

Speak Up Culture – Stand Up Against Workplace Bullying

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An organization's fundamental success is dependent on healthy and productive employees. Everyone should feel secure and respected when they come to work each day. Unfortunately, an overwhelming number of employees are experiencing health-endangering workplace bullying; what I refer to as a *soul-destroying issue*.

According to [Workplace Bullying Institute \(WBI\)](#), workplace bullying is repeated mistreatment and a form of "abusive conduct." Bullying is a non-physical form of workplace violence. Statistics from the 2021 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey indicates that nearly one-third of adult Americans (30%) suffered abusive conduct at work, 19% witnessed it, 49% are affected by it, and 66% are aware that workplace bullying happens. In addition, 76.3 million workers are affected, 61.3 of bullying is same-sex gender bullying, 43% of remote workers are bullied.

In a [separate study](#), 71% of the respondents who were bullied at work were treated by a physician for work-related symptoms. 63% of workplace bullying victims saw a mental health professional for their work-related symptoms. Some of these symptoms included hypertension, sleeplessness, ulcers, severe mood swings, debilitating anxiety, panic attacks, clinical depression, migraine headaches, relapse of previously controlled addictions, even post-traumatic stress disorder. In the most extreme cases, workplace bullying can even lead to [suicide](#) "bullycide".

Bullying in any form is unquestionably terrible, but I want to focus on a form of bullying that doesn't always get the attention that it deserves. Specifically, I'm talking about workplace bullies.

For the sake of simplicity, a workplace bully is basically anyone who makes your work life a living hell by contributing to, or creating, a hostile, psychologically unsafe work environment. More formally, workplace bullying is repeated, persistent, psychologically health-harming mistreatment by one or more employees ("enemy or perpetrator") of an employee ("target or victim"). It is abusive conduct that takes the form of verbal abuse; or behaviors perceived as threatening, intimidating, or humiliating, work interference or sabotage, or in some combination of the above.

The primary issue with bullying is that the perpetrator desires to control the other person's behavior, usually for his or her own needs, personal agenda, or self-serving motives. Bullies use a variety of subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle ways to control others emotionally, psychologically, and even physically.

Adept bullies and manipulators are often extremely controlling people who are attuned to certain personality traits to exploit others. They are skilled "people readers" and make it their task to understand someone's flaws to determine what techniques can be used against them. Some even go a step further and mask their bullying behind a charming and nice demeanor and even a noble cause.

In fact, evidence shows according to a study published in the [American Journal of Public Health](#), targets are often high performing, highly ethical employees whose competence poses a threat to their low performing, low ethical counterparts. The bully's only real motivator is to battle the target while having the upper hand – an unethical tactic used to uphold the image they long for but are unable to get through competence.

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SUBTLE SIGNS OF PASSIVE AGGRESSIVE BULLYING

Bullying often goes unnoticed in the workplace because it is a slow process of emotional and psychological manipulation that is hard to prove and detect. These subtle signs are all used to create an emotional reaction, usually anxiety, which establishes greater control and power over the victim.

- Deceit.** Repeatedly lying, not telling the truth, concealing the truth, misrepresenting the truth, deceiving others to get one's way, and creating false hopes with no plans to fulfill them, deceiving others into thinking the target is the problem (*e.g., communicating honestly reported data in a deceptive manner*).
- Ignoring.** Purposefully ignoring, avoiding, or not paying attention to the employee; "forgetting" to invite this person to a meeting; selectively greeting or interacting with others besides the victim
- Isolation / exclusion.** Intentionally excluding the employee or making them feel socially or physically isolated from a group; purposefully excluding them from decisions, conversations, and work-related events
- Rationalization.** Constantly justifying or defending behavior or making excuses for acting in a particular manner (*e.g., publicly berating the employee; creating issues where there are none*)
- Minimization.** Minimizing, discounting, or failing to address the employee's legitimate concerns or feelings
- Diversion.** Dodging issues, acting oblivious or playing dumb, changing the subject to distract away from the issue, deflect accountability by placing blame on the victim to avoid negative consequences
- Shame and guilt.** Making an employee constantly feel that they are the problem, shaming them for no real wrongdoing, or making them feel inadequate and unworthy, or making the victim feel guilty for doing the right thing
- Pitting employees against each other.** Unnecessarily and deliberately pitting employees against one another to drive competition, create conflict, or establish winners and losers; encouraging employees to turn against one another
- Constant change and inconsistency.** Constantly changing expectations, guidelines, and scope of assignments, consistently "moving the goal post"; constant inconsistency of word and action (*e.g., not following through on things said*)
- Projection of blame.** Deflection, shifting blame to others and using them as a scapegoat; not taking responsibility or accountability for problems or issues
- Taking Credit.** Taking credit for other employees' work without acknowledging them.

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"Cruelty is based on weakness; cruelty is the act of cowardice, not courage."

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BLANTANT SIGNS OF AGGRESSIVE BULLYING

- Aggression.** Yelling or shouting at an employee; exhibiting anger or aggression verbally or non-verbally (e.g., *pounding a desk, eye rolling, mocking, insults*)
- Coercion.** Aggressively forcing or persuading someone to say or do things against their will or better judgment
- Punishment.** Undeservedly punishing an employee with physical discipline, psychologically through passive aggression, or emotionally through isolation
- Belittling.** Persistently disparaging an employee or their opinions, ideas, work, or personal circumstances in an undeserving manner (e.g., *publicly mocking*)
- Embarrassment.** Embarrassing, degrading, or humiliating an employee publicly in front of others (e.g., *inferring lack of or inability to pay attention*)
- Revenge.** Acting vindictive towards someone; seeking unfair revenge when a mistake happens; retaliating against an employee due to personality conflict, or disagreement over poor quality or incomplete work
- Dismissive.** Being ignored, dismissing behaviors, perspectives, or accomplishments as insignificant. (e.g., *publicly telling an employee to “stop talking” in the middle of making a valid point while contribution to a conversation*)
- Gaslighting.** Involves manipulative, abusive behavior that ends up making the targeted person question their competence, perceptions, and self-worth. It's an insidious form of abuse often done covertly that causes an employee to question their own reality (e.g., *the “gaslighter” belittles emotions, has an unjustified narrative of performance, or misremembers, gives encouragement at strange times, pretends to be helpful, says one thing and does another*)

IGNORANCE IS NOT BLISS & SILENCE IS DEEMED AS ACCEPTANCE

Bullying and manipulation of this nature affects an employee's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. Bullied employees may experience a great deal of distress as a result of their perpetrator's behavior, which can manifest itself in frustration, anger, anxiety, insomnia, inability to concentrate, performance and productivity issues, and other physical and emotional symptoms. The treatment they experience also tends to influence their lives outside of work.

Employees deserve to work in a respectful, fair, comfortable, and psychologically safe work environment where others around them, particularly those of authority, perceived authority, peers, or co-workers aren't trying to control them or manipulate their behavior. It's everyone's responsibility to make sure our employees leave every day, at a minimum, with their self-respect, dignity, and well-being intact and unscathed by the actions of workplace bullies. If they aren't, then we're just as culpable as the bullies because silence is deemed as acceptance.

“Fighting through your fear to do the right thing for yourself and others is the epitome of bravery. In my experience, bravery will always win against the cowardice of a bully every day of the week.”

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If this information isn't enough to be an urgent call to stop this unconscionable and devastating behavior, the effects of workplace bullying on a company's bottom-line can be devastating. Specifically, the cost of dealing with constant employee turnover and re-training, rampant absenteeism, potential lawsuits, dismal employee morale (which, not surprisingly, affects customer service quality), increased healthcare costs, and the inability to attract top talent is enough to destroy any business).

"There is overwhelming evidence that the higher the level of self-esteem, the more likely one will be to treat others with respect, kindness, and generosity." -Nathaniel Branden

Yes, all cruelty is based on weakness; cruelty is the act of cowardice, not courage.

If you or someone you work with are experiencing this harmful and destructive behavior, stand up, speak up, and break the silence.

Fighting through your fear to do the right thing for yourself and others is the epitome of bravery. In my experience, bravery will always win against the cowardice of a bully every day of the week.

Godspeed!