



## How to Handle Bullies at Work

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Just as road rage afflicts our nation's highways, rudeness and bullying are now taking their toll on the nation's workplace. A variety of factors may be causing the increase of workplace bullying. Some companies face tightening budgets, layoffs and competition between full-time employees and nearly permanent part-time and contract workers.

Relationships also become strained where time and productivity pressure exists from managers who are expected to squeeze the most out of possible shrinking work forces. Employees in cubicles and open office environments often find that noise pollution—the buzz of fax machines and printers constantly spitting out paper, phones ringing, pagers beeping and the endless chatter of co-workers—can also lead to frayed nerves.

Bullying doesn't just affect those involved directly. It can also undermine an organization's effectiveness, damaging productivity.

According to Christine Pearson, a professor at the University of North Carolina's Kenan-Flagler Business School, "There's a bottom-line cost to all this. It goes beyond potential hurt feelings. We've got data that show people cut back and reduce commitment to their work. While subtle compared to other forms of abuse, the effects of workplace bullying are pervasive, costly, and potentially long-lasting for both the individuals and the organization."

### **Identifying a bully**

We've all been ignored or snapped at by a co-worker or manager who's under pressure or in a bad mood. But bullying cuts deeper. It involves persistent, abusive and intimidating behavior designed to make the recipient feel upset, humiliated and threatened.

The key to spotting bullies is to observe their pattern of behavior. Do you work with someone who blames others, makes unreasonable demands, criticizes the work ability of others, takes credit for someone else's work, threatens, insults, yells and screams? Then you work with a bully.

Bullies often travel in packs. They enjoy partnering with other mean-spirited people, creating an atmosphere of intimidation or exclusion for a targeted individual. The goal is to coerce, control or punish another person. This type of abuse often takes the form of innuendo, rumors and public

discrediting.

## **What you can do**

What can you do when faced with workplace bullies? Experts advise to keep calm. Don't overreact or rise to their bait. Bullies are hoping for a nasty confrontation, so just walk away.

If the situation becomes unbearable, employees should approach their managers to request an intervention. Employees who endure such mistreatment should begin documenting the incidents, including specific dates, times and locations, so a detailed record can be presented to managers.

Enlist the help of trusted co-workers. Take the time to find out if others have experienced the same treatment by the bully. Ask if they're willing to brainstorm with you on ways to improve the situation. See if they would be willing to back you up in a meeting to address the situation with the bully, or to provide a united front when discussing the problem with your manager.

## **Traits of a workplace bully**

- blames others for errors
- makes unreasonable demands
- criticizes the work ability of others
- threatens and insults others
- yells and screams
- steals credit for other employees' work

## **Tips to cope with bullies**

- Stay calm. Don't rise to the bully's bait.
- Avoid nasty confrontations. Walk away.
- Enlist the support of trusted co-workers.

Talk to your manager and ask him or her to intervene.

## **Resources**

*The No A\$\$hole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't* by Robert I. Sutton. Business Plus, 2010.

*Toxic Workplace! Managing Toxic Personalities and Their Systems of Power* by Mitchell Kusy and Elizabeth Holloway. Jossey-Bass, 2009.

The Work Doctor, <http://www.workdoctor.com/>

**By Rosalyn Kulick**

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