



Employees suffering from bullying at the hands of their bosses or co-workers have been getting some new attention of late.

Bullying is all about power. It happens when a boss or employee (the bully) targets a single worker (the victim) and uses behavior that has the *intention to hurt or undermine* him/her. Bullying appears in lots of obvious or insidious ways. Physical bullying, like taking office possessions or loading up on impossible tasks may not be as painful as verbal bullying – yelling, public insults or demeaning comments – but still has a negative impact. The most painful kind of bullying is relational, which includes being singled out, excluded, or denied promotions without just cause.

The bully manipulates the power balance to prove his worth at the expense of another. Victims are afraid to speak up because they fear losing their jobs or incurring more workplace bullying as revenge. Employees who try to defend themselves or their co-workers may draw retaliation and further isolation. Bystanders often watch the bullying occur because they are “afraid to get involved.” Worse yet, they may also start to blame the bully or rationalize the abuse, which only contributes to the victim’s sense of isolation and suffering.

Men and women may bully differently. Men usually are more direct and aggressive and use their power in ways that are not hard to recognize. In fact, women may be more cruel and insidious in their covert methods, like gossiping or exclusion.

Bullying that goes unchecked can take a toll on the physical and mental health and, ultimately work performance. Employees, who worry about their position and have to fend off attacks, may be less creative. Additionally, lower productivity, absenteeism and employee turnover is not uncommon when bullying runs through the workplace. New research suggests that bullying at work fosters depression, insomnia and substance abuse.

Ironically, management is often unwilling to deal with bullying because a perception exists that bullying a worker actually makes them perform better. Is bullying necessary to make a worker perform better? The reality is that good management makes a worker perform better. Bullying and fear tactics may move a certain project forward, but the loss is greater on the employee side of the human equation.

Bullying in the work world can be addressed with the right tools. First, companies need clear definitions of bullying and the examples that define unacceptable behavior. Employers should have bullying policies that set clear guidelines for appropriate vs. inappropriate behavior. The person at the helm defines the culture of the company and the rights kinds of behavior and needs to continually model the right kinds of actions and attitudes. When “slip-ups” occur, the manager needs to be quick – and public – in his apology. Additionally, people who exemplify appropriate behavior and good leadership skills should be recognized and rewarded. On the other hand, an aggressive, “go for the jugular” kind of manager simply perpetuates the problem.



What do you do if you are the victim of workplace bullying? To begin, make an attempt to enter in to a meaningful one-on-one dialogue with the bully. If your effort fails, engage the help of a co-worker or supervisor to facilitate a discussion. Make it clear, in a calm and rational way, that the bullying behavior is having a negative impact on your work performance and that you need to build a more productive working relationship. If none of your efforts make an impact, consider a job change. If a company is not committed to supporting a “bully-proof” environment, it’s not the right place to work.

If you are a “bystander” to bullying in the workplace, make it clear to the victim that you are available for help and support. All too often, bystanders join in with the bully in blaming the victim, to avoid becoming the target of abuse themselves. Put yourself in the shoes of the “target,” and take action that will help the situation.

Exposing bullying situations is the first step to creating a safer workplace. Learning how to handle a difficult boss or co-worker takes lots of practice and support. No easy solutions exist. Talking about the problem is the first step.

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