

HOW TO DEAL WITH A WORKPLACE BULLY

Remember your high school bully? The jerk that used to throw people in trash cans? That burly kid that used to dunk people's heads in the toilet and give them swirlies? And remember the grand tradition of wedgies?

I once thought that bullies only existed in high school. I used to believe that the "real world" was full of civilised, kind people and the whole idea of "bullies" didn't exist for adults.

The sad fact of the matter is this: yes, *most* adults are pretty civilised. And I still like to think that kind people make up the majority of the population. But bullies still exist. And it's a very real problem when you find yourself the victim of one in the work place. Dealing with a bully at work is entirely different than it used to be in high school. You can't gather your friends around you for protection and you can't ask your mom to talk to the principal. A work place bully is a delicate situation that must be handled with care.

What does bullying work look like?

Bullying is a deliberate attempt to control or undermine you. It typically happens over a prolonged period of time and it can severely damage your self-esteem and confidence. It can be subtle or overt. It can take place in private or in front of others. The circumstances can vary greatly from person to person. Here are some examples of bullying behaviour at work:

- A co-worker or supervisor constantly complains to other team members that you aren't pulling your weight. They make jokes at your expense and accuse you of making mistakes you haven't made. In private they constantly belittle, insult and even threaten you. You feel frightened, angry, ashamed and embarrassed.
- Your co-workers isolate you and do not keep you informed of things that are happening in the office. You are left out of meetings and team activities. Your input is ignored or immediately written off as not being good enough. You feel that your presence and input are not valued.
- A co-worker or supervisor piles irrelevant work on you, demanding impossible deadlines. You feel tired, overworked and frustrated.
- A co-worker or supervisor dismisses your ideas then later takes credit for them. You feel like a character on a bad sitcom - duped by the oldest trick in the book.
- A co-worker or supervisor asks others to keep an eye on you, making it apparent that evidence of your mistakes is highly rewarded. You feel edgy, nervous and paranoid.
- A co-worker or supervisor is verbally abusive, yelling and criticising you. They personally attack your character and attempt to intimidate you. You feel frightened, angry and abused.

How do you handle a bully?

Bullying cannot be ignored. If you feel you are being bullied, here are some steps to follow:

1. Evaluate the situation

It's important to trust your instincts in situations like this. If you feel bullied, you probably are a victim. But look closely at what is happening around the person in question. Is everyone afraid of them? Do they have a reputation for this sort of thing? Are you not the only one experiencing this? If it's happening to others, get together with them and find out how they feel. There's power in numbers.

2. Make notes

When something happens, write it down. Keep a log of every insult, every back stabbing move they make. Documentation is a very powerful tool. Write down dates and times and exact quotes if you can.

3. Don't play their game

It's easy to let someone push your buttons and fly off the handle at them. Don't let this happen. Don't stoop to their level. Remember that this is a professional environment and show some respect for your work. Try your best to ignore the bully and their actions. Don't let yourself be baited. Chances are, the bully is looking for a reaction. When they don't get one, they may eventually stop.

4. Stand up for yourself

It may seem like a contradiction after the last point, but don't let yourself be walked on. You can ignore the bully without sitting down in the middle of the road. What I mean is this: find your voice. If someone is piling irrelevant work on you, respectfully say no. It will take some time to find the right way of doing this, but it can (and should) be done. If you are being left out of meetings, bring it to the attention of the group. Tell them how it makes you feel and what the consequences are to the job. Keep your interactions professional and respectful always, no matter what they hurl at you.

5. Call in the Big Guns

If you've done all you feel you can do, take the issue to your Human Resources Manager. Take your documentation with you and address the issue from a work perspective. Elaborate on how the behaviour is damaging your work. Inform them of how important the issue is, stressing your desire to continue working in a comfortable, safe environment.

6. Know when to fold

Once you've asked for help and nothing changes, you may need to consider the possibility of leaving. No one advocates such a decision because it simply reinforces to bullies that they can "push" people out with their behaviour. But you have to think of yourself in all of this. It's not worth it to stay in a negative environment just to prove a point. If the bullying is damaging you physically (i.e. you can't sleep, have knots in your stomach or panic attacks) you need to seek professional help. There are also legal steps you can take to help you. Investigate your options thoroughly before making any decisions. And always remember that you deserve a friendly, peaceful environment to work in. We all do.

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