

Workplace Bullying

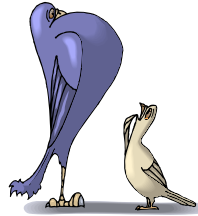
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Facts About Bullying

In the workplace we have an obligation not to harm or allow harm to employees or others in our workplaces. Bullying behaviour breaches our duty to provide a safe and secure work environment, both physically and psychologically.



Some forms of bullying in the past have passed as acceptable management practice. People refer to this as a culture of bullying. In other situations bullying behaviour is influenced by situational factors where those who bully exercise their power to control situations or people.

How widespread is workplace bullying?

The following statistics have been drawn from international and Australian research:

- *One in four Australian employees have been bullied at work*
- *75% of targets had to leave work to make the bullying go away*
- *70% of occurrences from male to female.*
- *30-50% of stress claims at work are related to bullying, intimidation and related forms of abuse*
- *Bullying is 4 times more prevalent than sexual harassment*
- *80% of bullies are in a position of authority*
- *80% of employees have witnessed bullying*
- *10-20% of the workforce is being bullied at any one time*
- *20% of those who witness bullying will leave their employment within a year.*
- *People who bully at work are more likely to be male*
- *Where the bully is male or female, the target is more likely to be another female*
- *Not all people who work with a bully will become targets. Bullies select their targets according to whom they can control*

Reports of bullying must be taken seriously and investigated.

Employers need to take action to deal with those who bully and will protect those who complain.

Defining Bullying

“Bullying is a set of persistent, coercive behaviours that causes chronic and cumulative detriment to the victim and work performance.”

It is a form of abusive treatment based on creating fear. The behaviour is designed to achieve control of others and compliance with the bully's wishes.

Bullying ... How do you tell? 6 key defining points!

1. **Is it a form of negative workplace conduct or treatment covered by your organisation's policies?**
2. **Is it behaviour that the person does not want and is unable to readily defend themselves against?**
3. **Is the treatment persistent and coercive, or has it formed a pattern over time?**
4. **Is it behaviour that is detrimental to the victim and their work performance?**
5. **Is there risk to the mental or physical health, safety or wellbeing of those subjected to behaviour?**
6. **Is the behaviour detrimental to work or organisational performance?**

Bullying is not a one-off event. It is a cycle of behaviour with characteristics similar to the cycle of domestic violence. However, in the bullying cycle, control is more likely to be achieved through psychological and emotional means than physical violence.

This is the typical cycle of bullying:

- A person is bullied for months, perhaps years.
 - Eventually, they may assert their right not to be bullied by making a complaint.
 - The bully presents (or lies) convincingly, often portraying themselves as the victim.
 - It's one word against another with no witnesses and little direct evidence.
 - Decision-makers are persuaded by the bully into seeing the target as a 'trouble maker' or as a defective individual.
 - Pressure amounts on the target so they leave, are dismissed or managed out of the job.
- Once the target is gone, within 3-21 days, a new target is selected and the cycle of bullying starts over again.

Common Myths About Bullying

Myth No. 1: "It's one of those personality clashes ... or ... it's his personality, that's just the way he is."

Bullying is not a form of conflict, nor is bullying a 'personality clash'. 'Personality Clash' is a term used to deny or discount the experience of those bullied, or used as a reason to avoid getting involved.

Myth No. 2: "Sometimes people who get bullied deserve it. It's their own fault if they can't stand up for themselves."

Bullying is the preferred behaviour of the bully. It is not the preferred behaviour of the target. The target does not cause the bullying nor does the target choose to be bullied.

Research indicates that those who are bullied are conscientious and effective employees. They are co-operative and non-confrontational people and are generally unlikely to be subservient or go along with being controlled. This increases their likelihood of being targeted.

There are five well reported categories of bullying that occur in workplaces.

1. Threat to professional status
 - Humiliation in front of colleagues or others
 - Intimidatory or use of 'legitimate' procedures for performance management or discipline
2. Threat to personal standing
 - Name calling, teasing and inappropriate jokes about the person
 - Unreasonable job demands and overloading
 - Belittling opinions and undermining of work
 - Discounting or denial of accomplishments
 - Destructive innuendo and sarcasm
 - Verbal and non-verbal threats
 - Physical violence or violence to property
3. Isolation
 - Preventing access to opportunities
 - Withholding information required to do the job
 - Under resourcing, withholding resources or clawing-back resources.
 - Freezing out, ignoring or excluding
 - Unreasonable refusal of applications for leave, training or promotion
4. Overwork
 - Undue pressure to produce work
 - Impossible deadlines
 - Unnecessary disruptions
5. Destabilisation
 - Meaningless tasks or removal of responsibility
 - Shifting goal posts
 - Unpredictable behaviour and moods – 'running hot and cold'
 - Undervaluing of efforts
 - Derogatory comments about others behind their back

How Do Bullies Behave?

Most bullying is controlling behaviour done out of sight or out of earshot. In many situations, the expression of overt aggression is curtailed and the bullying behaviour becomes hidden from view and difficult for the target to prove. This has significant implications for grievance management, should a complaint be made.

What Motivates People To Bully?

People who bully continue their tactics because they can. They are usually high achievers who have a strong desire to be 'in control' and little or no tolerance for being 'controlled'.

Whether the bully is in a position of formal authority or not, the bully is always boss! People who bully gain positions of importance and authority. Before long they are indispensable to the organisation and as consequence, often untouchable.

Typically they are unable to see their own weaknesses, preferring to shift any blame to others and receive any accolades for themselves. Their self-esteem is distorted and they see themselves as more talented, gifted and generous than they really are.

How is Bullying Condoned?

Like all behaviour, bullying is reinforced by rewards and extinguished by punishment. Failing to set limits on bullying behaviour in the workplace is a form of reward.

Experience shows that in 90% of complaints made about bullying in the workplace are about matters already known to the responsible managers. By the time a complaint is made, costs associated with HR support, turnover, work quality and absenteeism are significant.

So, those who can prevent bullying mostly fail to do so. Why is this so?

Environments In Which Bullying Thrives:
For bully to continue it requires conditions that only too often our workplaces are able to provide.

1. Legitimacy or Protection
 - *Often provided at the highest level of the organisation because the person who bullies is powerful, popular or good for business.*

In competitive work environments bullying is encouraged and rewarded for the outcomes it achieves. Success is often measured on relative standing, rather than absolute performance, so the human and organisational costs associated with bullying are accepted.

Amongst other behaviour, people who are bullied may find that they are:

2. Isolation and Oppression Of Those Bullied – *People who are bullied can almost always be relied upon not to speak out. They experience shame and humiliation, and are often not believed.*

Research shows that in of cases of workplace bullying, 75% of management came out in support of the bully and 56% of the bully's peer supported the bully. Those bullied were often not believed, had their motives for complaining questioned and were labelled as 'personality' or 'performance' problems by others.

3. Complicit Witnesses:– *people who know things or have witnessed bullying behaviour, however do not report.*

If bullying is condoned at higher levels, it makes it harder for co-workers to support targets of bullying, even though they don't take part in the bullying themselves. Co-workers want to be on the winning side, not the losing side and if the target looks as if they might be losing, then it's easier to withdraw support from the target and turn a blind eye to the bullying.

A Message For Managers:

If you manage someone who bullies you are likely to be aware of:

- *The bully's general behaviour, their style, alleged incidents, who is targeted and who is affected.*
- *Increased turnover rates, absenteeism, workers compensation claims, complaints and other indicators of management deficiencies in the work environment.*
- *Conflicts between the bully's work area and other work areas in the organisation; shortcomings in service delivery and co-operation.*
- *Benefits that you or the organisation has achieved by condoning a 'results at all costs' approach.*
- *Turning a blind eye to the bullying and its consequences.*

Actions to Stop and Prevent Bullying:

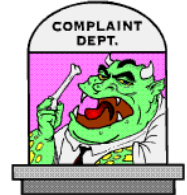
1. Identify the behaviour for what it is.
2. Confront such conduct so that those bullied do not retreat into shame, self-doubt or self-blame.
3. Skill and support employees and management to challenge bullying behaviour.
4. Take whatever steps are necessary to ensure that people are not victimised for whistle-blowing on bullying.

People who bully often go to great lengths to keep their victims quiet, using threats, either direct or veiled. What they fear most is exposure and being called publicly to account for their behaviour and its consequences. Bullies will use intimidating behaviour to get their way.

Listed below are the three major types of bullying and some of their characteristics:

1. **Chronic bullies**
2. **Opportunistic bullies**
3. **Blind-Spot bullies**

Types of Bullying



Chronic Bullies

Justification: *"I can't help it. It's just who I am. If you don't like it, then leave."*

Behaviour:

- Will dominate people in most encounters at work and away from work.
- Will claim it's their personality.
- Competitive in all aspects of human interaction.
- Are used to getting their way in every situation in which dominance is exerted.
- Targets submit or retreat and the bully continues to dominate.
- This pattern becomes a self-reinforcing cycle.
- In companies that promotes strong competition amongst individuals, chronic bullies are over-represented and may be seen as leaders.

Opportunistic Bullies

Justification: *"Play the game in order to get to the top"*

Behaviour:

- Good at reading cues from the workplace.
- Whilst organisation preaches co-operation and teamwork, bully understands what is actually rewarded.
- Can be competitive if that's what is required.
- Away from work are able to suspend their competitive nature.
- Capable of being charming and supportive and likely to be involved in 'good works'.
- Well-connected in chain of command. Presents caring, supportive and successful side to those higher up.
- Targets have difficulty in getting their case heard, as supporters believe person can do no wrong.
- Behaviour is governed by reinforcement. As the behaviour is opportunistic, call to account may stop mistreatment continuing.

Blind-Spot Bullies

Justification: *"But I'm just trying to help." "It's just the way I am." "I can't seem to get good staff around here."*

Behaviour:

- Can hurt or insult with inappropriate comments or personal affronts.
- Applies none of the subtleties of social interactions.
- May show a new employee a task, then do it themselves because they lack patience to wait.
- When confronted, retreats or apologises, but doesn't change the unacceptable behaviour.
- Retreats to old patterns when stressed or frustrated.
- Readily shifts the responsibility for own shortfalls or behaviour onto others.



Strategies for Countering Workplace Bullying

Common pitfalls Do's and Don'ts

Recruitment and Selection:

- Prevention is better than cure. Avoid employing bullies in the first place. Whilst they present well and look good on paper, the cost to the company will be experienced in the longer term.

Induction, Training and Support:

- Ensure all new employees are properly inducted in professional conduct requirements and all relevant policies, and sign-off!
- Annual training for all employees, including all levels of management, in Diversity/EEO/Harassment/Bullying /Code of Conduct and Unacceptable Behaviour.

Leadership:

- Ensure that performance management is not restricted to achievement of outcomes. The behaviour demonstrated on the job is also evaluated.
- Demonstrate leadership. Don't wait to deal with matters until a complaint is made. *(Many managers wait for a written complaint before taking action. This type of management should not be mistaken for leadership.)*

Notification Processes:

- There are safe and secure systems for notifying matters that ensure the confidentiality of complainants.
- Provide appropriate support for targets.
- Don't send the workplace grievance officer or contact officer off to confront a bully. Managing these situations is a line responsibility.
- Notifications of bullying **must** be properly investigated and the behaviour addressed. Avoid Alternative Dispute Resolution processes such as conciliation or mediation to address the bullying behaviour. They often don't work and risk compounding the problem! (ADR is useful for re-establishing the working relationship **after the bullying behaviour has been addressed and managed.**)

Behaviour Management:

- When dealing with bullying, there is a tendency to manage the behaviour and motivations of the target to avoid dealing with the unacceptable behaviour of the bully.
- Be prepared to manage your way through defensiveness, denial, blaming, threats and hostility.
- Bullies like to control others, so expect that they will react badly when others try to manage their behaviour.
- State clearly what needs to change about their behaviour.
- Establish what you want from them; when you want it by; what resources you will provide to achieve it and the consequences of breaches. Because bullying is a serious matter, and likely to be repeated, document and formalise all interventions.
- Targets and others will be victimised one way or another. Ensure protection is provided for these people.
- Provide proper follow up and monitoring, otherwise your efforts will be wasted and your actions will further reinforce the bullying behaviour.
- Use behavioural contracts where necessary and don't accept excuses from the bully for not upholding their side of the bargain.

The bully counts on you giving up!

- Most managers give up because the process of managing a bully becomes too difficult, too time consuming and too emotionally draining. Managers then unwittingly collude with the bully, justifying their actions by claiming the targets are over-sensitive and behaviour wasn't all that bad. Research shows that 70% of managers come out on the side of the bully.
- Chronic bullies in particular have energy for maintaining their behaviour over the long term. Managers need to be aware of this. Transferring them to another work only increases the number of potential targets.

Get tough before you get tired!

- Remember, bullying continues because it is enabled and reinforced. Apply behavioural principles and balance punishments and rewards.
- Get professional help. This is a very tricky area to deal with and experienced people can save a lot of time, money and grief.