

Bully boy tactics

More than one in eight people admit to being bullied at work, and ganging up on the boss, in particular middle managers, is on the increase, according to the results of a study presented at the annual British Psychological Society conference.

But what are 'bullying behaviours', and how can you tell if you are being bullied?

In its report *Bullying at work: How to tackle it*, the trade union AMICUS states that bullying is more common in workplaces where one or more of the following factors exist:

- Extremely competitive environment
- Fear of redundancy or downsizing
- Fear for one's position of employment
- Culture of self promotion by putting colleagues down
- Envy among colleagues
- An authoritarian style of management
- Frequent change and uncertainty
- Lack of training
- De-skilling
- No respect for others and/or appreciation of their views
- Poor working relationships in general
- No clear accepted codes of conduct
- Excessive workloads/demands on people
- Impossible targets/deadlines
- No procedures/policies for resolving issues.

Being bullied is an isolating experience. It tends not to be openly discussed for fear of further ill-treatment and because the 'target' often feels ashamed to discuss it with colleagues in case their professional credibility is called into question.

Even the mildest form of intimidation may be very disturbing, and, as this intensifies over time, the effect on the victim can be severe.

Early warning signs of being bullied include: feeling as though you are constantly being criticised, even though your work standards have not slipped, and questioning your own ability.

KEEPING QUIET

It's not unusual to hear complaints from people that their professional competence has been called into question by their colleagues or managers.

These attacks might be overt actions such as a public 'dressing down' for work errors, or covert behaviour such as circulating rumours or gossip that appear to question an individual's ability.

One difficult area includes 'non-action', for example not acknowledging and/or approving a good piece of work, or not asking for an opinion from the person who is clearly best qualified to provide input. These issues are also very difficult for the targets



of bullying to raise, as they question their own validity.

Bullies typically try to make the life of their victim very difficult through the use of a number of different methods:

- Make unreasonable demands: constantly criticising
- Insist that their way of carrying out tasks is the only way
- Shout at victims, publicly, in order to get things done
- Give instructions and then subsequently change them for no apparent reason
- Allocate tasks which they know the person is incapable of achieving
- Refuse to delegate when appropriate
- Humiliate their targets in front of others
- Block promotion, refuse to give fair appraisals or endorse pay increases
- Exclude the victim from meetings or other legitimate business activities
- Make attacks on the professionalism or personal qualities of their targets.

Personal attacks

In addition to attacking a person's work role, bullying behaviour may also include actions and statements that are intended to undermine them personally. For example by ridiculing someone's hobbies or interests or by making comments related to physical characteristics such as their height, weight, clothes or hairstyle.

Isolation

Social isolation and its effects should not be underestimated. It is reminiscent of the playground and can be just as miserable and humiliating for adults as it is for children (if not more so as it can jeopardise their job).

Enforced social isolation of an individual within a group also requires enormous courage for any one group member to break ranks with their 'bullying' colleagues and risk consequent ridicule and rejection. Once these situations arise, for whatever reason, they are typically very hard to stop.

Overwork

Overwork, in a bullying sense, involves the imposition of highly unrealistic deadlines where people are effectively deliberately 'set up' to fail.

This may also appear as 'micro management', where every dot and comma, bolt, nut and screw is checked so often that incompetence is deliberately implied.

Bullying by subordinates

Bullying by subordinates can take many forms such as not delivering messages, hiding notes, changing documents, excluding people from social groups, or not delivering papers for meetings on time – all of which are designed to make the bullied manager seem incompetent.

Destabilisation

People who are deliberately 'destabilised' feel that they have lost control over their work environment and, as a result, have ceased to be able to carry out their duties in a relaxed manner without being threatened. Instead, they live from day-to-day as they fight to regain a position of normality, often unsuccessfully.

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