

# Are you the Victim of a Workplace Bully-on-the-Block?

*Tips to Survive the Office Bully with your Dignity Intact*

By Eileen Spatz



Most of us have vague and very unpleasant memories of being picked on at some point in our childhoods. Whether we were singled out by the bully-on-the-block and harangued on the way home from school each day, or were the subject of unflattering gossip in junior high school, that awful, sinking feeling of being the object of someone's ire is something we never forget. Why is that? Why are those emotions—fear, dread, and intimidation—burned so indelibly into our memories? We remember because the effects of bullying are, simply, traumatizing to us.

As adults who strive to be productive team members in the workplace, it is particularly unsettling to find oneself the target of what amounts to a bully on the block. Usually, when we realize that someone has it out for us at work we are shocked and surprised. Most targets of workplace bullying are kind, honest, and ethical people who simply want to get along with everyone and enjoy our work environment. So,

when it becomes clear that our boss or a coworker has painted an invisible bulls-eye on our backs we are simply stymied by this development.

## **Examples of Workplace Bullying**

Workplace bullying is defined as when one person, or sometimes a group of coworkers, singles out another person in order to humiliate or intimidate them. The person being targeted is often considered to be a threat by the bully, someone who could upstage them at work, be influential, or instigate changes that may unseat their power position somehow.

Bullying comes in various forms, including:

- One employee being singled out for unjustified criticism
- Shouting or swearing at an employee, or verbally abusing them
- Repeatedly excluding one employee from company activities
- Ignoring an employee's contributions at work
- Playing practical jokes repeatedly on an employee
- Using language or actions that humiliate, ridicule, or embarrass an employee
- Singling out one employee for harsher treatment or more demanding standards than the others

## **Workplace Bullies Abound**

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, bullying has become an American epidemic. WBI conducts regular national [surveys](#), the results of which offer these startling facts:

- 72% of the American public are aware of workplace bullying
- 27% have had direct experience with abusive conduct at work
- 69% of bullies are male perpetrators
- 60% of targets are female, 40% are male
- 72% of employers deny, discount, encourage or defend it
- Bosses are the majority of bullies

WBI defines workplace bullying as abusive conduct that is threatening, humiliating, intimidating, or involves work sabotage or verbal abuse. Unfortunately, unless the company you work for has an anti-bullying policy, your Human Resources department may offer little help. More than 85% of people who report bullying to HR find that employers ignore the complaint.

## **So What's a Nice Person to Do?**

No one should have to tolerate being mistreated at work. A hostile work environment can lead to serious health problems. About 45% of individuals who are targeted by bullies at work suffer from stress-related health issues. These include anxiety, stomach disorders, headaches, absenteeism, high blood pressure, insomnia, lowered self esteem, a sense of shame, insecurity about job security, and high stress levels that negatively impact all aspects of an employee's life.

There are some effective actions you can take to mitigate a bully's tactics and retain your dignity (and your job). They include:

1. Try not to be too passive or emotional at work. These traits will be like raw meat to someone who feels somehow threatened by your existence and is looking for signs of weakness.
2. Don't over-share with fellow coworkers, at least until you have worked with them long enough to know them well. Bullies look for vulnerabilities, and your personal information could provide ammo for them to use against you.
3. If you feel you are being bullied, do not allow your body language to show it. Try being more assertive at work.
4. If you are clearly being targeted by a bully, address it early on. Ask them if they have a problem with you they would like to discuss. Offer to have coffee and discuss any issues they might have.
5. If the bullying continues, confront the bully with your company's policy of zero-tolerance for bullying in the workplace (assuming there is one). State clearly that you will not allow the bullying behavior to continue, and reiterate the company policy.
6. Do not become emotional as a result of bullying behavior. Remain calm and do not retaliate.
7. If HR is unresponsive to your complaint, consider seeing a doctor to discuss health issues that may have arisen from the chronic

bullying. After that is on record, consult an attorney who can review your case to discuss any legal merit.

8. Finally, if the Teflon bully is somehow able to avoid all recriminations for his or her behavior and sidestepped any disciplinary action—and the bad behavior continues unabated—it may be best to cut your losses and look for a new job.

Although workplace bullying seems so juvenile and uncivilized, sadly, it is a common reality in America's business environment. That childhood bully-on-the-block never matured into an ethical adult. Instead, they morphed into a toxic person full of bitterness and insecurity, hell bent to pick off anyone that threatens their place at work. Our choice is whether to cower and quake under the bully's intimidating behavior, or to stare him down, secure in our own sense of self worth. I pick the latter.