

Understanding the Reasons for Workplace Bullying

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There are many different issues that motivate bullies to abuse their victims. Although tactics may vary from person to person, bullies share common psychological characteristics that cause them to behave badly toward their colleagues.

Understanding what incites a bully's behavior may help you deal with it in your workplace more effectively. This will also help you identify abusive situations, and prepare you to help bullies resolve their issues without reverting to abuse.

What You Need to Know

What motivates a bully?

Most incidents of bullying are motivated by the bully's own lack of self-esteem rather than the specific actions, appearance, or personality of the victim. Many bullies feel that they cannot cope with certain aspects of their own job. They feel threatened by a highly competent colleague or a colleague who receives praise from a manager.

Ultimately, bullies operate to hide their own incompetence. They view their victims as direct threats and bully them in an attempt to prevent their own inadequacies being revealed to other colleagues and managers.

How do bullies choose their targets?

Bullying is motivated by the insecurities and inadequacies of the bully, so any colleague who, unwittingly, threatens to highlight or expose those failings is a potential target.

In addition, certain personality traits are common to the targets of bullies. Such characteristics may include some of the following:

- being popular with colleagues, perhaps because of a vivacious personality and a good sense of humor
- being recognized (by praise or promotion) for professional competence
- being well-known and rewarded for trustworthiness and integrity (perhaps by having increased responsibility)

- being helpful, sensitive and known as someone that colleagues can talk to about professional or personal issues
- finding it difficult to say no and frequently offering to help others with projects or deadlines
- Being unwilling to gossip or engage in malicious discussion about the incompetence of others
- Being quick to apologize when accused of something, even if not guilty

Bullies are also opportunistic and may choose a particular victim in order to advance their own career. Many bullies select vulnerable victims that they can intimidate more easily than more confident colleagues—perhaps a new hire, a younger or older colleague, or someone that is shy or reserved. Targeting such people allows bullies to manipulate events and actions in their favor, transferring blame for incompetence from themselves to vulnerable victims.

What to Do

Recognize a Bully

Bullies may be motivated by different issues and operate in different ways, but there are some key personality traits and actions that indicate a potential bully. These include:

- personal or professional insecurities
- an “extreme” personality, that can shift quickly from one mood to another
- controlling or obsessive tendencies
- an inability to accept responsibility for their own actions and professional conduct

Workplace bullies will often try to transfer responsibility to their victims, and place blame for any professional failings with other colleagues. Even when questioned, bullies will deny their involvement and use their victims as scapegoats for their incompetence.

Recognize Bullying Incidents

Bullying is difficult to recognize, as it involves a range of psychological and covert abuse that is often visible only to the victim. Workplace bullying is particularly difficult to spot because of the environment in which it occurs. E-mail and cell phones allow bullies to abuse their victims electronically and in private; and victims can easily go unnoticed among the many other employees with urgent demands and queries.

However, there are a number of actions, signs, and activities that can indicate that bullying is occurring in your workplace. For example, you may find that someone is being subjected to one or more of the following:

- deliberate exclusion from meetings, conversations, or social gatherings
- the spreading of malicious rumors about them
- the imposition of increasingly unrealistic deadlines
- persistent assignment of unrealistic workloads; or, conversely, a sudden reduction in their duties or level of responsibility
- unwarranted criticism or interrogation, especially in front of other people
- unnecessary comments about their job security
- continued opposition to their promotion or development
- unwarranted subjection to disciplinary procedures or formal warnings for trivial or fabricated reasons

In isolation, these incidents may not constitute bullying; however, when they happen on multiple occasions over a period of time, they can become in a serious and damaging campaign of abuse. It is important to be vigilant about such activities and to investigate any tension, discomfort or disputes between colleagues in order to prevent such incidents escalating into serious workplace bullying.

What to Avoid

You Ignore Bullies

Bullying is a serious issue and it will not go away unless dealt with properly. Ignoring a workplace bully can suggest to your employees that you condone such behavior and that aggressive, abusive, and offensive practices are acceptable in your business. This will adversely effect the rest of your staff, who may seek employment elsewhere in order to avoid falling victim to such abuse or who, alternatively, may feel that bullying is acceptable and begin to treat colleagues in a similar way.

You Don't Have a Clear Policy

Make it clear that bullying will not be tolerated in your business, that employees must treat each other with respect. You can do this in the following ways:

- Set good standards of behavior yourself and encourage senior staff to do the same.
- Treat complaints of bullying seriously and objectively.
- Ensure all reported cases of bullying are dealt with quickly and in strict confidence.
- Develop and publish an anti-bullying policy and distribute it to all staff and new hires, making a copy available in the employee handbook or on a shared bulletin board.

Where to Learn More

Web Sites:

Bully Busters: <http://bullybusters.org>

Leading Edition, "Dealing with Workplace Bullies":
www.purdue.edu/HR/LeadingEdition/LEdi_705_workplace_bullies.htm

Workplace Bullying Institute: www.bullyinginstitute.org

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