

How to Handle Workplace Bullies

Just as road rage afflicts our nation's highways, rudeness and bullying are now taking their toll on the nation's workplace. The trend, according to some experts, can be attributed to tightening budgets, layoffs and competition between full-time employees and the growing number of nearly permanent part-time and contract workers in U.S. companies.

Relationships also become strained because of time and productivity pressure from managers who are expected to squeeze the most out of 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.

For more information

Disgruntled: The Darker Side of the World of Work by Daniel S. Levine, Putnam Publishing, 1998.

The Bully at Work: What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity on the Job by Gary Namie, Ruth Namie, Sourcebooks, Inc., 2000.

Campaign Against Workplace Bullying, www.bullybusters.org

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