

Bullying in the Workplace

Often when people hear the word “bullying,” they think of children on the playground or high schoolers getting teased by their classmates. You might think that as people get older, rates of bullying decline due to developing brains and emotions. However, this is not the case.

The prevalence of workplace bullying is significant. According to a 2017 national survey by the Workplace Bullying Institute, about 20% of U.S. workers have experienced bullying in the workplace and over 60 million workers have been affected by bullying.



Workplace Bullying Defined

Workplace bullying is defined by aggressive behavior with the intent to intimidate, humiliate, sabotage, or degrade. It involves deliberate, hurtful, and repeated mistreatment of employees fueled by a desire to control. Bullying behavior can exist at any level of an organization; bullies can be, and often are, managers or supervisors, as well as coworkers. It’s important to be aware of the signs of bullying in order to identify when it is occurring.

Bullying can take many forms: covert and subtle or blatant and obvious. Many signs of workplace bullying are subtle, such as the person who always takes credit for work that others clearly contributed to or someone who often critiques another’s work with the intent of negatively affecting their reputation.

Examples of bullying:

- Being shouted at or humiliated
- Unwarranted or invalid criticism
- Being the target of practical jokes
- Being excluded or socially isolated
- Verbal intimidation (name calling, teasing, gossiping)
- Excessive scrutiny or micro-management
- Purposely withholding information or necessary resources
- Cyber bullying (via text, email, social media)

It’s equally important to be aware of what bullying is not. There will always be healthy conflict in any workplace—colleagues with diverse backgrounds and personalities should be able to work together in a mutually respectful manner while speaking openly about matters, asking difficult questions, and challenging ideas.

Bullying is not:

- Expressing differences of opinion
- Offering constructive feedback
- Making a legitimate complaint about another worker's conduct
- Reasonable management action, including decisions about job duties or discipline

Common Characteristics of Bullies and Their Targets

Bullies seek out people who are vulnerable and unlikely to confront or report them. Bullies typically have dominant personalities and are quick tempered and opinionated. Bullies are often insecure themselves, and bullying helps them create the impression they are in control.

On the other hand, their targets tend to be compliant in relationships—wanting to be a people pleaser—and are often shy, quiet, and non-confrontational. Victims are often seen as competition by the bully due to their competence. They might also be new to the workplace.

The Effects of Bullying

When organizations ignore workplace bullying behavior, it can cost the business significantly due to:

- Loss of productivity
- Increased absenteeism due to manifestation of illness
- Increased accidents on the job and healthcare payouts
- High rate of employee turnover

Steps to Stop Workplace Bullying

When a person is being bullied in the workplace, they often experience disbelief and shame, making it difficult for them to report the behavior. Often when the target does report it, the employer is in denial and makes excuses, which enables the behavior. In the majority of bullying cases, the bullying only stops when the target quits, is fired, or is forced to leave.

Employers lead by example and should:

- Know what constitutes bullying behavior
- Focus on job performance and ensure feedback is constructive
- Promote a positive workplace culture
- Establish an anti-bullying zero tolerance policy
- Establish processes for reporting, investigating, and resolving complaints

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