



Leadership Tips

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Are Your Employees Being Bullied?

Bullies are no longer confined to the school playground. In fact, the Workplace Bullying Institute has determined that 37% of adult Americans have faced bullies on the job. Difficult people and personalities have always challenged teams and their leaders. Bullying behavior, however, can create stress and anxiety, which can lead to costly personnel issues. The Level Playing Field Institute's research found \$16.2 M for employee turnover; over a million dollars in litigation settlements; and \$8 M in lost productivity could be traced back to bullying behaviors.

When the work environment tolerates or overlooks bullying behavior, it often accounts for high turnover, and the expense of rehiring and training new employees, lower productivity due to reduced motivation, and increased stress-related health conditions.

The Consulting Team has found many levels of behavior from aggressive personalities to true bullies. We are often hired to assess a situation where one or more have complained about being mistreated, disrespected, or bullied. However, many of the aggressive personalities we have coached had the organization's best interest at heart. They were typically unaware of the impact of their demanding, brusque style. Most had no idea they were perceived as intimidating or that others felt threatened, even fearful around them.

The following actions are *not* considered workplace bullying unless they are aimed at one or a few employees. They just typify aggressive behavior:

- A co-worker with poor social skills who is overly and openly critical or takes credit for successes and blame others for mistakes or makes hurtful comments or jokes about others
- A manager who shouts at or overly criticizes his/her employees; sometimes not providing them with adequate training or resources

One way to modify their behavior is to help these individuals to become acutely aware of their communication styles, emotions, emotional intelligence, and reactions to

stress. Comprehensive coaching over a few months will typically turn around the situation.

We are regularly called into organizations to facilitate team building and coach managers on effective leadership. In one instance, the human resources director told us that an employee recently said that her boss was bullying her. When we interviewed the employee, we discovered that she just felt some deadlines were unrealistic. When pressed if she felt bullied, she said: “Not at all; I just need more time to do my assignments and I’m afraid to tell my boss.” We facilitated a critical conversation between the woman and her boss and cleared up the situation in less than two hours.

In another situation, we coached a new manager who was put in charge of his former peers. His team felt he was harsh and dictatorial, while his intention was to establish control in order to lead them to better results. In three coaching sessions, he learned how to forge more effective relationships and flex his communication style to lead instead of command his work group.

According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, up to a third of workers may be the victims of abuse by workplace bullies. The Institute states that seventeen percent of workplace bullying crosses the line into harassment. **The New York Times** found that about sixty percent of workplace bullies are men, and they tend to bully male and female employees equally. Female bullies, however, are more likely to bully other females.

Bullying can be defined as: *“When one or more people in the workplace single out another for unreasonable, embarrassing, or intimidating treatment. The bully may be a person of authority who feels threatened by the victim or may be a co-worker who is insecure or immature.”*

We all need to become aware of bullying behaviors and to address them. This begins with recognizing how bullies treat others on the job. Observe the difference between conflicts of ideas, opinions, or personality styles versus bullying behavior. Overly demanding people may be focused on winning an argument, being in charge, or obtaining perks and promotions.

Intentional bullies, however, intimidate, dominate, and subjugate the target in order to neutralize his or her position or influence. They may start with name-calling, verbal abuse, and then spreading rumors. They may verbally mistreat their targets, either in public or when nobody is around to note their behavior. They may sabotage fellow employees’ results or interfere with their ability to get work done.

Has the complained-about employee acted any of the following ways?

- Persuades or coerces others to stop working, talking, or socializing with the target
- Constantly creates anxiety or agitates others by his/her words or actions
- Labels another as incompetent, despite that person’s actual performance
- Singles out one person or group for practical jokes, unjustified criticism, or blame
- Purposely ignoring an employee’s work/ contributions

If you answered yes to one or more of these symptoms, check with human resources for advice on how to deal with this.

Many might think that bullies are only coworkers. However, at times the bully can be the boss, especially if the person in charge feels threatened. Remember that people bully in order to exert power over and control others. Despite the fact that they may be smart, successful, and productive employees, bullies also fear loss of control, advantage, and position.

A word of caution: Don't mistake a person for a bully if they simply expect the best from their employees or challenge them to increase their expertise and results. Also, someone's bad day at work is not sufficient evidence to identify a teammate or boss as a bully. It is helpful to bring or hire in a neutral third party to help you assess the situation and its affect on employees.

To read more about The Consulting Team's related services go to: www.theconsultingteam.com. In the next issue of Leadership Tips, learn how to deal with difficult personalities, including intentional bullies.