

ARE YOU A **BULLY?**

No longer associated with schoolyard behaviour, bullying in the workplace is on the rise; find out how to take action, whether you're the victim or the perpetrator

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Bullying, whether it's name calling, beating or teasing, is primarily exhibited by children in the playground; however new evidence suggests that this schoolyard behaviour also exists in the office environment, with conciliation service Acas revealing that one in 10 employees suffer from bullying and harassment in the workplace.

However, while it's easy to feel like a victim, many are unaware that their idiosyncratic attitude has seen them labelled a 'bully'. ➤

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What Constitutes Bullying?

Bullying behaviour can include a wide range of both overt and covert actions. It is not unusual, for example, for individuals to complain that their professional competence has been called into question as a result of disparaging remarks or criticism from colleagues or managers, whom they feel are undermining their position.

These actions might include overt action such as a public ‘dressing down’ for work errors, or covert conduct such as circulating rumours or gossip that question an individual’s ability or integrity. But bullying can also include ‘non-action’ – for example, not giving acknowledgement or approval for work well done, or failing to ask the opinion of the person who is clearly best qualified to provide that input.

However, in this context, it is important to bear in mind that what is, in some cases, perceived as bullying behaviour by one person, may be taken to be merely overly zealous supervision by another. It is often for this reason that bullying and intimidation is, very often, a difficult and complex situation with which to deal.

Bullies will typically make unreasonable demands of their chosen target; shout at victims publicly, as a deliberate tactic to disempower them; give instructions which they then change for no apparent reason; allocate tasks which they know are beyond the ability of the individual; block promotion by refusing to give fair appraisals or by refusing to endorse pay increases or bonus awards; exclude the victim from discussions germane to their work responsibilities.

Being ‘sent to Coventry’ is a well-known UK phrase describing the enforced social isolation of an individual within a group. When applied in a workplace setting, it requires enormous courage for any one group member to break ranks with their ‘bullying’ colleagues and risk the consequent ridicule and rejection.

‘Overwork’ can involve the imposition of unrealistic deadlines, where people are deliberately ‘set up’ to fail. This may also appear as micro-management, where every dot and comma is checked so often that incompetence is deliberately implied.

THE VICTIMS

Individuals who are bullied at work often feel they have lost control and, as a result, cease being able to carry out their duties without fear of being threatened. Instead, they live from day to day as they fight to regain a position of normality. After a period, they will tend to become introverted and back away from contact with others in the workplace.

They may be tense, anxious and uncooperative and prone to emotional outbursts. The stress that bullying creates often leads to minor illnesses such as headaches, irritable bowel syndrome and chronic fatigue, but if stress is experienced over a prolonged period, then the person concerned may ultimately suffer more serious health problems, including ‘burnout’ leading to a complete breakdown, as a result. Prolonged stress can also contribute to hypertension which in turn can increase the susceptibility to stroke or heart attack.

People are often reluctant to discuss their experience of bullying for fear of reprisal or further intimidation. It may be seen as a ‘black mark’ against them that could damage their career progression. Unfortunately, a majority of individuals who have been the victims of bullying are unwilling to take formal action, and this is no doubt a contributory factor in the high exit rates associated with bullying at work. This fact could be noted during an exit interview. If you won’t stick up for yourself at work, help those left behind.

Taking Action

Procedures available to individuals who are being bullied include confronting the instigator – which is often a difficult or even impossible action; approaching their immediate superior; contacting HR; making a formal complaint using the organisation’s published policy and procedures (if they exist); involving a trade union; speaking to a colleague; staying and taking no action; or, ultimately, giving up their job.

The HR department may not always know what action to take. Often, it may be a senior manager who is alleged to be the bully, but challenging senior executives may be beyond the remit of HR staff. In which case, external consultants may need to be retained to manage the situation and to mediate where possible.

It’s important that employers recognise the impact that bullying can have on the organisation as a whole, as well as on individual employees. In particular, a robust formal policy and procedure should be in place to deal with bullying or harassment issues, as this will positively indicate that the organisation takes the issue seriously and provides a mechanism for dealing with complaints, both informally and formally. This is a particularly important point should a case of intimidation or harassment against the organisation be brought before the courts or an industrial tribunal, in a claim for compensation.

Bullying is unacceptable in the modern workplace, and an organisation’s action (or inaction) in relation to bullying will often be judged by its staff – with inaction being seen as condoning bullying at work. People do not want to work for a company that has a reputation for bullying behaviour.



The Way Forward

There is no doubt that workplace bullying and harassment is on the increase. A tough economic climate certainly has an impact on management behaviour, and this in turn can lead to increased stress levels throughout the organisation. As companies downsize, they are looking to achieve higher sales and increased productivity from every employee and, very often, in an attempt to survive the economic downturn, incorrect management tactics are employed.

A further factor is that managers working remotely are not necessarily able to keep an eye on what is going on in the office. They are busy with their own challenges and often miss the first signs of bullying behaviour. When they finally realise there's a problem, it's often too late to retrieve the situation, and a serious consequence of inaction crystallises, such as a resignation or a serious health problem, and a possible legal claim for compensation.

Bullies are notoriously known to conduct their bullying behaviour behind closed doors, but those who do conduct it in front of others leave behind not only a frightened victim, but also disturbed fellow workers who witnessed it. Fear is a key factor in this scenario, and very often, managers persuade themselves to ignore, rather than confront, the problem. Different cultures bring different challenges, and some people who are less assertive than others may experience more problems than those who can stand up for themselves confidently and assertively. The bully will invariably choose the person who has little confidence, but it should not be forgotten that bullies may very often also try to victimise the person who is popular and therefore seen as a threat to them.

Whatever the reason, workplace bullying is pernicious behaviour that is usually insidious and which needs to be stamped out the moment it is identified or reported. The whole organisation, from the boardroom downwards, needs to stand behind a 'zero tolerance' policy towards intimidation, to demonstrate unequivocally that it will not accept such behaviour. ■

Beat The Bully In You You're a bully if you:

- Make unreasonable demands and constantly criticise
- Intimidate others with your behaviour
- Make veiled threats
- Publicly humiliate others
- Make personal insults and get angry over trivial matters
- Ignore or exclude others from conversations
- Spread malicious rumours
- Make threats or send abusive emails
- Make unpleasant comments or spread lies and malicious gossip on social networking sites

How to change your behaviour:

- Identify the aspects of your behaviour which are unacceptable, and acknowledge them accordingly.
- Listen to what other people are saying about you.
- Seek help in the form of coaching or counselling to help you evaluate the underlying issues that lead you to bully, and look at how to change your behaviour.
- Put yourself in the shoes of the victim to see how you would feel.
- Meet with your victim and apologise for your behaviour.
- Look at how you can improve your communication skills, including your body language.
- Read what you write in emails several times before sending, and ask yourself – "Would I like to receive this?"

Stop Bullying Among Kids

How someone behaves as an adult is directly linked to their behaviour when a child. Which is why it's important to stop bullies in their tracks at an early stage.

Here are some environmental factors that can lead to bullying:

Insufficient parental supervision and not teaching children that bullying behaviour is unacceptable.

Parents giving in to an aggressive or unreasonable child, who learns that these tactics work for them and enables them to get their own way.

Aggressive behaviour in the home between parents and towards their children can lead to aggressive behaviour in later years. This is learned behaviour and quickly becomes a part of a behavioural pattern.

Watching other bullies get their own way, and emulating their behaviour as a way of seeking their approval.