

Advice on dealing with bullying in the workplace

What do we mean by bullying in the workplace?

In the Notebook Mentor 'Not getting on with someone at work' we briefly discuss the subject of bullying. It is undoubtedly a topic that everyone has an opinion on – for who would want to see or condone bullying in or out of the workplace? Workplaces should be places where you feel 100% human. They should be places where the values and traits of mutual respect, humility, accountability and conscientiousness take precedent, right? Well, that's how we think it should be!

Sadly, bullying in the workplace is more common than any of us would like to believe and, according to several recent global reports, is on the rise. It can take different forms and be obvious or subtle, face-to-face or over email/phone, in private or in front of others. Whatever its form, it can severely impact confidence and self-esteem. There's no legal definition of bullying (unlike harassment), but it can be described as deliberate and negative behaviour targeted at an individual, repeatedly and typically over a prolonged period.

Here are some typical examples of bullying in the workplace:

- ◆ Making offensive, intimidating or undermining comments
- ◆ Being sarcastic towards you or your ideas
- ◆ Humiliating you in front of colleagues
- ◆ Constantly undervaluing your efforts or criticising
- ◆ Denying you training or promotion opportunities
- ◆ Blaming you unfairly for problems caused by others
- ◆ Gossiping behind your back
- ◆ Physically or verbally abusing you, such as calling you names or labelling you
- ◆ Regularly treating you unfairly
- ◆ Constantly setting you up to fail by withholding information or imposing unreasonable deadlines or workloads
- ◆ Excluding you from common activities
- ◆ Using overbearing supervision
- ◆ Spreading malicious rumours to damage your reputation

When might bullying be misconceived?

The choice of words in the definition above is key. In this instance it describes wilful bullying. This can be different from being on the receiving end of everyday differences of opinion or complex and emotional business change.

Here some examples of things we think do not necessarily constitute bullying:

- ◆ A manager giving you difficult feedback about your performance
- ◆ A manager informing you that your job may be at risk of redundancy
- ◆ A manager, peer or subordinate disagreeing with you – with your idea, style, values or decision. If there were no conflict in the workplace, there would be no creativity. Resolving conflict creates debate, and debate resolves problems – even if it feels tricky in the moment.
- ◆ Conversations that may take place during formal processes – such as within a grievance or disciplinary process.
- ◆ Asking and expecting you to work conscientiously and within certain boundaries (such as your working hours or role description).
- ◆ Occasionally having an expectation that you will be flexible (for example, staying on that extra hour to finish a project). Of course, this works both ways for employee and employer.

None of the above scenarios are likely to be easy or straightforward conversations. The skill of the person giving the feedback or managing the process is key – and often people are poorly trained and equipped when it comes to tackling sensitive topics. If someone clumsily handles a performance conversation does that mean they are bullying you? We're not so sure, but some would consider that point of view controversial.

Unconscious bullying is even more complex to pin down – if you don't even know you are doing it, does that make it acceptable or unacceptable? We think it's probably more of the latter, but equally we believe everyone should be given a chance to understand how they are impacting others – and be given the opportunity to change, before they are condemned.

Dealing with bullying informally

If you think you might be the subject of bullying, (and unless it concerns them directly) the first person you should speak to about the issue is your line manager. Your line manager owes you a duty of care and should take your concerns seriously, helping you decide how to handle the situation. If the issue concerns your line manager you might need to talk to someone in your HR department or privately speak to someone else more senior in the organisation. If none of these options is available we suggest you talk to an independent third party (a charity, mediator, counsellor or other agency offering support). Grievance related formal processes are stressful for all concerned, so it's important to test whether the issue can be resolved informally before you head down a more formal route.

How best to deal with the situation?

We would advocate the informal approach in the first instance, although this will depend on the nature of the situation and how safe you feel to deal with it directly yourself. As with any difficult relationship, our advice is to deal with it as quickly as possible. Given the level of emotional toll that bullying can take, it's preferable to rapidly signal to the person you are not getting on with that their behaviour isn't acceptable to you.

Irrespective of whether you take an informal or formal approach, it's advisable to document what's happening (including dates / times, names of anyone else present, specific details of the incident including verbatim comments where possible). Not only does this enable you to describe the nature of what's taking place if you take a formal route to resolution, it also helps you to clarify your thoughts before addressing the issue directly. Take time to review your record of the situation in preparation for the discussion.

We're mindful that the prospect of confronting someone can be very intimidating. As tempting as it might be to respond in the moment that they're bullying you, that might further inflame the situation, especially if others are present. Speaking privately to the person about their behaviour allows you to exert more control over the conversation and ensures you are prepared and as calm as possible. You might feel that it would be helpful to have a trusted third party present.

Consider the following points to help you structure to the conversation:

- ◆ Calmly outline the behaviour that you've observed, giving as much detail as possible.
- ◆ Explain the impact that the behaviour is having on you and your work.
- ◆ Clarify specifically what is unacceptable to you and what you will not tolerate in the future.

If you've tried the informal route several times and it hasn't worked, then you might want to consider raising a formal grievance. Find out what your organisation's policy is regarding bullying and use that as your guide to seek resolution. If no policy exists speak to someone more senior or as a last resort a member of their peer group.

Dealing with bullying formally

Accusing someone of bullying can often have serious consequences – the person may be disciplined, could lose their job or even have their career reputation tarnished or ruined. On the other side if your grievance is rejected, you may have to return to working with the individual and the situation could worsen as a result.

None of these things is reason enough not to call bullying out, however, you have a duty of care to yourself and to others to carefully consider whether your experience merits going down a formal route of resolution.

Before you decide to follow a formal route of resolution, spend quality time working through the questions on the next pages. This should help your decision-making and should give you sufficient evidence to start a formal process.

Take your time to answer the following questions and see if this helps you with your thinking:

Are the issues that you're experiencing happening on a regular basis?

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Do you feel you have been treated this way over a long and sustained period? (Say over 6 months)

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Are you on the receiving end of any of the following behaviour? Tick any that you think or feel apply to your situation stating whether it is happening privately or publicly. If you can, provide a few sentences to summarise what is going on:

Is someone (or more than one person) consistently:

- ◆ Making offensive remarks about you
- ◆ Intimidating or belittling you
- ◆ Making undermining comments about you
- ◆ Being sarcastic towards you or about your ideas
- ◆ Humiliating you in front of other colleagues
- ◆ Constantly undervaluing your efforts or criticising you
- ◆ Denying you training or promotion opportunities
- ◆ Blaming you unfairly for problems caused by others
- ◆ Gossiping behind your back
- ◆ Physically or verbally abusing you, such as calling you names or labelling you
- ◆ Regularly treating you unfairly
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- ◆ Excluding you from common activities
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Does it feel as though there's an imbalance of power in your relationship with this person/s?

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Do you observe the person/s you're not getting on with treating anyone else in the same way? Do they have a reputation for being a bully?

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If you've answered yes to more than a few of these statements then it's worth considering taking action. Before you do, answering these additional questions:

Have you spoken to the other person/s about how they are making you think and feel?

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In what ways were they responsive and willing to listen to your views?

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Have you seen any changes in their behaviour? Has this made any difference to you?

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What do you conclude from your answers above?

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What do you think is the most appropriate course of action?

.....

What have you decided?

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Before you start the process

If your answers to these questions has led you to the conclusion that you're being bullied, before you start down the formal route, it's really important that you take care of yourself. Ensure that you get support, ideally both inside and outside the workplace. By looking after your physical and mental wellbeing (through all the usual activities such as eating and sleeping well, exercising, and spending time with people you love), you'll be better equipped to handle the situation.

Please take some time to list out the things that you're already doing to take care of yourself and think about who is in your support network. Then list out the additional activities that you could do to take extra care at this point in your life, as well as any other people who can support you.

Current things I'm doing to look after myself:

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People in my support network now how can help me:

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Further things I can do going forward to take even more care of myself:

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Other people I could add to my support network:

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Now, armed with your analysis, evidence and preparation take a deep breath and move forward to taking charge of your situation.

We hope you can reach satisfactory resolution to your concerns.

How is bullying different from harassment?

While bullying is technically not against the law, harassment in the workplace is. This is when unwanted behaviour is of a kind related to different types of discrimination – for example, age, sex, religion, race or disability and so on. The behaviours seen are likely to be the same as those that constitute bullying, however harassment is unlawful under the Equality Act of 2010. If you are being harassed at work use the same questions above to work through the right approach to tackling your situation.