

## Workplace Bullying Examples Every Employee Need To Know

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Human beings have the potential to abuse one another with physical violence, verbal abuse, threats of violence, backstabbing, undermining, and a range of other bad behaviors. History is littered with examples of the individual and group cruelty meted out on unfortunate victims by victorious armies, vicious leaders, violent masters, and vindictive family members. However, attitudes and responses to these behaviors are strongly influenced by the culture, social climate, and meaning of the behavior to the target (Tehrani, 2009). In this article, we look at the names that people have used to describe negative interpersonal behaviors, the history and development of the construct of bullying in the workplace, the features of the individual, group and organizational bullying and ways to differentiate between healthy conflict, strong management, and workplace bullying.

An older 2008 poll (by Monster.com in America) on workplace bullying found that 75% of employees reported being affected as either a target or witness. And a new 2019 Monster.com survey out this month found that nearly 94% out of 2081 employees said they had been bullied in the workplace. That's a huge increase (19%) in the last eleven years. Over half (51.1%) in the Monster.com survey said they were bullied by a boss or manager. The ways the respondents said they were bullied were aggressive email tones (23.3%), coworkers' negative gossip (20.2%), and someone yelling at them (17.8%).

Workplace bullying researchers and practitioners have struggled to establish a single agreed-upon definition of this phenomenon. As a consequence, there are numerous definitions of workplace bullying currently in use around the world to investigate this serious workplace issue, to educate the workforce about this form of harassment, and to assess claims involving allegations of workplace bullying (Goodman-Delahunty, 2007).

### ***Definitions***

#### 1. A definition of workplace bullying

At the EU level, there is no single uniform definition of what is meant by bullying or harassment at work. Despite the lack of a uniform definition, most definitions used by researchers and practitioners share some common features: Accordingly, bullying involves negative acts that occur repeatedly, regularly (systematically) and over some time, and the person targeted has difficulties in defending him/herself (The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2013). In some definitions, the aim of harming the target or intentionality of the behavior is included.

Definitional criteria:

- Wide range of negative acts that may cause psychological harm
- Direct and indirect behaviors Work-related, person-related and social exclusion

- Repeated and frequent
- Long duration
- Power imbalance: making it difficult to defend oneself

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone, or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. For the label bullying to be applied to a particular activity, interaction, or process, the bullying behavior has to occur repeatedly and regularly and over some time. Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper 2011).

According to the framework agreement on harassment and violence at work by the European social partners, workplace harassment occurs when one or more worker or manager is repeatedly and deliberately abused, threatened and/or humiliated in circumstances relating to work (The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2013). Most often the term bullying refers to negative acts inside the workplace, by colleagues, supervisors, or managers or subordinates. In some definitions and studies also negative behavior by third parties is included, and clients, patients, customers, or the like are classified as possible perpetrators (The Japan Institute for Labour Policy and Training, 2013).

#### 1. A definition of workplace bullying

Bullying at work involves repeated negative actions and practices that are directed at one or more workers. The behaviors are unwelcome to the target and undertaken in circumstances where the target has difficulty in defending him or herself. The behaviors may be carried out as a deliberate act or unconsciously. These behaviors cause humiliation, offense, and distress to the target. The outcomes of the bullying behaviors have been shown to cause clinically significant distress and impairment in social, occupational, and other areas of functioning. (Einarsen et al., 2003)

In this definition of bullying there are four main features (Tehrani, 2009): (a) the behaviors need to be perceived as negative and unwelcome; (b) they have to be persistent and long-term; (c) they need to involve an imbalance in power; (d) they do not have to be intentional to cause bullying to have taken place.

#### **Negative behaviors**

According to Tehrani (2009), the negative behaviors found in bullying fall into four main types:

1. **Personal derogation:** this includes the use of humiliation, personal criticism, ridiculing, or demeaning comments to undermine the standing or integrity of the target.
2. **Intimidation:** where threats of physical violence or psychological intimidation, the misuse of power or position is used to create a situation where the victims feel unable to defend themselves or to take other forms of action.
3. **Work-related bullying:** in which the withholding of information, removal of responsibilities, work overload, or where the credit for work undertaken is 'stolen' or not recognized as being undertaken by the target.

4. **Social exclusion:** where the target is cut off, isolated, scapegoated, or side-lined by other employees.

## Identifying workplace bullying

According to Raypole (2019), bullying can be subtle. One helpful way to identify bullying is to consider how others might view what's happening. This can depend, at least partially, on the circumstances. But if most people would see a specific behavior as unreasonable, it's generally bullying (Raypole, 2019).

## 11 EXAMPLES OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

### Types of Bullying

Workplace bullying is classified into three broad categories. These are *individual*, *complex*, and *organizational* bullying. Below there is the expansion of the bullying and contextual examples of their manifestations:

#### 1. Individual Bullying

##### 1. Predatory bullying

Predatory bullying occurs when the target of the bullying has done nothing to warrant the negative behavior (Tehrani, 2009). The bully may be using the innocent victim to demonstrate their power to others or perhaps the victim belongs to an outgroup and is attacked because they are different and not part of the group. Predatory bullying occurs more often in organizations where the culture permits this kind of behavior as the bully recognizes they are unlikely to be punished for their negative activities (Tehrani, 2009). Targets of predatory bullying often find it difficult to understand what they have done to warrant the negative behaviors. This is not surprising as they do not need to do anything wrong to become targeted (Tehrani, 2009).

#### Example 1:

*A secretary joined a media organization working for a senior manager. Within a few days, she found that he was behaving very badly towards her. He would criticize her work pointing out errors in front of visitors. He would become angry whenever he was kept waiting. The secretary found out that he had behaved in the same way with all his secretaries and that no one had stayed long.*

##### 1. Dispute-related bullying

According to Tehrani (2009), dispute-related bullying develops out of a perceived slight or conflict that has been allowed to get out of hand with the result that the social climate in the workplace has become sour. Each participant in the dispute-related conflict comes to perceive the other person as having caused them harm. The attacks and counter-attacks escalate until the destruction of the opponent becomes the overriding goal (Tehrani, 2009). Dispute-related conflict can involve intense emotions leading

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individuals on both sides to experience feelings of fear, suspicion, resentment, contempt, and anger.

**Example 2:**

*Two research scientists had been working on a project. When one of the researchers made a breakthrough, he wrote a paper that failed to recognize the work undertaken by his colleague. From that time the two men would not work together and at every opportunity, they would undermine each other. This attitude spread to their teams with the resultant loss of co-operation and support.*

1. Escalating bullying

Escalating bullying can be explained by the way people attribute the reasons for their own and others' behaviors (Tehrani, 2009). When people consider their behavior they tend to attribute positive aspects to their personality and values and negative aspects to external circumstances such as their health or pressure at work. Typically, people looking at the behavior of others see it the opposite way round. Negative behaviors are seen as due to personal characteristics and positive behaviors the result of external circumstances. In an escalating conflict, neither person is passive (Tehrani, 2009). As each perceived negative act occurs, the other player will respond according to their attribution of the intentions behind the act. As the atmosphere deteriorates, both players may come to believe that the other person is responsible for the breakdown of relationships and either may accuse the other of bullying (Tehrani, 2009).

**Example 3:**

*A supervisor was walking down a corridor talking to a colleague. As they came to a door the supervisor held the door open for the colleague but let it close as Jill, another member of his team, walked up. Jill saw this as a deliberate act and felt upset. During the next week, Jill thought about what had happened and began to notice more things about the supervisor and started to behave negatively towards him. This continued for a few weeks during which time the supervisor and Jill only noticed the negative behaviors of the other. Independently they went to human resources, Jill complained that the supervisor was bullying her and the supervisor said that Jill was being obstructive.*

1. **Complex Bullying**

While there are complexities in understanding the origin and processes involved in the development of bullying between two people, the situation becomes much more complex in an organizational setting where there are several players, a range of motivations, hidden agendas and old scores to be settled. The following **four examples** describe some aspects of complex bullying in organizations.

1. Delegated bullying

**Example 4:**

Sometimes the person perceived as undertaking the bullying is unaware of the role that they are playing

on behalf of someone else, generally their manager. For this kind of bullying to occur the target has to be painted in a poor light by the manager. The target will be described to the naïve bully as lazy, uncooperative, ineffective, or difficult. Having established this expectation in the mind of the naïve bully, the manager exerts pressure on the naïve bully to bring the target into line. Common corrective measures might include close monitoring, isolation, and the setting of unreasonable goals. The bully would be expected to report their actions on addressing the target's 'failures' to the manager. If the target experiences the naïve bully behavior as bullying it is not uncommon for the naïve bully to be identified as a bully and the manager to escape criticism.

### 1. Bystander bullying

It is not always the primary target of bullying that is most affected by the behaviors of a bully. In some instances, the bully creates a situation where one person is picked upon unfairly and other people stand by watching helplessly but on occasions may take part in the taunting of the target. Research (Tehrani, 2004) has shown that bystanders can experience a high level of distress as a result of their feelings of guilt at being unable to support the victim and fear of standing up to the workplace bully.

#### **Example 5**

*A CEO insisted on total unquestioning support. Anyone who raised issues or foresaw problems in his ideas was verbally attacked in management meetings and described as inflexible and resistant to change. Meetings of the senior team were characterized by personal attacks and anxiety about when their turn would come. Efforts to assist the target were rare with most of the senior managers sitting silent, waiting for the tirade to end.*

### 1. Mobbing or gang bullying

Mobbing involves gang bullying where the target is typically a team member or a manager. As mobbing is group behavior, the bad behavior from a single member of the mobbing group need not be particularly bad or frequent for the impact of the group behavior to have a major impact on the target. If challenged it is much easier for individual bullies to justify their infrequent bad behaviors.

#### **Example 6**

*Elaine could not drink alcohol due to a medical condition. Her job required her to attend residential events with colleagues. One of her colleagues kept drawing attention to her sobriety and over time others would join in insisting she has a drink and commenting that it could not possibly be bad for her. Elaine found this situation difficult and started to stay in her room or traveled home whenever possible. Her colleagues began to see her as odd and descriptions like 'kill-joy' and 'party-pooper' became commonplace.*

### 1. Subordinate bullying

Although the power of the role or position can protect the jobholder from bullying, around 12 percent of

bullying in the UK is by subordinates (CIPD, 2004). Subordinate bullying can be subtle and may remain hidden for some time. Subordinates have the power to undermine, procrastinate, block, withhold information, and fail to pass on important messages.

### **Example 7**

*Sally joined an organization as a middle manager. An internal candidate, George had been unsuccessful. A female subordinate (Jenny), who was responsible for a key area of work, held back information that Sally needed to do her job. When Sally asked why the information had not been given she would say 'I thought you would know that.' Sally also missed important meetings because messages were not passed on. Jenny and George began to talk to colleagues and others giving untrue examples of how Sally was unreasonable and incompetent.*

#### **1. Organizational Bullying**

In recent years, it has been recognized that organizations can behave in a bullying manner (Liefoghe & MacKenzie Davey, 2001). Organizational bullying occurs in situations in which organizational practices and procedures are used to oppress, demean, or humiliate the workforce. There are several different ways in which organizations can employ bullying tactics as a management style.

##### 1. External pressure

### **Example 8:**

Sometimes organizations are bullied by outside bodies including shareholders, customers, and government agencies. Profit or performance targets may be set at a level that cannot be achieved without placing significant stress and pressure on the employees. A chief executive, managing director, headteacher, or other leader required to bring about the changes is put in the difficult position where any failure to achieve the targets may result in some form of censorship whilst working to achieve the targets will cause extreme pressure and distress to the workforce.

##### 1. History and culture

### **Example 9:**

Organizational cultures tend to develop over time and are made up of shared beliefs, assumptions, and behaviors. When organizational cultures are based on negative beliefs and assumptions then institutionalized bullying can occur. The following are examples of cultures that lead to bullying: blame cultures, gossip cultures, and victimizing cultures.

##### 1. Senior team tactics

### **Example 10:**

In some organizations, the chief executive may appoint a henchman or woman whose job it is to carry out harsh and uncaring actions, leaving the CEO with clean hands. When challenged, the CEO may even appear genuinely concerned about the negative behaviors and may decide to punish the henchman/woman if things go too far. This process results from the CEO's difficulty in handling the harsh and the caring requirements of the role and splitting the role, allowing him or her to be caring while leaving his or her subordinate to hand out all the difficult and punishing messages (Hirschhorn, 1999).

## 1. Process bullying

### **Example 11:**

When oppressive organizational practices are employed frequently and consistently, employees feel victimized by them. Examples of organizational bullying can include organizations excessively using statistics to manage workflow or punishments such as withdrawal of overtime for failing to reach unreasonable performance targets. In organizational bullying, employees often recognize that their line manager is not the source of the problem but rather the bullying is related to how the organization goes about its business.

### **Effects of Bullying**

#### [How can bullying affect your health?](#)

Bullying can have significant, serious effects on physical and mental health (Raypole, 2019).

While leaving a job or changing departments could end the bullying, this isn't always possible. Even when you can remove yourself from the bullying environment, the impact of bullying can last long after the bullying has stopped (Raypole, 2019).

### **Physical health effects of bullying**

If you are being bullied, you may:

- feel sick or anxious before work or when thinking about work
- have physical symptoms, such as [digestive issues](#) or [high blood pressure](#)
- have a [higher risk](#) for [type 2 diabetes](#)
- have trouble waking up or getting quality sleep
- have [somatic symptoms](#), such as headaches and decreased appetite

### **Mental health effects of bullying**

Psychological effects of bullying may include:

- thinking and worrying about work constantly, even during time off

- dreading work and wanting to stay home
- needing time off to recover from [stress](#)
- losing interest in things you usually like to do
- [increased risk](#) for [depression](#) and anxiety
- [suicidal thoughts](#)
- low self-esteem
- self-doubt, or wondering if you've imagined the bullying

### **How does bullying affect the workplace?**

Workplaces with high rates of bullying can also experience negative consequences, such as:

- financial loss resulting from legal costs or bullying investigations
- decreased productivity and morale
- increased employee absences
- high turnover rates
- poor team dynamics
- reduced trust, effort, and loyalty from employees

### **Conclusion**

Bullying is a serious issue in many workplaces. While numerous companies have a zero-tolerance policy, bullying can sometimes be hard to recognize or prove, making it difficult for managers to take action. Other companies may not have any policies about bullying. Taking steps to prevent workplace bullying can benefit organizations and the health of their employees. If you have been bullied, know you can safely take steps to combat the bullying without confronting the perpetrator. Remember to take care of your health first.

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