Leadership & Strategy » HR for Leaders » Bullying » Everything You Need to Know About Bullying (But May Have Been Too Afraid to Ask)

Everything You Need to Know About Bullying (But May Have Been Too Afraid to Ask)

At least 25% of employees will experience bullying at some point in their working lives. [1] If bullying is so commonplace, you’d think that tackling it would be pretty near the top of most organisations’ agendas. Evidence suggests that this, sadly, is far from the case. This is due in part to the fact that bullying often takes place behind closed doors, and so can go largely undetected. Also, given the psychological nature of bullying, organisations may find it hard to know where or how to start tackling it. Without intervention at both the individual and organisational level, however, bullying can be a serious and persistent problem. This in-depth article is designed to help organisations understand what bullying is, why it happens, the effects it can have on individuals and organisations, and what organisations can do about it.

What bullying is

Bullying has many different guises and can occur in a variety of different situations, making it hard to give it one definitive description. The following definition is often used to describe what workplace bullying is:

"Persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating or insulting behaviour, abuse of power or unfair penal sanctions which makes the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable, which undermines their self-confidence and which may cause them to suffer stress." Amicus - MSF Union, 1994 [2]

Bullying at work can be broadly broken down into two different types. That which is:

- **personal in nature** – e.g. derogatory remarks about a person’s appearance or private life
- **work-related** – e.g. questioning a person’s professional competence, allocating unachievable tasks

Many bullies will of course engage in both types of bullying when targeting an individual/individuals.

Psychologist Pauline Rennie Peyton [3] offers a more detailed classification of types of bullying behaviour as follows:

- **threat to an employee’s professional status**, e.g. continually questioning an individual’s competence, public professional humiliation, belittling of opinions, accusations of lack of effort
- **threat to an employee’s personal standing**, e.g. intimidation, insults, ridicule, malicious gossip, name calling
- **isolation**, e.g. physical or social exclusion, such as withholding of information, preventing fair access to opportunities
- **overwork**, e.g. the imposition of impossible deadlines, providing unnecessary distractions, unfair allocation of work
- **destabilisation**, e.g. removing responsibility, setting up to fail, unfair or excessive criticism, constant reminders of past mistakes, refusal to recognise or praise good work

This typology offers a useful range of examples of unacceptable behaviours which can be used in anti-bullying initiatives.

It is important to appreciate, however, that where any of the behaviours described above occur as an isolated incident, this does not usually constitute bullying. Rather, what you should be looking for is repeated patterns of such behaviour, or behaviour that escalates in nature.

Bjorqvist observes:

"During the early phases of the bullying process, victims are typically subjected to aggressive behaviour that is difficult to pin down because of its indirect and discrete nature. Later on more aggressive acts appear." Bjorqvist, 1992 [4]

What bullying isn’t

Having a strong management style, or being assertive does not amount to bullying. Neither does it apply to situations where two employees are in regular or constant disagreement, but where they are both equally able to stand up for themselves. This would really be classified as conflict rather than bullying.

The serial bully
Based on research into thousands of cases of bullying at work, Tim Field believed that 90% of bullying incidents are committed by serial bullies, the majority of whom display psychopathic characteristics.

"Like the textbook psychopath, serial bullies are emotionally cold, compulsive liars and experts at mimicry and deception. They sail through psychometric tests with flying colours and are masters of the latest workplace jargon, which is sure to impress management. They tend to rise swiftly through the ranks, giving them the ideal position to target those below them." [5]

According to Field, the serial bully's focus is on power, control and subjugation of others. They usually operate by targeting one individual and bullying them relentlessly until they break down or leave. They then move on to their next victim. By the time organisations realise that there is a serial bully in their midst, considerable damage has already been done.

Cyber-bullying

We tend to think about bullying as something that happens face to face. But a person can just as easily be bullied by phone, by letter or memo, or electronically. So-called ‘Cyber-bullying’, where targets are bullied by email, text, instant messaging, even social networking sites, is said to be on the increase. One in five people surveyed by Dignity at Work in 2007, for instance, claimed to have been bullied by email and one in 16 had been bullied via text. [6] The increased availability of portable media devices such as wireless laptops and Blackberries™ allows bullies to intimidate their target even when they are out of the office, on holiday or at home.

The consequences of bullying

Systematic and prolonged workplace bullying can have devastating consequences for both the target and the organisation. Workplace stress, for instance, costs UK employers £3.7 billion a year, or 13 million lost working days. Bullying is estimated to contribute to between 10% and 20% of this loss. [7] In the United States, the Workplace Bullying Survey has found that that an incredible 37% of the U.S. workforce are being bullied at work. [8]

Employers who fail to address bullying in their organisation may end up counting the cost in terms of: [9]

- lost time – because bullied employees are more likely to suffer from stress and be absent from work
- lack of employee engagement – because morale is low
- lost resources – because trained and experienced employees leave the organisation
- financial penalties and loss of reputation if a bullied employee takes the organisation to an employment tribunal

The above costs ultimately culminate in reduced productivity and quality of service from the organisation.

Pearson’s study on Workplace Incivility [10] asked workers in a cross-section of US organisations about the effects that bullying-type behaviour had on them at work. The results showed just how bad bullying behaviour can be bad for business business:

- 28% of respondents lost working time avoiding the perpetrator
- 53% lost time worrying about the incident or possibility of future incidents
- 57% said they felt less committed to the organisation
- 22% made less effort at work
- 10% spent less time at work
- 46% considered leaving their job to escape the perpetrator
- 12% resigned to avoid the perpetrator

Employees who witness bullying can also be profoundly affected by it. For example, they can feel powerless and weak if they see a colleague being bullied but are too frightened to stick up for them in case they become a target themselves. If that colleague is forced to move department or even resign, the bystander may go on to experience ‘survivor guilt’. Where witnesses see bullying going on, but detect a lack of will from the organisation to confront it, they can also lose trust and faith in their employer.

On a personal level, bullying can have distressing physical and emotional effects on the target. In Bullying at Work [11] Andrea Adams points out that it is often only when an individual becomes physically unwell that they finally realise they are being bullied. Emotional and physical symptoms of stress caused by bullying can include:

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<tr>
<th>Emotional</th>
<th>Physical</th>
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<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>Feeling sick</td>
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<td>Irritability</td>
<td>Sweating/shaking</td>
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<td>Panic attacks</td>
<td>Disturbed sleep</td>
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<td>Depression</td>
<td>Palpitations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Loss of energy</td>
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<td>Lack of motivation</td>
<td>Stomach/bowel problems</td>
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<td>Loss of confidence</td>
<td>Severe headaches</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling of isolation</td>
<td>Loss of libido</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reduced self-esteem</td>
<td>Minor aches and pains</td>
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**Spotting the signs of bullying**

Hard evidence that bullying exists in an organisation can be difficult to come by, not least because targets of bullying are often too scared to report it. There are, however, some telling signs that organisations can watch out for. These include:

- an unexplained decline in performance from an individual, or from several individuals in the same department
- a rise in transfer requests from a particular department or areas of the business
- an increase in levels of absence due to stress
- an increase in staff turnover in a particular area of the business
- higher than usual rates of staff turnover in general
- any indications of bullying or harassment from exit interviews, especially where an employee/manager’s name crops up repeatedly

**Why bullying happens**

‘Bullying cultures are created by the attitudes of the people responsible for running organisations.’ [12]

Bullying can and does happen in all different sizes and kinds of organisations. The type of organisations that are most likely to harbour a bullying culture are: [13]

- those with a very hierarchical management structure
- those where an autocratic leadership style is the norm
- those with a high pressure, ‘hire and fire’ culture, e.g. sales-driven organisations
- small, sometimes family-run organisations that don’t have any anti-bullying measures in place.

Other factors that can lead to bullying can include: [14]

- workplace changes, e.g. change in ownership or management, internal restructuring, introduction of new performance measures
- personality differences, for example, personal biases
- gender/age imbalance in the workforce

**What organisations can do about it**

In order to stop bullying happening it is important for organisations to:

- **Encourage a positive working environment.** Bullying thrives in a negative working culture, e.g. a culture built on resentment and mistrust. By encouraging a positive working culture, characterised by honesty, openness, and mutual respect, organisations can go a long way to preventing a bullying culture from taking hold. Senior leaders and managers need to lead by example as their behaviour will be reflected throughout the organisation.
- **Educate employees about bullying** in order to ensure they don’t engage in bullying behaviours themselves, and can spot bullying behaviours in others.
- **Offer anti-bullying training** to help employees recognise and deal with bullying. Advice on how to build self-esteem can also help employees lessen the likelihood of becoming a target of bullying and give employees the confidence to speak up if they are being bullied.
• **Implement anti-bullying initiatives** – these should send out a clear signal to all employees that bullying will not be tolerated by the organisation and give employees a course of redress if they find themselves the target of bullying behaviour. Initiatives might include implementing an anti-bullying policy, putting up anti-bullying posters in communal areas, or even introducing an annual Bullying Awareness day. Simply drafting a policy and filing it away is not enough. Ongoing top-down support for these initiatives is essential.

• **Respond quickly to any complaints of bullying.** This sends out a clear message that bullying behaviour will not be tolerated by the organisation. It will hopefully encourage targets to speak up, and make bullies think about the consequences of mistreating others at work.

**Conclusion**

Bullying is an all too common problem—and one that no organisation can afford to ignore. The key responsibilities for organisations to ensure bullying is tackled effectively are to:

- understand what constitutes bullying behaviour
- be able to spot signs and symptoms of bullying in their organisation
- develop robust policies and procedures to tackle it should it arise
- take a top-down approach to embedding a positive working culture throughout the organisation


[5] *Psycho Bosses on the Loose: are you in the Line of Fire?*, [www.guardianunlimited.co.uk](http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk)

[6] *One in 10 Workers Experiences Cyber-bullying in the Workplace* at [www.personneltoday.com](http://www.personneltoday.com)


[13] *Concern Over Workplace Bullying* at [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)

[14] *Bullying at Work and the 2007 Code of Practice* at [www.cipd.co.uk](http://www.cipd.co.uk)

**Related Items**

**Related Resources**

- Bullying and Harassment - What's the Difference?