

Bullyology

Managing Workplace Bullying – How to deal with incidents?



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How to Deal with Bullying Incidents

As a manager, what's the best way to handle bullying incidents? Be assertive. Being assertive means speaking with authority, clarity and firmness. Calmly speak to relevant parties behind closed doors. Listen to their versions of events, compare these with all other accounts, take past behaviours and your own observations into account and make a reasoned judgement based purely on facts. Remember that bullies feed off emotion, uncertainty and sensitivity – so don't give them that fuel. Be direct, factual and emotionally under complete control.

Tips for handling workplace bullying:

1. Know your anti-bullying or employee behaviour policy inside and out – and feel free to suggest ways it might be improved.
2. Encourage all staff to report any negative behaviours immediately. Investigate bullying incidents in a way that respects the privacy and dignity of all involved and ensures confidentiality through the entire process.
3. Interview alleged bullies, witnesses and victims separately. Dragging them all into the same room to 'hash out their differences' is usually counterproductive – and can be extremely uncomfortable and intimidating for victims.
4. Never ignore or dismiss a bullying complaint. If a staff member has the courage to come forward (this can be an agonising and scary decision) and the confidence in you to report it, you should give their complaint the gravity and attention it deserves.
5. Never make excuses for bullying:

“I can't believe they're the sort of person who would do that”. “It's just a personality clash”. “He/she is just passionate”. “It's just firm leadership”. “You're just too sensitive – you need to toughen up”. “I/he/she is under a lot of pressure at the moment”. “I/he/she was just teasing”. “I/he/she didn't mean anything by it”. “I/he/she treats everybody the same way – it's nothing personal”. “This company has bigger things to worry about than these petty conflicts”. “I/he/she is a perfectionist”. “That's part of the culture here”. “I know he/she can be a bit aggressive but the business needs them”.
6. When faced with a bullying complaint, investigate and then take prompt, decisive action. Don't delay, don't placate, don't make promises you can't keep. The target has a right to know what action will be taken - and when.
7. Don't dodge responsibility with the “work it out amongst yourselves” ploy. If you (and/or other managers) don't get involved, the problem will likely worsen.
8. Explain to bullies which specific company behavioural policies/antidiscrimination or sexual harassment laws/Fair Work Commission guidelines they've overstepped. List the work-related impacts their behaviour is having on the business: employee

health issues, reduced productivity, poor work attendance, client complaints, too much time being spent on conflict resolution, etc.

9. Shelve your favouritism. Just because you may have a positive or long-standing relationship with the alleged perpetrator doesn't mean they aren't bullying others. Put personal feelings aside while sorting out the versions of reality put forth by target, bully and witnesses.

10. Ensure the physical and emotional safety of the target, especially immediately after questioning the bully. Keep an eye out for possible retaliation (both the subtle and the blatant) and warn the bully of the consequences of 'trying to get even' with a complainant.

11. Be prepared for bullies to justify their conduct. They're masters at bulldozing their ideas onto others. You'll need to assess the correctness of their reasoning in relation to the impact it has on the emotional well-being of the workforce.

12. Believe accusers until proven otherwise. Bullies will often distort the truth, targets will often be ashamed or scared and witnesses may side with the bully for self-protection or because they're co-bullies.

13. A bullying complaint creates a stressful situation, so conduct interviews nonjudgmentally and calmly. Interviews needn't always be formal: a quick 'heat check' of workplace climate may put staff more at ease than an official investigation.

If the facts confirm that bullying has occurred, decide on the appropriate action to take as a manager. This might include:

- Insisting that the bully apologise to their target(s)
- Issuing an official reprimand
- Providing counselling or anti-bullying training to the perpetrator
- Closely monitoring the bully's conduct (be alert for possible retaliation)
- Clearly explaining the negative social, financial and reputation impacts that the bully's behaviour causes the business – and how it affects the entire organisation, not just the target
- Imposing the threat of termination if negative behaviours continue – and following through if necessary
- Organising an external investigation if warranted
- Doing everything you can to support the target's health, safety and well-being including, if necessary, directing them to outside support agencies or organisations; this support should also extend to witnesses, who may also be adversely affected by bullying incidents

- Encouraging change to the overall workplace culture by becoming a trusted and assertive anti-bullying advocate
- Taking a hard look at your own management style – is it making the work climate better or worse in relation to staff loyalty, enthusiasm and trust?

Moving the bully and their target away from each other (to different departments, for example) doesn't solve the problem – sooner or later, the bully finds other employees to victimise or continues to harass the original victim from afar.

If you feel ill-equipped to handle a bullying complaint for any reason (personal bias, insufficient training, fear of repercussions, etc.), get help from other managers/HR staff or seek out external support organisations to help resolve the issue.

Dealing with a bullying incident can and should be a collaborative effort. Ask other supervisors and staff for input on how they feel the situation might be resolved. Multiple perspectives can lead to a more balanced evaluation and a quicker solution.

What to do if you're a bullying target

Yes, even managers can be targets of workplace bullying. Their bullies might be other managers, employees or even the CEO. Hierarchies in many businesses are everchanging so bullying and aggressive power-grabbing can happen throughout all levels. If you're a manager who is being bullied, these tips can help:

- Confront your bully directly but calmly. Don't argue with them – your anger only fuels their aggression. Speak with them privately. If they've made some snide or inappropriate comment, ask them what that has to do with their job. Explain why their behaviour is harmful. Ask them to be more professional.
- If the calm, rational, appeal-to-their-sense-of-fairness approach doesn't work, start recording the individual bullying incidents. It's useful to put complaints in email form and keep track of responses. This ensures a written record of their pattern of behaviour. Eyewitness accounts and written records are crucial in proving bullying.
- You may find your complaint is not the first one upper management has received about this person; yours will extra add extra weight to the equation and may be the tipping point that persuades management to conduct a meeting, review or investigation.
- If you're being bullied, realise that you're not alone and that the abuse you're receiving is no reflection on your qualities as a person or abilities as an employee. You're not stupid, weak or incompetent just because an insecure person is trying their best to make you feel that way. Get help if you're not coping with the stress. A number of organisations can provide support.
- Don't let yourself become depressed or socially isolated by allowing the abuse to continue; take action as soon as possible to protect your health. An all-too-common

mistake made by bullying targets is to try to deal with the situation alone. This may be a matter of pride, fear or not knowing where to turn – but the burden is often too much for one set of shoulders to bear.

Quick fact:

According to Harvard Business Review statistics, workplace incivility comes at a high cost:

25% of workers admitted taking their frustrations out on customers

47% intentionally decreased the amount of time they spent at work

66% said their workplace performance declined

78% reported a lower level of commitment to the organisation

80% lost productive work time stressing/worrying about the incident

For more information check out the Managing workplace Bullying Online course.
Contact jessica@bullyology.com

A red-tinted background image showing a person's hands writing in a notebook on a desk. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the red overlay. The person is wearing a dark shirt, and their hands are positioned over an open notebook. The overall mood is serious and focused.

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