

BULLIES AT WORK

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Workplace bullying is a growing international problem. It is more than a one-time incident. It is a pattern of behavior between a bully and another worker which can demoralize, isolate and trigger illness in the target of the bully. What is bullying? Who does it? Is it increasing? What can you do to protect yourself? And what can employers do to promote a safe environment for employees? This short article attempts to answer some of these key questions. My perspective is that of a therapist, mediator, and attorney handling “high conflict” disputes in a variety of settings.

What is Workplace Bullying?

In many ways, it is similar to playground bullying; except that as adults it should no longer be an issue. It is aggressive behavior that should be personally contained, but for some reason is not. Bullying involves more than one incident of aggressive negative behavior. It is a repeated *pattern* of negative behavior that usually involves a bully with more power or the convincing appearance of more power. Bullying can include acts that are intimidating, humiliating, and isolating and can be verbal or physical, blatant or subtle, active or passive. (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006.)

The underlying message is that the bully can and will keep engaging in unwanted, negative behavior which you are powerless to stop. This sense of powerlessness grows and the target begins to feel bad about himself or herself, as well as frightened of the bully. Bullying appears to go on in an environment that tolerates or rewards hostile behavior without intervening. The effect on the “target” of bullying can be devastating, and there is substantial research which shows that targets can experience a wide range of related illnesses, from depression and loss of sleep to intestinal disorders and increased risk of heart disease. Productivity drops, teamwork suffers, good employees leave, and employers have increased medical and legal claims. (Yamada, 2008.) Research even shows that workplace bullying has a more negative effect on employees than sexual harassment, perhaps because there are more procedures in place for dealing with sexual harassment nowadays. (Bryner, 2008)

Who Are the Bullies at Work?

From my experience and interdisciplinary training, I strongly believe that bullies at work are High Conflict People (“HCPs”) with high conflict personalities. By this I mean that they bring this behavior with them, rather than that they are reacting to an external “issue” or that other people “make” them behave this way. I believe that bullying is part of “who they are”—their life-long pattern of thinking, feeling and behaving. This began before they took this job.

From my observations, there are four personality types most often engaged in workplace bullying. Each of these types is trying to overcome a sense of weakness or fear in themselves, although they are usually not aware of this. (And don’t try to point it out to them!) They are unconsciously driven to find and attack what I call their “Targets of Blame,” because this helps them briefly feel less anxious and helpless themselves by *feeling* able to hurt others. Their targets can be anyone. It’s not personal. It’s about the bully, not about the target.

“I’m Very Superior” type: These bullies are stuck trying to prove to themselves and others that they are superior beings. They are really afraid of being seen as inferior, but this fear is not conscious and they will become very defensive if you suggest that they are worried about being seen as inferior. They show frequent disdain and disrespect towards those closest to them. This is mostly verbal, but they may engage in humiliating jokes, tricks or maneuvers to make you look bad (to make them look good, they hope). This is automatic behavior for them.

“Love-You, Hate-You” type: These bullies often seek revenge for perceived rejections from those they thought were very good friends. Once their fantasy of friendship fades, they retaliate. Even if you did nothing, they don’t check out misinformation—instead they act on it. They may spread rumors and make claims that you are an extremely uncaring or unethical person. If there was a conflict, they want others to believe it’s all your fault. They have a lot of all-or-nothing thinking and they jump to conclusions. “You’re with me or you’re against me.” They can easily fly into a rage, and sometimes they become violent or stalk their Targets.

“I Need to Dominate” type: These bullies go beyond just wanting to appear superior. They enjoy hurting other people. They fear being dominated, so they try to find someone, somewhere, who they can dominate. As long as they are harming someone else, they feel less vulnerable. They may say hurtful things, but they often do hurtful things, including stealing from those they are closest to, manipulating you into doing favors and then stabbing you in the back, and being willing to destroy your career for some short-term goal. You may feel that you are being manipulated or in danger. Be skeptical of strange schemes. They are con artists.

“I Can’t Trust Anyone” type: These bullies are highly suspicious of others and may believe that you are taking advantage of them, when you don’t even know them personally. They bear a grudge and will attack you before (they think) you are going to attack them. They can spread rumors that you want to harm them, and they believe it themselves. They often create high conflict situations because of their excessive fears of everyone else.

All of these bullies *feel* that they are victims. They *think* that you are a danger to them, and so they believe they are justified in attacking you. While it may seem that they are enjoying bullying others, it is not true enjoyment. They enjoy the momentary feeling of being in power. Most people don’t need to have power over someone else in a negative way. But for these bullies, that is the only satisfaction in a daily struggle of *feeling* that they are everyone else’s victim. Remember, this feeling is not conscious and you will make it worse if you suggest this to them.

Are Bullies Increasing at Work?

Over the past couple decades, workplace bullying has begun to receive the same kind of attention that schoolyard bullying has received for years. Perhaps it’s the same dynamics, for people whose personality development has been stuck since childhood. Interestingly, research indicates that 16 to 21 percent of employees experience health-endangering bullying and that it’s four times greater than sexual harassment reports. (Yamada, 2008)

These statistics (16 to 21 percent) are very similar to the statistics for personality disorders in society (approximately 15-17%). Since bullies also have *enduring patterns* of *dysfunctional behavior*, many of them may have personality disorders. Research on family violence shows a strong correlation between ongoing domestic abuse and personality disorders. (Dutton, 2007)

It’s also interesting that the growth of this problem in the workplace seems to have paralleled the increase in personality disorders in our modern society. They can’t seem to stop themselves and many organizations seem to tolerate them. With the increase in self-centeredness and decrease in empathy, we can expect to see more of this problem in the future.

What Can You Do?

If you are being bullied, there are several things to consider.

1. Don’t take it personally. Avoid becoming self-critical or becoming isolated. Bullying behavior is about the bully, not the target. There is nothing you could have done to deserve this behavior.
2. Get help. Talk to someone about the bullying, even if it’s a friend, family member or co-worker. Start where it’s easiest to start. You will feel stronger, rather than weaker. Don’t try to stop the bully alone. That is a mistake many individuals make and many organizations make.
3. Find out your organization’s policy about bullying. There may be a resource person to whom you can report the bullying, such as in Human Resources or an Employee Assistance Person. The best policies encourage co-workers and managers to work together to halt bullying behavior and to have the bully removed, if necessary. If you are being bullied by your immediate supervisor and if your organization says you have to talk to that person, look around for someone else to talk to. Such a policy is disfavored and there may be someone else in your organization who you can speak to.
4. Remember you have choices. Many excellent employees leave organizations which allow bullies to run rampant. You don’t have to tolerate a hostile work environment. Knowing you have choices and investigating your options (like researching other job options) will give you strength. **Remember, bullying is not about you. It’s about the bully and the bully’s personality problems.** You don’t have to be stuck. Perhaps a change of departments or supervisors may be a solution, so that you don’t have to leave the organization. But don’t get stuck feeling stuck.

What Can Your Organization Do?

To be honest, the problem is really a cultural problem. The workplace culture must reject bullying, as there is little the individual worker can do. Successful programs aimed at reducing playground bullying focus on the school environment. Likewise, workplace bullying needs to be addressed at the organizational level. Here are a few suggestions for a comprehensive approach:

1. Policies Against Bullying: Leadership in the workplace must establish clear policies against bullying and for healthy conflict resolution. Clarifying that bullying is unwanted, aggressive, negative behavior of any type will help employees begin to understand where to draw the lines. Clarifying what the consequences are of workplace bullying (and that the

organization will enforce them) can go a long way to helping employees feel safe. Employees as a group should know what the policies are, as bullies often distort their understanding of the rules to allow their inappropriate behavior.

2. Prevention of Bullying: Programs designed to reduce school bullying often have a committee of representatives from different parts of the school community. This committee then develops and disseminates prevention activities. By involving all levels of employees and management, such a team approach has a better chance of changing an organizational culture than simply a top down initiative. However, top management has to strongly support it in a meaningful way, or it will fail.
3. Staff Training: Training all workers to support each other and “set limits” on their co-workers may be more effective than just setting company policies. (Bryner, 2008) When all workers feel responsible for the quality of the workplace environment, it seems to calm down aggressive employees. In contrast, when workers feel that “anything goes” or “it’s not my problem,” there is more likely to be aggressive, bullying behavior. Practicing conflict scenarios and what co-workers can say and do is a particularly useful approach.
4. Confidential Lines of Communication: Many bullies are in positions of authority over their targets. Therefore, lines of communication which require reporting such problems to one’s immediate superior do not work. There needs to be independent resource people for reporting bullying to the organization and to the leadership.
5. Counseling: It would help employees and organizations to have a resource person for bullied individuals to use to discuss bullying experiences in confidence. This may help employees and organizations reduce the downward spiral of self-doubt and health problems that bullying often triggers. Such a service could be of assistance to bullies as well, so that the organization may be able to keep some of these employees while assisting them in improving their workplace behavior.
6. Consequences: There have to be real consequences for bullies, which everyone can see. That way other potential bullies will be more careful to follow the rules and other potential victims will know that they work where they will be protected.
7. Healthy Workplace Laws: Some states and countries are considering healthy workplace legislation which would establish expectations for employee behavior, and also provide for legal redress for workplace bullying. This should be encouraged, because it must be part of the culture, not up to the individual victim to deal with.

In summary, bullying appears to be a growing problem. Individual targets are usually overwhelmed, especially because bullies appear to have the active or passive support of their employers. Therefore, a comprehensive approach may have the best chance of success for a company or organization attempting to address this problem. Understanding that bullying is primarily an unconscious behavior based on long-term personality patterns may assist organizations and individuals in approaching this more effectively.

Most workplace bullies may be High Conflict People (HCPs) with high conflict personalities. Realizing this helps understand that the problem is:

- A problem of long duration that won’t just go away.
- It is a deep and serious problem, rather than a minor problem.
- It is a problem that must be solved at the community level, rather than putting the burden on the individual target to stop the HCP.

Best wishes in handling this problem. Remember, you are not alone and you don’t need to take any bullying personally. It is not about you—it’s about the bully’s pattern of behavior, and everyone’s willingness to set limits on it.

High Conflict Institute provides training and consultations regarding High Conflict People (HCPs) to professionals dealing with legal, workplace, educational, and healthcare disputes. Bill Eddy is the President of the High Conflict Institute and the author of “It’s All Your Fault!” He is an attorney, mediator, and therapist. Bill has presented seminars to attorneys, judges, mediators, ombudspersons, human resource professionals, employee assistance professionals, managers, and administrators in 25 states, several provinces in Canada, France, and Australia. For more information about High Conflict Institute, our seminars and consultations, or Bill Eddy and his books go to: www.HighConflictInstitute.com or call 602-606-7628.

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