

Bullies at work — How to handle toxic coworkers

Len, Janet's boss, saw Janet talking on the phone for an extended length of time. He assumed it was a personal call, when actually she was talking to a client. Instead of waiting until she got off the phone, he stood over her desk and yelled, "I know you're on a personal call. Why don't you do some work for a change?" The client heard this, and Janet was terribly humiliated.

Such scenarios are nothing new to Janet, despite her being a top performer in the organization. Over time, she's discovered Len has an almost paranoid fear that he will be played for a fool. Simple things such as coming back a few minutes late from lunch because of traffic trigger a rage about trying to take advantage of him. Janet has a bully boss on her hands.

And, she's not alone. Bullying is not limited to playgrounds or the junior high cafeteria. It happens in the work environment more times than anyone wants to admit, creating toxic work environments, harming productivity, increasing turnover rates, and paving the way for potential lawsuits.

What does workplace bullying look like?

The [Workplace Bullying Institute](#) (WBI) defines workplace bullying as "repeated, health-harming mistreatment by one or more employees of an employee: abusive conduct that takes the form of verbal abuse; or behaviors perceived as threatening, intimidating, or humiliating; work sabotage; or in some combination of the above."

So, while they may not demand your lunch money, workplace bullies still inflict anguish just like their schoolyard counterparts. The bully's need for control can make him (or her) incredibly overbearing. He can publicly humiliate you, use guilt to manipulate you to do his bidding, or blow up and make scenes to intimidate you. He may threaten to fire you and generally treat you like an unruly 2-year-old instead of a respected adult.

Above all, bullies are overwhelming. Their entire demeanor expresses aggression. When criticizing something you've said or done, they seem to attack not just the particular behavior, but *you*, and they do so in an accusatory way.

Think that remote work arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down instances of bullying? That did not happen. Rather, bullies adjusted their type of bullying: belittling targets on video chat, sending threatening emails, withholding resources necessary to complete assignments, and raging over social platforms. For some offenders, cyberbullying proved an even better outlet. They could bother their target at any time in their own home, creating a greater sense of fear. Many figured their chances of getting caught were low, leading to harsher or more frequent bullying instances.

Who gets bullied at work?

The [2021 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey](#) reports that 30% of American workers currently experience bullying or have experienced it in the past. Males account for two-thirds of workplace bullies, and they target

other males 58% of the time. Female bullies greatly favor female victims. In terms of rank, bosses account for 65% of office bullies.

No standard method exists for figuring out who is likely to get bullied. Some bullies go after traditional “easy targets” — introverted, submissive people unlikely to call out the bad behavior. Other bullies opt for talented or popular colleagues out of jealousy or because they see them as a threat to their own status. Sometimes, bullies single out people because of their race, gender, disability, age, or weight. They cover for their own underlying insecurities by picking on anyone who is “different.”

The dangers of workplace bullying

Bullying behavior takes a toll on the wellness of those experiencing it. Victims may develop mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and helplessness. They also may suffer from physical health maladies such as headaches and stomach trouble. Productivity may decrease because of difficulty concentrating. Absenteeism may increase due to the desire to avoid the instigator. Eventually, the person being bullied may decide to get a new job rather than face a hostile work environment.

Co-workers who witness bullying also suffer from the toxic work environment. Staff members may fear they will become the next targets of bullying. Morale drops if people believe company leadership lets bad behavior go unchecked.

As in the case of Janet earlier, clients may get wind of bullying behavior. Bosses and co-workers who bully in front of others make customers feel uncomfortable and damage the company’s reputation.

Bullies put organizations at risk for lawsuits. Bullying itself is not illegal. (WBI and other groups are working on a [healthy workplace bill](#) to rectify this problem.) However, harassment *is* against the law. Victims claiming sexual harassment or other types of mistreatment on the basis of membership in a protected class — such as gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, national origin, age, or disability — may decide to take legal action.



How to deal with a workplace bully

As tempting as it might be to keep trying to ignore a workplace bully, the bad behavior oftentimes won't go away on its own. The traditional wisdom about a schoolyard bully holds true for a corporate bully as well: You have to stand up to him. Bullies can smell weakness in their adversaries, and they will move in for the kill. Like a schoolyard bully, however, they will often back down when you show them you are willing to fight.

While each person needs to decide his or her own route to "standing up," the following actions often prove helpful during an encounter.

Send the right signal physically

When you are attacked, your body language will indicate whether you're intimidated. If your shoulders droop and your eyes drop, the bully will get the message that you are intimidated and really lay it on. To send the opposite message, take a deep breath, which draws your frame-up. Look the bully square in the eye, and remain still.

Let the bully talk; don't interrupt

If you ask anything, ask open-ended questions beginning with "who," "what," "when," "where" and "how." Ask permission to take notes so that you can get this matter resolved. After you ask a question, be quiet, and let the bully talk as you take notes. This will make him think he is getting results, which will calm him down and may make him stop seeing you as an enemy.

Don't expect to feel comfortable

When standing up to a bully, you will feel confused, overwhelmed, angry, hurt, and afraid. That's what the bully is counting on. He uses those feelings to intimidate people. Even if you feel distraught and can't say just the right thing, do say something, anything, to counter his onslaught. Do not be overwhelmed by your fear and cave in, expect to feel uncomfortable and you take some of the shock out of the actions.

Allow time for the bully to wind down

If the bully has lost his temper — yelling at you, crying angrily, or making noise — stand pat for a while to give him time to run down. Remain in place, look directly at him, and wait. When the attack loses momentum, jump into the situation.

Don't compete with a bully

Never try to undermine this person's authority or unseat him or her. If you do find yourself competing with a bully, allow him or her to save face in case you win. Otherwise, you'll find yourself with a very powerful enemy.

Appeal to reason, not to feelings

Aggressive people give very little weight to how a person feels. Showing emotion won't help you much. Use reason to make your point. Illustrate how your plan or approach benefits the aggressive person.

Use your knowledge of the bully's inner insecurity

The bully's rage is often coming from some inner fear. Analyze what that fear is, and address the fear instead of the rage. Talk to the bully about it in a non-accusatory way. If you can visualize the frightened child the bully is frantically trying to hide, it may help you control your anger and make him easier to deal with.

Pulling it all together

To see some of these ideas in action, let's return to the case of Janet. After Len's mean, unprofessional display, she refrained from yelling back that it wasn't a personal call. Instead, she finished talking to the client and then went into Len's office to ask to speak to him. Having figured out that Len's fear was that he'd be taken advantage of and played for a fool, Janet said, "Len, I know you're worried about people taking advantage of you, but I would never do that. You know I'm a good worker who does more than is expected of me."

Len had to agree that this was true. Janet continued, "I felt very humiliated by your yelling at me so loudly that our client could hear. We may have lost a sale. Next time you have a problem with me, please call me into your office, and let's discuss it privately." After Janet said this, Len actually apologized and promised to do what she asked.

Why did this strategy work? Janet addressed Len's fear instead of blaming him. She implicated him in his own bad behavior by saying "our" client, and "we" may have lost a sale. Instead of telling him what was wrong with him, she used an "I" statement, expressing how his behavior affected her. Lastly, she came up with a solution he could live with — calling her into his office instead of making a scene.

Getting help in handling a workplace bully

Unfortunately, confronting a bully may not be enough to eliminate the bad behavior. Insecurity, jealousy, low self-esteem, and the need to control run deep in some people. If your efforts do not yield good results, getting others involved may be the best way to improve your life.

Start by documenting everything. Write down the date and place of each bullying instance along with what exactly occurred. Include any supporting documentation, such as a list of witnesses or a printout of an offensive email.

Next, see if your employee handbook addresses bullying. Some companies have little tolerance for such behavior. Pinpoint what policies the offender has violated, and look for guidance on who to contact regarding the matter.

A bully is not just hurting your feelings. She is sabotaging business success. She creates a toxic environment that damages morale, focus, and maximum productivity. Smart employers realize bullies harm the company's bottom line and take action. Thus, talking to your mutual supervisor could be a good idea when the bully is a co-worker. If you are dealing with a bully boss, notifying the HR department may prove a helpful route. In either case, bring along your documentation to demonstrate the history and severity of the bullying. Pull out the employee handbook to cite the specific policy violation.

When reasonable actions don't yield results

Unhappy with results? Some victims of bullying continue to talk to others in human resources and management until they find someone willing to take effective action. Filing a formal complaint may make leaders listen more carefully. In cases of slow or non-existent assistance, the target of bullying may consult a lawyer to explore legal options. Rather often, victims decide to look for a new job rather than continue in a toxic workplace.

Individuals dealing with workplace bullies or similar difficult people may find it helpful to talk to a mental health professional. A therapist can suggest other strategies for handling the situation based on the particulars of the case. He also can help the victim deal with the corresponding feelings of frustration and helplessness. While a target cannot always change a bully, the victim can learn how to better respond to and cope with the psychological power imbalance from which the bully gains strength.