

Bullies at Work: What to Know, What You Can Do

When you hear the term bullies, chances are you may think of children in the schoolyard. You may not realize that childhood bullies often go on to become workplace bullies.

Workplace bullying is a serious problem that can deeply affect the mental, physical and financial health of the bully's **target** (the person or group the bully abuses). The Canada Safety Council reports that in the workplace, one person in six has been bullied and one in five has witnessed a co-worker being bullied.

What is workplace bullying?

Workplace bullying is a repeated pattern of negative behaviour aimed at a specific person or group—the bully's **target**. Although it can include physical abuse or the threat of abuse, workplace bullying usually causes psychological rather than physical harm. Workplace bullying can involve sexual harassment and discrimination. For more information about these situations, see [Other Relevant Tips and Additional Reading](#) at the bottom of the page.

Because workplace bullying is often psychological, it can be hard to recognize. The most harmful forms of bullying are usually subtle rather than direct, and verbal rather than physical.

Workplace bullying often involves one or more of the following:

- rudeness and hostility that disrespects the target
- threats and intimidation, including the abuse of power
- deliberate acts that interfere with the target's work

Bullying is

- spreading rumours and gossip
- making offensive jokes or comments, verbally or in writing
- using insults or put downs
- blaming, scolding, criticizing and belittling
- excluding or isolating
- intimidating by standing too close or making inappropriate gestures
- making unreasonable demands, constantly changing guidelines, setting impossible deadlines and interfering with work
- discounting achievements and stealing credit for ideas or work
- disciplining or threatening job loss without reason
- withholding information or giving the wrong information
- taking away work or responsibility without cause
- blocking requests for training, leave or promotion
- using offensive language or yelling and screaming

Bullies at Work: What to Know, What You Can Do

- pestering, spying, stalking or tampering with personal belongings and equipment
- physically abusing or threatening abuse

Bullying is not

- enforcing workplace policies and procedures
- evaluating or measuring performance
- providing constructive feedback
- denying training or leave requests with good reason
- discussing disciplinary action in private
- dismissing, suspending, demoting or reprimanding with just cause

Who are the bullies?

Bullies can be managers, supervisors, co-workers, or clients.

People bully to

- sideline someone they feel is a threat (the target)
- further their own agenda at the expense of others
- deny responsibility for their own behaviour
- mask their lack of confidence and low self-esteem

The bully's target is usually a capable, dedicated person. Eighty per cent of targets are women.

What are the effects of workplace bullying?

Physical effects of bullying include:

- losing sleep or sleeping too much
- eating too much or too little
- symptoms like stomach pains or headaches
- increase use of alcohol or drugs

Psychological effects of bullying include:

- shock, anger, frustration, feeling helpless and vulnerable
- loss of focus, confidence, morale and productivity
- family tension and stress
- panic or anxiety, especially about going to work
- clinical depression or suicidal thoughts

Bullies at Work: What to Know, What You Can Do

How can you tell if you're a target?

If you can answer "yes" to the following questions, you may be the target of bullying behaviour:

- Would most reasonable people consider the behaviour unacceptable?
- Are you spending a lot of time defending your actions and seeking support from your co-workers? (Bullied employees spend between 10 and 52% of their time on this kind of defensive activity.)

What can you do if you're being bullied?

Many workplaces are developing anti-bullying policies. If your workplace has a policy in place, follow it.

If your workplace has no anti-bullying policy, the following suggestions will help you take action:

- Keep a factual journal of events. Record the date, time, witnesses, what happened (in as much detail as possible) and the outcome. Record the number and frequency of events to establish a pattern of bullying.
- Keep copies of any letters, emails, memos or texts you receive from the bully.
- Keep copies of performance appraisals or references that prove you can do your job. Continue doing your job to the best of your ability.
- If you feel safe doing so, tell the bully that the behaviour is unwelcome and unwanted:
 - Describe the bullying behaviour, explain why it's unacceptable and describe how it affects you.
 - Focus on the problem not the person. Use "I" language and describe the outcome: "I feel like our customers lose confidence in my abilities when you criticize me in front of them."
 - Tell the bully firmly you want the behaviour to stop.
 - If you need support to take this step, ask a witness to be present when you approach the bully.
- If you don't feel comfortable talking to the bully in person, write a letter and send it by registered mail or courier. Keep the delivery receipt and a copy of the letter.
- Avoid being alone with the bully. When you communicate with this person, stick to the issues and stay as calm as possible. Walk away if the bully makes threats, scolds or puts you down.
- Stay connected with your co-workers and others. Don't let a bully isolate you.
- Resist the urge to retaliate. It can make you look like a bully.
- Contact your union

Bullies at Work: What to Know, What You Can Do

Present your concerns in a professional, factual way. Bring your record of the bullying with you, including the names of any witnesses.

What if you witness workplace bullying?

Bullies thrive where co-workers think that bullying behaviour is none of their business. But bullying affects everyone in the workplace, not just the target. If you witness workplace bullying, follow these suggestions:

- If you see bullying in progress, gather some co-workers and stand in plain view of the bully. The bully will be aware that you're witnessing the behaviour and the target will feel supported
- Keep detailed, factual records of any incidents of bullying you witness
- Offer the target your support and encourage him or her to take action. Show the target this tip article or other articles on workplace bullying
- Help the target prepare to meet with or write to the bully
- Go with the target to meet with a supervisor or speak with the bully about the behaviour

Workplace bullying is harmful behaviour that neither you nor your employer can afford to ignore. Take action: don't allow a workplace bully to threaten your health or your career.



Courtesy of:

Alberta  Government
Alberta Learning Information Service