour patterns could be next in line. In this educational journey, bullies should realise the negative impact of their actions and take responsibility.

The other side of the coin: Being bullied

What should you do if you are the target of a bully? The wisest strategy is to completely avoid such people. But if that's not an option, the challenge becomes not to play their game. Don't allow yourself to be baited or get emotionally hooked. If bullies are denied a reaction, there is a chance that they may stop.

If bullies continue their unpleasant behaviour, another strategy would be to set boundaries. You should make it clear to them that their behaviour will be documented and that they may face some form of disciplinary action. Furthermore, you should ask your co-workers to support you, to serve as witnesses and also to document what's happening. However, bullying is often sustained by the silence of bystanders unwilling to help. You should inform such people that this stance could be viewed as another form of bullying.

When building a case for HR, it is crucial to demonstrate how bullying affects the productivity of the people working in the organisation. You need to make a very clear and convincing business case to senior management that the bully (in spite of his or her contributions to the bottom line) will be just too expensive to keep in the long term.

Finally, if you're being bullied, you would be wise to build a personal support network to bolster your feelings of confidence and resilience, as bullies are experts at creating self-doubt. Of course, there are always going to be instances where top management is complicit in encouraging bully-like behaviour. In that case, the final strategy may be to quit this toxic environment. Staying would only make you sick.

Whatever bullies try to do to you, keep in mind Eleanor Roosevelt's wise statement: "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent."

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