

## Sticks and Stones may Break Your Bones, but Words can Break Your Spirit: Bullying in the Workplace

### It's A Fine Line.....Between Incivility and Bullying.

But both are forms of workplace aggression. **Incivility** includes rudeness and discourteous verbal and non-verbal behaviors. **Bullying** includes persistently criticizing employees' work, yelling, repeatedly reminding employees of mistakes, spreading gossip or lies, ignoring or excluding, and insulting employees' habits, attitudes or private life.

Bullying is not about being teased, nor does it include the off-color jokes, racial slurs, or unwelcome advances that are the hallmarks of legally defined harassment. Workplace bullying is a pattern of destructive and generally deliberate demeaning of co-workers or subordinates that reminds us of the activities of the schoolyard bully. However, the workplace bully is an adult, who is usually aware of the impact of his or her behavior on others.

Bullying is a destructive and abusive behavior that disempowers and discredits the target, and may often include behaviors that do not appear obvious to others. For instance, how does an employee report to their boss that they have been excluded from lunch? Or, that they are being ignored by a co-worker? The insidious nature of these actions makes them difficult to deal with and sanction.

### Signs You are Being Bullied at Work

Do you regularly feel intimidated or dread to work near a particular co-worker? Does your boss or a co-worker talk over you at meetings, criticize you, or steal credit for your work? If you answer yes, chances are good that you're one of 54 million Americans who have experienced workplace bullying. Here is how experts say you can tell if you are being bullied at work:

- **Constant Criticism** – If the criticism from your boss or co-worker never seems to stop, despite your history of excellent work.
- **Lots of Yelling** – If you are frequently screamed at, insulted or humiliated in front of others.
- **Remembering Your Mistakes** – If your boss or co-worker seems to keep a file of your mistakes and constantly refers to them for no constructive reason or falsely accuses you of errors.

- **Gossip and Lies** – An office bully often spreads destructive gossip and lies about you and your performance.
- **You're Not Invited to Lunch or Meetings** – If you feel like you're being singled out and/or isolated by your co-workers or boss, socially or physically.
- **Work Means Misery and You Always Need Mental Health Days** – If it seems like all of your paid time off is being used for mental health breaks to get away from the misery of your office.
- **Sabotage** – A workplace bully may try to find ways to ensure that you fail at your job. Examples include changing rules on the fly that apply to your work or not performing tasks crucial to your success.
- **Impossible Schedule** – A workplace bully won't hesitate to change your schedule to make your life more difficult – scheduling last minute meetings when he/she knows you are scheduled to be off.
- **Stolen Work** – If your boss or co-worker steals credit for work you have created.

## What Can You Do?

You must do something. The bully will not go away; if you make yourself an easy target, you will only encourage the bully. Here's how to deal with your office bully:

### Be Assertive

The ideal way to deal with a bully is to go into your office with a healthy dose of assertiveness and speak in an authoritative tone. Don't allow the bully to intimidate you or your true worth.

### Stand Firm

Be prepared to stand your ground when a bully tries to mess with you. If he publically humiliates you, turn the situation back toward him with an honest defense. Don't be silent or you will be perceived as weak.

### Set Limits on What You Will Tolerate From a Bully

Once you have set a limit in your mind, exercise your right to tell the bully to stop the behavior. You might want to rehearse the following steps with a friend so that you are more comfortable responding when the bully attacks.

- Describe the behavior you see the bully exhibiting – don't editorialize or offer opinions, just describe what you see. (*You regularly enter my cubicle, lean over my shoulder, and read my personal correspondence on my computer screen.*)

- Tell the bully exactly how his behavior is impacting your work. (*Because much of my work is confidential, these actions make me feel as if I need to hide what I am working on from you, or change screens which is a waste of my time.*)
- Tell the bully what behavior you will not put up with in the future. (*In the future, you are not to enter my cubicle unless I invite you to come in. This is my private work space and your actions are unwelcome.*)

## **Be An Exemplary Employee**

Do your job and do it well. People who bully have built-in radar and love to zoom in on the mistakes of others. Don't give them a reason to go after you. If you are known for doing a good job, the bully probably won't target you because he doesn't want to be embarrassed later.

## **Protect Yourself**

As soon as you see that you are dealing with an office bully, start documenting every encounter, including the date, what happened, what was said, and who may have been a witness. You may need this information later if you need to involve your supervisor or human resources.

## **It's About Power**

Remember, you did not cause the bullying to happen. Bullies enjoy the feeling of power, so when you stand up for yourself and exert authority, they are likely to move on.

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## **Contact Us:**

Workplace bullying is a serious problem for educational and other workplaces. If you would like help dealing with bullying behavior, contact the Center for Work and Family Life.

For more information about Center for Work & Family Life programs and services, please visit our web site, [www.usc.edu/worklife](http://www.usc.edu/worklife).

To request a free, confidential consultation, or to schedule an appointment, call 213-821-0800.