

Concerns about Bullying at Work

“Bullying at work is repeated, health-harming mistreatment of a person by one or more workers that takes the form of verbal abuse: conduct or behaviors that are threatening, intimidating, or humiliating; sabotage that prevents work from getting done; or some combination of the three.”
(The Bully at Work, 2nd edition – Gary Namie, Ruth Namie)

Some bullying is done behind closed doors, some in meetings or in front of co-workers. Bullying can be both verbal and non-verbal. Bullies dominate, want control, and threaten and diminish the targeted individual. Bullying can be personally devastating to the targeted individual, causing serious health issues (stress, flare-up of auto-immune illness, lowered self esteem, depression). Bullies are both male and female and select both strong and weak members of their team as targets.

Characteristics of a Bully

Controlling, malicious

Aggressive, impatient, volatile, temperamental

Constantly criticizing, competitive

Disrespects, humiliates, demeans

Usually targets one individual at a time

The Bully may

- Express anger or irritation on a regular and frequent basis
- Intimidate and threaten (verbally or physically)
- Be systematically hostile and rude
- Raise voice, slam doors, grab papers
- Ask for ideas and opinions and then punish the target for speaking out
- Publicly or privately disparage the target’s intelligence, creativity, expertise and experience
- Mock or treat the target with disdain
- Distort information so that communications are misunderstood or degraded
- Exclude the target from sources of information
- Forbid the target to talk to other staff (Others are paid more than you and it wastes time and money for you to talk with them.)
- Give too little information, requiring the target to have to ask repeatedly for more
- Give the target so much work that it cannot be done by deadlines
- Give assignments at the last minute and then complain that it is not completed on time
- Ignore statements that the workload is impossible; suggest that the target doesn’t work hard enough
- Resent the target’s successful relationships (work and personal) and discount and challenge them
- Show preferential treatment, kindness to others, excepting the target
- Make inappropriate comments about the target’s personal life
- Share inappropriate detailed personal information

Lydia Cummings, Ombudsman
Harvard University

2004 East Coast Ombuds Group - updated 2009

Characteristics of a Target

Challenged, intimidated, afraid
Anxious about next outburst/attack
Isolated from co-workers and other support (human resources, management)
Cannot count on help or support from human resources
Suffers from physical or psychological stresses and loss of self confidence
Has difficulty communicating and defending boundaries
Often rationalizes and forgives the bully's behavior
Focus at work is on avoiding the bully

The Target's Experience (paraphrased from conversations)

- I am afraid to go into her office alone – I try to avoid contact with her
- I am always on eggshells – I don't know what will set her off
- I no longer feel safe giving my opinion
- There is always something wrong – I cannot please my boss
- My boss comes into my cubicle and challenges me – I feel defenseless
- I can't concentrate and it is affecting my performance – I am worried I will be fired
- I am beginning to question my ability to do a good job
- I am ridiculed when I ask for more information about an assignment – he acts as if I am stupid
- I am isolated – I don't dare talk to anyone about it
- If I go to Human Resources they will tell my boss – my boss will retaliate
- Human Resources knows this is going on and hasn't done anything to stop it
- My co-workers/colleagues know how I am treated and they do nothing
- I am frightened of my supervisor - when he confronts me I can't speak
- I am losing my self confidence and self esteem
- I am so angry I am afraid I may lose control and do something rash
- I have trouble sleeping, have migraines, get sick before going to work
- I now take medication (or increased doses) for depression
- I have anxiety attacks that has required absences from work and medical tests
- I can't stop thinking and talking about this with my family – they are tired of hearing me complain and want me to leave my job
- I have told friends and they wonder if this situation is my fault

Counseling the Target

- Set and enforce boundaries regarding tone, meeting content, personal space
- Develop more effective strategies to offset Bully behavior, control interactions, plan and strategize communications
- Keep records of dates and kinds of behaviors
- Learn more about the subject, recognize the behaviors (books on bullying)
- Update your resume and be aware of what is available on the job market – having options makes you less victimized
- You have the right to excuse yourself from a meeting if there is yelling, threatening behavior
- Set Boundaries
When you raise your voice, you frighten me and I find it hard to respond
I don't let anyone talk to me this way – at home or at work
Stop!
I prefer working in a collegial manner
This is not acceptable work behavior
I want to hear what you have to say, but I am not going to continue this conversation until we can talk more calmly
What you just did is unacceptable to me and for this workplace
I would like to get back to the work we were discussing
I don't wish to discuss my personal life
I am uncomfortable talking about personal issues
Your experience and mine are different
Excuse me I need to get a drink of water
I have started to keep notes of what you say

Changing the Culture

- Empower the individual
 - Setting boundaries
 - Understanding the behaviors
 - Re-assessing the circumstances and trying different strategies
- Establish clearer understanding and acceptance of workplace culture and values
 - Discuss norms and standards that should be acknowledged and supported
 - Communicate and post those standards
 - Define and characterize unacceptable behavior
- Intervention and support from senior manager, Human Resources, Dean or VP