

Identifying Toxic Work Cultures: Recognizing & Controlling Workplace Bullying

by Drew Mitchell

When one hears the word "bully," they may think of the prototypical roughneck at school who shoves the little kids into lockers. It could be the hooligan who takes someone's lunch money as a fee for letting them live another day. But people tend to forget or ignore that bullying does not necessarily end on the playground or the gym locker room. Workplace bullying is becoming well-known thanks to many that have brought the topic to light in recent years.

There are various forms of bullying, and as employers begin to understand each type, they can find ways to create a bully-free environment in their workplace. As with any problem, there first has to be recognition. Employers need to learn the "signs and symptoms" of bullying so they can better identify what is making their workplace "sick."

What should an employer look for in a workplace bully? Mean girls and tough boys were typical bullies in school, but what about at work? If someone were to look at the person sitting next to them or sitting across the room, would they be able to identify the bully? Those seemingly innocent-looking people may be bullies. Chances are they're not. But bullies in the workplace can be very hard to identify. One reason is most people like to believe that people are, in essence, good. But bullies are not good people. They are evil. That may sound melodramatic, but the concept of the workplace bully cannot be taken lightly. Bullies are bad people, and people must keep in mind that they look like anyone else one may see on the street or at the lunch room table. They look like anyone's neighbor, sister or cousin.

Workplace bullying is defined as repeated and enduring aggressive behaviors (most frequently verbal and non-physical). It is intended to be hostile and/or perceived as hostile by the recipient and is usually unpredictable, irrational, and unfair. Workplace bullying differs from harassment in that conduct is always intentional and includes more than just enumerated grounds. Intent of bullying is usually to make the target feel that their contributions to the workplace are not needed or are sub-par. The bully will continue this behavior toward the target until they are successful at getting the target fired or they make the target so miserable that they give up and quit the job they once loved.

Examples of what the bully may do include all or some of the following:

- Belittling someone's opinion or contribution;
- Deliberate and 'physical' intimidation;
- Excessive work scrutiny and unfair criticism;
- Setting impossible deadlines, tasks or targets;
- Supervisor/manager taking credit for work of employee;
- Ignoring someone or deliberately excluding them;
- Singling out coworker(s) in front of others;
- Shouting at coworker(s);
- Acting with condescension;
- Gossiping or spreading rumors;
- Interrupting without care or respect;
- Sending hostile email(s) or other correspondence.

The bully is usually well-liked by peers. Bullies present themselves as social creatures, even though bullies tend to have deep feelings of social inadequacy. They seem to be friendly and outgoing, but in reality they may see anyone as an adversary. Underneath their cool demeanor, the bully is usually paranoid, secretly looking this way and that way for potential rivals that might create pitfalls for the bully's professional success. The bully is manipulative - everything they say and do is for the purpose of making things better for their own situation. The workplace bully is usually very intelligent, or more accurately, cunning. It's not unusual for nearly all in the workforce to see the bully as someone to look up to - a role model for the company's newest members as well as those long-term employees who have fallen from grace for being too comfortable in their jobs.

One might think that a bully would be a detestable oaf and someone people would avoid. This couldn't be further from the truth for the workplace bully. While the bully is silently self-centered, at the same time the bully is a charmer. Bullies will compliment others if they need them as allies. They offer help to others in order to gain the reputation as a "team player." While doing so, bullies build their own case for professional survival by making people aware of the good deeds the bully does in the workplace, even those of relatively little consequence to the day to day operations of the business. By lending help as a "team player" as well as padding their credentials by exaggerating their own contributions, the bully paints their self-portrait as a valuable asset to the company. This makes it easy for the bully to avoid suspicion when there are productivity problems. If the bully is successful enough to create an illusion of success and to have made themselves seem more valuable than they actually are to the business, it can take years to expose the bully's actual agenda.

The bully's loyalty is fleeting, be it to the company, boss, friends or coworkers. The bully typically does not really care about the place they work or the people they work with. There is only one thing that is important - prestige. If a conversation or a project doesn't interest the bully, the bully will change the subject. Depending on the type of personality the bully has, actions may be subtle to abrasive. The bully may quietly turn attention to herself by interjecting her thoughts into a conversation and then quickly change the subject or she might just outright call the topic silly or stupid and proceed to take over. The bully is prone to grandiose acts, as if they are the spotlight performer in a Broadway play.

Bullies typically target specific personality types in the workplace. Potential targets are people who are usually very good at their jobs and have achieved a high level of prestige in the workplace. The target isn't necessarily in management, but they could be "management material" for the future. The target is usually a high achiever and very enthusiastic about their work. The target has liked their job very much prior to the bully targeting them. The target is usually very scrupulous, with a high level of politeness, integrity and ethical standards. They treat others with dignity and respect, refusing to join the "in-crowd" or any cliques. Targets are typically family-oriented and take their family responsibilities very seriously.

Bullies hate the idea that there are others who may be better. It doesn't matter what they are better at - it's the fact that they have the potential to pull the spotlight away from the bully. The target may make more money, wear better clothes, drive a nicer car, or any of the typical markers of personal success. any or all can trigger a bully's ire. Maybe the bully was passed up for a promotion and they feel that the person who got the promotion should pay for taking it from them. Granted, the bully may not have done anything to deserve being promoted, but that does not matter to them. In the mind of the bully, someone of lesser importance was put in a higher position than them. The mission for the bully is to eliminate the target.

Targets are typically not in protected classes that discrimination laws address. The bully's antics usually fall just outside standard harassment definitions. They make certain that they are not held accountable for any wrongdoing. They cover their tracks very well and most of the time too easily. They often frame their own misdeeds on one or more of their hapless targets. The bully is good at making their targets into scapegoats for tasks or projects gone wrong. While the bully may have one person targeted more than others, the bully will target more than one person at a time if the need is there. The bully is a player, able to tell what people value and what makes them tick. The bully will then play on those qualities. Most frightening is how the bully builds trust. It is the key to the bully's success. If a bully is able to impress people, then they are victorious.

Bullies may be mean people, but sometimes there is a psychiatric condition in play as well. A disorder often associated with bullying is Narcissistic Personality Disorder. This is not the typical self-love that most people have. That is a natural and healthy emotion. The narcissist is a person who has a grandiose vision of self, feelings of superiority that are actually masking subconscious feelings of inadequacy. Narcissists may have a severe lack of morals and believe that there is no authority greater than their own. They see other people as inconsequential. Narcissists are unapologetic because they seldom believe anything they do is wrong - it's always other people who are wrong.

Every workplace has the potential for toxic behaviors. Just because it has not been identified in a workplace does not mean it never existed. It does not mean that there is no potential for it to exist. It does not mean that it is not occurring in the present. It means that workplace bullying has not been recognized for what it is. Employers must become accountable. They must establish anti-bullying programs and disciplinary procedures to combat this behavior.

Despite the fact that bullying is becoming more recognized, there are few legal remedies in the United States for this behavior. While many recognize that this type of behavior is morally wrong and professionally inappropriate, it's not necessarily illegal. It is typically left up to workplaces to recognize the issue, define the problem and put remedies in place to combat it. As long as the disease process that causes bullying dominates the workplace, efforts to end it will not be successful.

Information for this article was gathered from the personal experiences of various people as well as from the [Workplace Bullying Institute](#).

© Andrew Mitchell, 2010. Unauthorized use and/or duplication of this material without express and written permission from this author and/or owner is strictly prohibited. Excerpts may be used, provided that full and clear credit is given to Andrew Mitchell with appropriate and specific direction to the original content.