



Book Survive Bullying at Work

How to Stand Up for Yourself and Take Control (Steps to Success)

Lorenza Clifford
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Recommendation

Bullies aren't just in the schoolyard – the workplace has plenty of them, too. On-the-job bullies are common to some occupations and stressful corporate cultures. Author Lorenza Clifford, a British career coach with a master's degree in organizational psychology, has put together a short, to-the-point guide to help readers deal with bullying. She highlights some warning signs that a bully may be on the loose in your workplace, cites danger periods when bullying tends to increase and lists some behavioral symptoms victims display. Her common-sense advice and checklists help victims understand what makes a bully behave like one, why bullies are picking on you, who to turn to for help and support, how to take action, and how to rebuild your confidence. Nipping offensive behavior in the bud is the best way to squelch bullying. Sometimes the healthiest option is to seek employment elsewhere. Although written from the standpoint of U.K. law, this book is widely applicable. *BooksInShort* believes it can benefit anyone who wants to craft healthy workplace policies, help an employee who is being victimized or avoid being a target.

Take-Aways

- Misfits and accomplished, successful people alike can be targets for bullies at work.
- Being the target of a bully can make you feel incompetent and insecure.
- Bullying is a power play – with the bully having the upper hand.
- Workplace bullying tends to escalate in times of stress, staff disruption or company reorganization.
- Your best chance of halting the abuse is to confront bullies directly and promptly.
- Confronting a bully carries the risk of making the situation worse.
- Many companies turn a blind eye to bullying and thereby tacitly endorse it.
- Inform yourself about your company's legal policies on bullying.
- You may decide it is wisest to change jobs and leave the bully behind.
- Some people don't realize that their bad behavior can be mistaken for bullying.

Summary

Recognize the Signs of Bullying

Occasional disagreement and friction in the workplace is normal. When someone routinely mistreats or tries to dominate his or her colleagues, however, that's bullying. Such inappropriate behavior tends to be frequent and ongoing, and generally worsens with time. Most people encounter bullies at some stage in their careers. Bullying is widespread, particularly in certain professions and corporate hierarchies. Bullies go after people whom they consider inferior, and treat them in negative or intentionally hurtful ways. They tend to get bolder and more brazen over time. Even if you shrug off minor annoyances, the bully's tactics can escalate. If you're being bullied, feeling thrown off-balance emotionally and stressed out is natural. If the bullying persists, it could even trigger symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Clues that you might be facing a workplace bully include a persistent feeling of low self-worth, a lack of a sense of humor, increasing errors in your work, inability to sleep, a dwindling sex drive, trouble focusing and increased alcohol consumption. If your mood brightens only on days off, ask yourself why.

“Sadly, no-one is bully-proof – bullies attack all types of people for different reasons.”

Managers need to encourage staff members to speak up and to be alert to potential bullying. To gauge morale, talk to members of workplace associations or unions, or ask the entire staff to complete a written survey. If employees display low job satisfaction and stress, they may be struggling with bullies. Other clues include an unusually high incidence of sick days or excessive staff turnover. If someone files a formal complaint about bullying, respond with immediate, decisive action or the problem will escalate.

“Some bullying victims...decide to stay on because they no longer have the self-confidence for job hunting; their self-belief... [is] so low that they don’t feel able to get another job.”

The idea that bullies are dumb “losers” or strangers is a myth. They can just as easily be smart, confident people within your inner circle. Joking insults can, in fact, be aggressive, hurtful power plays. Supervisors or colleagues who commit the following examples of unacceptable workplace behavior are bullies: They always shoot down or ignore your great ideas. They give you more work and less choice about how to do it. They leave you out of key meetings and deny you access to necessary information. They are belligerent and verbally abusive. If you get to the stage where someone punches or gropes you, or subjects you to unreasonable personal demands, you are being victimized by a bully who may be liable for sexual harassment and other charges.

“What reaction is your bully getting from you that makes it pleasurable? Can you...make bullying you less interesting?”

If you face such signals of possible bullying, keep in mind that:

- **You could mistake valuable feedback for bullying** – Some people who are legitimately trying to share important information and help you may communicate crudely. If their intentions are good, they should be able to give you useful details in a calm, professional manner when you ask for clarification.
- **Rough behavior is common in certain settings** – Inform yourself about standard practices in your workplace. New military recruits, for example, should expect their superiors to shout at them.

Why Does Bullying Occur?

True psychopaths or sociopaths are rare in the workplace. Most bullies are aggressive because they are fearful or jealous. Perhaps they feel inadequate or someone has injured their pride. Other bullies are ambitious and want to gain the upper hand. They may want promotions or other favorable conditions, so they strategically target anyone they consider to be competition. Bullying can also ensue when an employer hires inadequately trained people who point fingers at others to shift the blame for their inadequacies. A company culture based on heavy-handed control can breed bullies. Individuals can unintentionally become bullies if they lack social graces, have poor impulse control or are unable to empathize with the person they are bullying.

“Remain professional at all times, even if it’s the last thing you feel like doing.”

Many triggers can set off bullying. Bullies often pick on misfits, but you don’t need to be a misfit to be bullied. Gender, workplace status, ethnic background or youth can make you a target. Workplace bullying typically increases during times of staff and organizational changes, or when an individual’s success and recognition spurs jealousy. Many targets are successful, industrious and good at their jobs. They have good working relationships and a clear sense of fair play. Their only weakness may be that they are vulnerable to slights because they value praise. In all cases, however, the bully is responsible for the bullying, not the victim.

Can You Turn Your Situation Around?

Being bullied turns your worldview upside down. Where you once felt in control and believed the world to be an upbeat place which operated fairly and coherently, you suddenly feel stressed out, less confident and emotionally upset. Your workplace appears sinister and unsupportive. The longer the bullying goes on, the more your enthusiasm and self-esteem erode. Some victims turn their anger inward, mentally beating themselves up for not knowing how to handle the situation. Take care of yourself first. If you start feeling desperate or suicidal, get professional help immediately. Take comfort in the thought that bullies are insecure, weak and pitiable.

“If you...decide to move, make sure [to] leave behind...negative emotions associated with the bullying...Be positive and look forward to starting again with a clean slate elsewhere.”

If you are persistently bullied, turn the situation around: set a sensible course of action and follow it. If you allow the abusive behavior to persist too long, the bully will become entrenched. Even if your efforts aren’t entirely successful, you’ll gain more mastery over the situation and feel better about yourself, provided you don’t inadvertently escalate the conflict. When you muster the courage to act, remain professional, and do not attack, retaliate or take revenge. Don’t get bogged down running through the bully’s offenses over and over in your mind. Instead, pursue positive efforts:

- Talk to a trustworthy professional (such as a therapist) to clarify the situation.
- Find a trusted person to confide in privately.
- Inform yourself about your legal rights.
- Discreetly locate sympathetic colleagues who are willing to back you up (if they are being intimidated too, they may be less likely to step up on your behalf).
- Consult your doctor about stress relief and consider a leave of absence if appropriate.

Should You Hit the Road?

At first, bullied victims work harder to reconnect with their work team. If their efforts fail, they lose hope, realize that their career paths have become limited and disengage psychologically from their jobs. Bullying targets may eventually come to feel that they’ve sacrificed too much self-confidence and good health to continue subjecting themselves to toxic circumstances. You will probably be reluctant to leave your colleagues behind to face the same treatment, but you must think of yourself. To continue earning a living you must be in good mental and physical health. When you refuse to tolerate abuse, you send your colleagues a positive message.

“Taking time off to attend interviews with other companies may not seem a very good idea; if the bully is [your] manager, for example, it could give him or her ammunition.”

If you're ready to make the transition to another job and you decide to leave, consider where you're headed; certain occupations are at higher risk for attracting bullies, including the public sector, the hotel industry and dance. Re-evaluate your career goals and ask yourself:

- What appeals to me in a job?
- Am I most comfortable in a large or small organization?
- What kind of atmosphere and philosophy fit me best?
- Do I thrive under a certain type of management?
- What kind of salary do I want and need?

“Protect your organization by making sure that it devises and implements strong anti-bullying policies.”

Consider where you're least likely to be bullied. Network with friends, discuss options offered through professional organizations and browse job ads. Weigh the gravity of the bullying against the job market to select the best time to leave. Look out for these potential pitfalls:

- You're so miserable in your job that your decision making is compromised, so you rush headlong into an equally frightful scenario at another job.
- You're so demoralized and shaken by the bullying that you lower your standards and accept any career path, salary or terms you are offered just to get out of your situation.
- You don't take time off to recharge before starting the new job; without emotional closure on the troubling chapter behind you, you may have insufficient energy to tackle new challenges.

Should You Stand Your Ground?

If you decide to stay, get ready for a long and hard fight. Take the following steps:

- **“Know that your organization has responsibilities”** – Employers are obliged to treat bullying grievances as they would any work safety hazard. If nothing happens when you report the bullying, report your grievances to trade union representatives or personnel staff.
- **“Know what you want”** – Do you want an apology, financial redress or vengeance? Or do you just want to go back to normal? Prepare yourself. When you confront the bully, keep your wits about you. Be clear on what you will say and how.
- **“Change your reactions”** – Change the way you react to the bully. How can you respond differently so that bullying you is less rewarding for him or her? Stay cool and professional, do what you can, then go home and get it all out of your mind.
- **“Collect evidence”** – If you decide to file a formal complaint or take your employer to court, you need evidence. Keep a diary describing the incidents (date, situation and witnesses), the behavior, and the effect it has on you.
- **“Prepare a complaint”** – A formal complaint is only wise if you have clear evidence and witnesses willing to make statements to back you up. Otherwise, if the bully gets away with it, the behavior may escalate, and you will be worse off.
- **“Consider your options”** – Ask yourself what your options are and what the winning outcome would be. Can you actually “win”? And can you handle the whole process?

How to Make a Difference

Studies indicate that nearly a third of all companies, perhaps inadvertently, make bullying worse for those who complain, and half of all organizations just reinforce the bully's position and take no action at all. The best companies act decisively to eliminate bullying. If you are a manager and a subordinate approaches you with a bullying complaint, be receptive – even if the victim has flaws. Ask for full details and take notes. Then:

- Help the victim consider and find appropriate options.
- Advise the target against retaliation.
- Assess how long this has been happening. If the situation is relatively new, you could help the target stand up to the bully.
- “Protect yourself, but do what you can to help.”
- To protect everyone in the workplace, inform your superiors.
- Avail yourself of support and resources, such as hotlines or whistleblower nonprofits.

Are You a Bully?

Take a good, hard look at yourself. Do you occasionally slip into the trappings of a bully? Ask yourself if you make jokes which might be insulting or demeaning. Do you express irritation and anger overtly? Do your replies tend to be blunt or strongly negative? Do you gossip? Do you overburden subordinates with excess work? Do you push your staff relentlessly, overlooking their needs and constraints? Do you tend to be argumentative? Do you dismiss staff concerns? Do you purposely leave certain people out of the loop? Are you a control freak? Do you make others scapegoats?

“If grievance procedure states your manager is first port of call and your manager is the bully, go to his or her manager instead. If...in doubt, go to...Human Resources, to senior management or even to the board. These people have a duty of care to you as their employee.”

If you answered “Yes” to any of these questions, try to become more self-aware and work harder to treat others respectfully. Managers may find it distasteful to address bullying among their ranks, but if management makes it clear it won't tolerate bullying, the workplace truly can become “healthier for all.”

About the Author

Lorenza Clifford is a career coach with a broad range of clients.

