

## How to Handle a Workplace Bully

By Jennifer Alsever

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If you run a typical American company — whether you have 10,000 employees or 25 — then you probably have a bully in your business. According to a 2007 survey conducted by Zogby International, almost half of U.S. workers report that they have experienced or witnessed some kind of bullying on the job - insults, threats, screaming, or ostracism. It's behavior that drags down company morale and can be costly in innumerable ways: Think higher turnover, lower productivity, more sick days, and more workmen's compensation claims, just for starters.

Here's how managers can handle a bully in the office, keep costs associated with such behavior in check, and maintain a civilized workforce.

### Things you will need:

- **Time:** Several weeks to write a policy on how to handle bullying and train managers accordingly. You'll need a few hours to meet with employees when an issue arises.
- **Input:** Encourage employees to report bad behavior. Add questions about bullying to existing tools like 360-degree feedback reviews, skip-level meetings, workplace-culture surveys, or sexual-harassment training.
- **Policy changes:** Talk to HR about adding bullying to your company's discrimination policies. Most policies cover harassment that is unlawful, such as sexual or racial harassment, but a bullying policy simply outlines behavior that is inconsistent with company culture.
- **A company culture that doesn't tolerate bullies:** If bullying is coming from the very top, this behavior will be impossible to root out.

A yellow sticky note with the text 'step 1' written in black cursive.

### How to Identify a True Bully

#### **Goal: Understand what constitutes bullying and recognize it in action.**

Most bullies don't act up in front of their superiors, so managers must rely on reports from other employees. Tools that let subordinates review their bosses anonymously, like the 360-degree performance review, can shed light on how a person behaves when management is not around, says [Anne Ciesla Bancroft](#), a Princeton, N.J., employment attorney with Fox Rothschild.

It's not hard to identify a bully if you're getting complaints of screaming, tantrums, public humiliation, sabotage, and verbal abuse. But watch for the more subtle signs of a problem, as well: the person who always takes credit for things others obviously contributed to, or who dominates meetings with sarcasm, interruptions, or insults. Keep an eye out for people who

are afraid to speak up, or signs of obvious tension in certain groups. Body language can be an indicator: Notice for instance, if Bob consistently doodles, rolls his eyes, or squeaks his chair when Sally talks — and only when Sally talks. Keep an eye out for “mobbing,” in which a group of people gangs up on another worker. “It often hides under the appearance of humor, but it’s really, ‘All five of us making fun of you,’” says Michael Dreiblatt, co-founder of Balance Educational Services, which trains educators on how to deal with bullying and prevent violence. A group may even ostracize one worker — for example, continually “forgetting” to put Sarah on the group email list despite her multiple requests to be included.

## What Not to Do

### How Managers Unwittingly Encourage Bullying

1. Pit workers against each other or emphasize a competitive work style.
2. Have a lax management style, so that employees must fill in the blanks themselves regarding what is acceptable and what is not.
3. Make unreasonable demands and goals of employees and managers.
4. Fail to give supervisors the authority to reprimand problem workers.
5. Set impossible deadlines or provide too little funding to accomplish a goal.

step 2

## Confront the Person Sooner, Not Later

**Goal: Act fast to show that your company won’t tolerate bad behavior.**

The biggest mistake employers make, according to Gary Namie of the [Workplace Bullying Institute](#), is that they don’t pay attention to bullying until it results in a crisis. When grievances emerge, handle them immediately — otherwise victims will stop reporting bad behavior. Talk with the bully and be direct but not confrontational or emotional. Be specific about the behavior: Saying “You told someone to shut up” or “You called someone an idiot” works better than saying “You’re not being nice” or “You’re not being a team player.”

After you describe the complaints, ask for the bully’s thoughts. Watch their style. Do they blame others? Do they get angry? Their reaction may tell you a lot about that person and whether they can change, says [Holly Latty-Mann](#), president of The Leadership Trust, a executive consulting firm in Durham, N.C. Try asking the offender if he or she would want their spouse or their child to be treated the same way at work. “Often their whole demeanor will soften,” Latty-Mann says.

If bullying has proven to be a pattern, it’s important to communicate with HR about the problem employee or perhaps include an HR official in meetings with the accused, says [Sandy Gluckman](#), author of “Who’s in the Driver’s Seat: Using Spirit to Lead Successfully.”

**Danger! Danger! Danger!**

## Target the Behavior, Not the Person

Too many managers personalize the issue when confronting workplace bullies, says Namie, who, in addition to the Workplace Bullying Institute, runs *Work Doctor*, a consulting firm that deals with bullying. Do not confuse the person with their conduct, he says. Do not ask them to “change” but instead tell them that the *behavior* itself must stop. Don’t get sucked into a bully’s defense that their target somehow deserves the mistreatment. “Tell them, ‘Regardless of your motive or the reason, it has to stop,’” Namie says.

step 3

## Enforce a Clear Action Plan

**Goal: Determine if the offender should be written up, get counseling, lose pay, or ultimately be fired.**

Before reprimanding an employee, check your company’s procedures and policies for guidance. If there is none, be sure to be consistent. “What you do to Bob is what you would do to Jim or Mary,” Dreiblatt says. As long as the situation is not too severe, a verbal warning is probably fine for the first conversation, although Dreiblatt recommends informally documenting what was said.

If there is a second or third incident, the bullying is a pattern and written reprimands are warranted, as are penalties such as removing the person from key projects, demoting them, or docking their pay. This is also the time to involve HR. “Make employment contingent upon change,” Namie says.

If the employee is considered valuable — perhaps a star engineer, a top salesman, or someone who might walk and take key clients with them — then you may want to consider coaching, counseling, or anger management. But this only works if the person has the ability and desire to change. If the bully is insincere and is unlikely to get it, then fire him or her quickly, advises *Bob Sutton*, author of *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t*. To protect yourself legally, be sure to give a warning and document the behavior. Don’t just transfer the person to a new job, because that only passes the problem along to someone else. Remember: the cost to your organization in terms of bad morale, turnover, emotional distress, or low productivity may be equal to or greater than the cost of lost talent or clients.

### Hot Tip

#### The True Cost of Bullying

Sutton’s book *The No Asshole Rule* offers one pointed way to show a bully the impact of his or her behavior: Quantify how much time managers have spent dealing with complaints about that particular person and how much time it will take to look for

replacements if co-workers or subordinates quit because of the work environment. Then take that much money from the person's bonus or pay as a motivator for them to change.

step 4

## Devise Your Own Policy for a Civilized Workplace

### **Goal: Create a corporate culture of respect.**

Bullies often tend to be smart, successful, productive employees, so top executives may be slow to reprimand or fire them. For this reason, it's important to have a policy on record. Enlist HR to amend your sexual harassment policy to include bullying. Bullying is not included in discrimination policies because it is not against the law (yet), but you can indicate in your policy that certain behaviors are inconsistent with your company culture. Outlaw tantrums, screaming, intimidation, threats, and any repetitive behavior that undermines colleagues. Give employees the means to come forward and report any violations without fear of retaliation, and ensure that your CEO and top executives will back up HR and managers when they lay down the law. "If you can't get your CEO to buy into this, you're going to be wasting your time," Hirschfeld says.

Perhaps the best way to discourage bullying is to make civility part of your corporate culture. Top executives should take the lead, speaking kindly to employees, showing them respect, and encouraging open communication by being present and accessible. Give managers more autonomy and more responsibility for keeping teams together, and reward employees for working together and helping each other to meet shared goals. Teach your employees how to handle confrontation, says Sutton, and how to avoid emotional conflict, second-guessing, complaining, and arguing after a decision is made.

Point out bad behavior to bullies immediately. "Day-to-day follow-through and your interactions with staff will speak much louder than a corporate memorandum," Dreiblatt says. For instance, if you see someone behaving inappropriately, such as intimidating or putting down others in a meeting, pull them aside immediately and tell them that their behavior isn't tolerated at the company, Dreiblatt suggests. "I'd say, 'You need to back off and listen to others. And I'm going to check up on you.'"

### **For Example**

#### **How to Disagree**

Intel provides all new full-time employees with "constructive confrontation" training, which teaches people to attack the problem, not people, and to do it positively. An example from the company's training handbook: "Jane dominates meetings. John lets Jane know that when she dominates the meetings, he feels reluctant to share his thoughts and suggests perhaps they try a 'round robin' approach in future meetings. They then agree to touch base again and see if the approach is working. John did not go to Jane and ask her to

stop dominating the meetings. He explained how he felt and offered a solution that will hopefully work for all parties.”

step 5

## Screen for Bullies in the Recruiting Process

**Goal: Stop the problem from recurring by identifying bullies during the hiring process.**

To keep your company bully-free, be attentive in the interview process. Resist the temptation to hire a hotshot when it's obvious he or she is a jerk, Sutton says. Check references carefully to root out past instances of bullying. Pay attention to how your candidate interacts with administrative assistants and lower-level employees, and encourage those employees to report rude or disrespectful behavior.

The natural human tendency to hire people like oneself becomes dangerous when bullies are in charge of hiring. Product development firm IDEO narrows the margin for this kind of error with a team approach: Each candidate is interviewed by people who will work above, below, and alongside him or her. The company's hiring managers also put a high priority on good references and select candidates for professional competence *before* they walk in the door, so the interview can focus on their human qualities.

During the interview, pay attention to how much a candidate says “I” versus “we” when talking about achievements, Latty-Mann advises. Ask the person to describe a frustrating project. You can spot a potential bully if he or she mentions incompetent people or displays exasperated body language, perhaps rolling the eyes or using a disparaging tone. To gauge the level of compassion a manager might have in firing a worker, ask how they would handle incompetent employees. Observe their body tension, level of compassion, and tone of voice, Latty-Mann suggests.

### Nitty Gritty

#### Gloves-Off References

If you want to dig deeper, ask the job candidate to sign a permission slip allowing former employers to give meaningful information about them without fear of a lawsuit. Ask candidates directly if anybody has raised issues about their ability to interact with other employees and request performance reviews from their former employers, Hirschfeld suggests. “Any applicant who objects a little bit about that — that says something,” he says.