

Dealing With Workplace Bullies: Tips for HR

By Robert Mueller, J.D.

Assisting an employee who seeks help after describing an abusive situation can be tricky. The HR professional must be able to distinguish a bully from an earnest but perhaps difficult or even troubled supervisor.

In all honesty, the employee must be able to appreciate the difference between what might feel like harassment from what is actually professional counseling and oversight. Understandably, these can be confused. Both are uncomfortable.

It's natural to assume that an allegedly abusive situation is a bullying one from how the employee describes it. But the difficulty the employee and supervisor are having might be caused by something else entirely. When made aware of what sounds like bullying, HR professionals should make gentle (and, of course, lawful) inquiries regarding both the employee and the supervisor concerning:

- Substance abuse
- Occupational stress.
- Cultural or other insensitivity.
- Performance and/or potential disciplinary issues.
- Personal problems (family, health, monetary).

Bullying is not a variant of these, and it's also not about degrees or gradations. Bullying is about political power.

The dictionary definition says a bully is "a person who hurts, frightens, or tyrannizes over those who are smaller or weaker." At work, a supervisor does not have to be brutish to tyrannize an employee if quiet micromanaging will have the same effect.

Bullies exploit their power over subordinates for their individual purposes. They are institutional renegades. Despite a likely first impression, bullies are not interested in furthering the employer's mission or its practical applications. They are on their own mission: the conquest of individuals as a matter of personal compulsion.

To find the truth, an HR professional will have to look beyond the bully and the immediate incidents, which tend to be baffling, to the surrounding context. The objective is to determine if there is a pattern and practice of intimidating subordinates over time.

Bullies are not creative people. Their treatment of a current target will be remarkably like the last—sometimes even using the same words.

Arrange for someone to take someone who seems like a former target to lunch. Don't hesitate to hire a work-savvy private detective to interview confidentially a former target who left to work elsewhere. What bullies do is not at all about a single complaining employee.

There were others who came before, and unless corrected, there will be others to follow. The bully is the common denominator.

Although they are probably not bullying other subordinates at the same time, other subordinates are being harmed nevertheless. Observe how they respond to the alleged bully.

When the bully talks to them, are they listening or deflecting? Are they engaged or withdrawn? Bullies aren't adept at interpersonal skills.

They aren't interested in others' feelings or concerns, and this lack of empathy and attention will make itself apparent in how employees respond to the bully. Generally speaking, employees will steer clear of engagement with a bully and attempt to stay under the bully's radar.

Bullies don't limit themselves to misusing just the employer's human resources, but sometimes misappropriate other, identifiable employer resources as well. Feeling themselves to be on a righteous mission—and above the company's policies—workplace bullies have been known to make and then justify bogus business expenditures, such as furnishings, equipment, supplies, travel, phone, and so on.

Consult the company controller. Measure the alleged bully's actions against the totality of his or her specific duties, the employer's mission and its practical applications. Compare the reports the bully has made against his or her actual performance.

Focus on bullies' substantive achievements. Have someone talk discreetly with clients and this person's counterparts in other departments. Is the bully paying attention to what she's paid to do? Ultimately, a bullying predicament is resolved in the same way as any other work problem—by focusing on the work itself.

Specifically, a workplace bully is someone who:

- Can't connect with other people.
- Bullies down and charms up.
- Tends to unduly demonstrate respect but to fundamentally lack loyalty.
- Uses the noise and drama of bullying to cover for this trait, and for their own performance inadequacies. Bullies are the ultimate defenders of mediocrity—starting with their own.
- Is not a team player.

If a person with supervisory authority has a capacity to connect with others earnestly, to learn lessons and grow from them, the supervisor may have been unkind but is still reachable. He or she is not a bully.

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A Dozen Tips for Bullied Employees

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If employees feel they are being targeted by workplace bullies, here are 12 strategies they can use.

1. It's up to you—first. HR professionals can't be present in the employee's work area, monitoring conduct like cops. Nor can they save the employee as if they were occupational lifeguards. Employees suffering mistreatment need to understand that management can only help them to the extent that they help themselves. Targets of bullies may be abused and reasonably withdrawn, but they are not helpless.

2. Don't take it personally. Believe it or not, bullying is not about you—your performance, your competence, your work style. For the bully, it's about political power. No matter what the bully might say, it's not about you. It's about a superior who exploits institutional power to torment an individual.

3. Treat the bully problem like any other work problem—professionally. Take objective notes. Collect a history that can be used to document a pattern of abuse. From the data, identify outcomes to strive for and action plans leading to them. When things get tough, you'll find protection by focusing yourself, HR, and others—including the bully—on operational goals.

4. Be the most knowledgeable employee possible. To maximize your defensibility and value, become the one who is most expert on the employer's personnel and operational rules, procedures and policies. It's surprisingly easy to scan all the relevant materials. Information is power. Be prepared to reference specific section numbers and headings for each bullying incident and other deviations from the employer's interest as well. Collect copies of all relevant company documents, including e-mails and reports of various kinds.

5. Trade objectivity for anguish. Becoming objective is probably the only effective way for an employee to get relief from torment both during and after a bullying campaign. There are simple tools that make objectification a rather easy thing to do.

6. On note cards, jot down just the succinct details of each policy deviation—whether bullying occurred or not. On a separate note card or incident report form for each event, jot down just the time, place, people, and salient quotes and/or distinct behaviors of concern. When the cards are presented coherently, others shift their view from the supposedly neurotic employee, to the note cards, to the bully.

7. Look beyond immediate incidents for a pattern of behavior. A bad day on anyone's part does not constitute bullying. A pattern and practice of intimidation over time does. Bullies are not creative people. They create patterns of misusing employer resources—including its human ones. To discover the patterns, document each event evenly, simply and regularly. This makes otherwise obscure patterns evident to HR and others.

8. Share the patterns and their details with family and, when ready, management. It is not helpful to go to HR and recount the horror story of the day. When you are ready to seek help, present well-organized information that illustrates a pattern and practice of maltreatment.

9. Create and nurture allies. Bullies normally target only one employee at a time. A bully's first goal is to isolate his/her target from co-workers to deny the target support from the team. Be mindful that bullies can never successfully sell their ugly bullying problem to others. It's unlikely anyone will buy it. The best way to gain support and increase credibility with co-workers is not by complaining, but by listening to others' concerns and being a helpful and valuable co-worker and team player.

10. Don't cower and don't escalate. It is not possible to retreat in a workplace. Avoid using sick leave or otherwise withdrawing from processes. The bully will not see this as sensible avoidance, but as cowering that he or she can exploit. Also, there is no point in arguing with a bully. Bullies can't believe anybody except themselves anyway. An argument can too easily turn into a confrontation. The best approach is to stand tall and strong but in a very obviously relaxed way.

11. "Touch the market" for strength in the freedom to leave. Look for specific employment opportunities, but not necessarily to take another job. The freedom to leave your job—even if you have no intention of doing so—fosters strength and good humor in a negative environment.

12. Arrange vacations for serious contemplation. Use your vacation time not only to unwind but also to contemplate the larger scheme of things. Come back sharp, strong, focused and organized for your well-planned, strategic self-defense campaign.

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