

Employees Need Your Help to Confront Bullies

By Julia Bain

Noted maritime writer William McFee once said, “*Doing what’s right is no guarantee against misfortune.*” (More on that quote a little later.)

Fast forward to a typical Monday morning in a typical workplace... The supervisor pulled out her desk chair and gasped when she saw a dead snake lying on its back, its mouth wide open. She had disciplined an employee on Friday whom she did not realize was capable of such behavior. Her heart was racing when she said to herself, “*I’m dealing with a bully.*”

There is a plethora of evidence that bullying occurs in workplaces all over the world every day. Employee reactions to this socio-pathic behavior range from shock, fear, loss of confidence and anger, to resignation due to an inability to cope. As EA professionals it is our responsibility to provide organizations with tools that will stop bullies in their tracks and broadcast a resounding, “*Not here!*” when attempts are made to deliberately generate suffering. We are the force that can give tormented individuals the assistance they need after helping them identify bullying for what it is: *Cruelty.*

About McFee’s Quote

Some employees mistakenly believe if they are professional and polite, this behavior will change. But the quote at the beginning of this article should remind ourselves, and our clients, just how true this statement is. In other words, many people are *not* kind and ethical, and will in fact hurt us if given the opportunity.

Certainly, confronting someone who is loud and aggressive is typically a task of the EAP. However, this issue gets more complicated when the form of violence is more subtle, such as calling someone by the wrong name over and

over again, constantly interrupting, or someone has a hand pointed in the shape of a gun at someone’s head.

Addressing Bullying Behavior

Give individuals and workgroups scripts to help them stop a bully. Whether the target of the bully is an employee or a bystander, invigorate your workforce by consistently delivering the message: “*You may not behave that way here,*” or “*Stop shouting right now.*”

Always give the person the option of walking away and getting help from a co-worker, security or even the police. If an employee feels at risk of harm, teach them to disengage and quickly go get help. Be the person who represents an EAP that says, “*You are not alone, we are here for you and if this happens, we will help you.*” Helping employees describe behaviors that are not acceptable accomplishes two goals:

- It allows the employee to clearly state that what is happening is not going to be tolerated; and
- It gives the bully the opportunity to stop the behavior, knowing the recipient is fully aware and articulate enough to describe it and, if necessary, report the unacceptable behavior.

The following are several examples: “When we talk, you lose your temper and always seem frustrated. You are frowning and do not allow me to speak. I need you to stop monopolizing our conversations so I can have a voice and equality in terms of time to talk when we converse. I need you to be calm and respectful with me.”

Or, “Often when we communicate you are either telling jokes or asking me ‘why’ questions and not being patient so I may answer you. Let’s start over and when you throw a verbal barb at me, I will tell you immediately



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so you can take a deep breath, make a shift, and be respectful.”

Or, “I am uncomfortable with your style of communication with me because you are either insulting me, or show obvious disinterest when I speak by turning your body away from me. I require respect in relationships. I need you to listen to me and show me you are interested in what I have to say.”

Practice a variety of scripts with employees so they can utilize *their own* style and preference. This will allow them to feel more comfortable assertively expressing themselves with bullies. However, also remind them that even if they deliver a script perfectly, it may not stop the bully. That is when the employee needs to get support from management.

If the situation is coming from the owner/CEO who is unwilling to halt bullying tactics, it is time to seek employment elsewhere. No paycheck is worth the destruction of self-esteem and spirit. Help clients articulate what they value about themselves that they are unwilling to allow another person to destroy. Generate a list of possible resources that may be able to assist a bullied employee:

- *Human resources*, which can initiate discipline, transfers, and conduct investigations that violate rules, policies, regulations and professional conduct;
- *Grievances* that can be filed within departments, unions and personnel boards;
- *Legal representation*, which may become necessary;
- *Mediation* that may be utilized;
- *Union representation* may be required if reports of bullying are not addressed by the company or upper level management; and
- *Security personnel and the police* may be called if employees believe they are in danger.

A Lesson in Assertiveness

Even when a manager or supervisor is the bully and he/she is disrespectful in whatever form, remind employees they have free will and can

remove themselves from the situation by saying, “*Excuse me.*” Then get help from the EAP or security.

Some people in management positions become deluded with power and mistakenly believe they can mistreat others because they make more money or have decision-making authority. Help employees summon the courage to say to bullies in upper management, “*Not with me, not today.*”

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Explain to employees what enabling behavior is, and that if they allow others to mistreat them they are in fact communicating, “*It is OK you treat me this way, because I am allowing it.*”

The Role of Bystanders

Does a bystander have an obligation to intervene when he/she becomes aware someone is being bullied (directly or indirectly)? Absolutely! By its very definition, bullying is unwanted aggressive behavior with a high likelihood of repetition. Since the bully picks a target he/she believes will not fight back (because of

an observed or perceived power imbalance), anyone who knows *effective assertiveness skills* can help.

Bystander intervention can begin by making eye contact with the bully and saying, “*What are you doing?*” This alerts the bully that you are a witness who is not going to ignore the inappropriate behavior. Depending on whether the bully backs down or keeps going will determine your next choice. If there is a behavior change that indicates calm, you have made a successful intervention and you can make eye contact with the survivor and ask, “*Are you OK?*”

If the bully persists, you can say, “*Stop talking.*” Walk towards the target and show solidarity, indicating that he/she is not alone. You can both walk away together so you can offer support in private, or if the bully simply will not back down and take direction, you can use your phone and record the behavior to show a supervisor and/or security. If at any time you believe the aggression is becoming dangerous, escort the other person to a safe location and call 911.

Bullies do not cease and desist unless there is a consequence. Make a value-based decision from your position of strength, and decide the buck stops here when you witness bullying. Be the hero who says, “*You are not alone, I can help you.*”

More Info for Supervisors & Managers

Supervisors, managers, and other decision-makers are ultimately responsible for eradicating bullying and replacing a negative culture with a positive and healthy one. If employees can learn to treat each other with respect, the leaders of the organization must hold everyone accountable to maintaining a culture of civility.

❖ **Set an example** – You cannot be a successful manager if people are afraid of you, and you can’t hold them responsible for respectful workplace behavior if you’re not practicing it yourself. Remember that, as a manager or supervisor, your choice of words, tone of voice, and

body language is an important asset to building a respectful workplace.

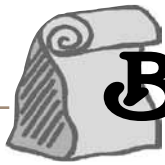
❖ **Handle complaints** – Whether your corporate policy handbook has a policy against bullying or not, grievances about bullying should be taken seriously and treated just like complaints of sexual harassment. In fact, some research has indicated that bullying is more detrimental to a person than sexual harassment because it is often allowed to go on for much longer periods of time. That’s because complaints of bullying are often ignored. When you hear a complaint about bullying, follow the same procedures you would if the complaint was about sexual harassment. That means conduct an investigation, document your findings, and make a formal decision.

Summary

As employee assistance professionals, we have an obligation to support and teach employees that they are *not* helpless from workplace bullies. It’s true that some employees may need a great deal of encouragement to assert themselves, and to gain the courage to put a stop to disrespectful behavior.

The EAP is responsible for creating a workplace that empowers and encourages strength. Ignoring bullies in the workplace has been the theme of workplace cultures for far too long. As a result, some employees believe bullies hold a “license” to perpetuate chronic pestering, criticizing, belittling, hostility and other behaviors that have the common goal of hurting, controlling, and manipulating others. It is time we create and enforce zero-tolerance policies for bullying behaviors in the workplace. ■

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Workplace Bullying Questionnaire

Does YOUR organization foster a culture of workplace bullying? Check yes or no for each of the following questions.

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| 1. Does your organization acknowledge or reward effective communication skills?..... | YES | NO |
| 2. Do meetings have an open forum where people are allowed to openly share ideas?..... | YES | NO |
| 3. Are bonuses and other rewards related to positive evaluations of communication skills?... | YES | NO |
| 4. During trainings, does the organization promote a culture of respect and civility? | YES | NO |
| 5. Is your team usually collaborative, where everyone feels free to offer suggestions?..... | YES | NO |
| 6. Are employee evaluations focused on strengths and opportunities for growth? | YES | NO |
| 7. Do managers encourage employees to think for themselves and make the right decisions? | YES | NO |
| 8. Does the organization provide training on topics such as leadership, teamwork, and interpersonal skills? | YES | NO |
| 9. Have you or a co-worker made a complaint to a manager about being treated disrespectfully, only to have it ignored? | YES | NO |
| 10. Is there unhealthy competition among staff? | YES | NO |
| 11. Is the organization going through stressful changes with little communication about what is happening? | YES | NO |
| 12. Does the organization strictly enforce and follow rules and policies in order to do <i>anything</i> ? | YES | NO |
| 13. Do employees spend a lot of time complaining about management?..... | YES | NO |
| 14. Are you and your co-workers generally stressed out about short deadlines, impossible deadlines, and other types of workplace stressors?..... | YES | NO |
| 15. Have you seen others yelled at, ridiculed, or made to look stupid without any intervention from management to get the behavior to stop? | YES | NO |
| 16. Is feedback from your manager usually focused on what you're doing wrong, instead of what you're doing right? Does the feedback lack suggestions for improvement?..... | YES | NO |

*If you answered "no" to any of questions 1-8 or "yes" to any of questions 9-16, it is possible your organization is allowing bullying to thrive. **Please note that this assessment is only intended for use as a guide.** It cannot and should not replace a corporate culture assessment or communication audit completed by a trained consultant. Source: Back Off! Your Kick-Ass Guide to Ending Bullying at Work, by Catherine Mattice & E.G. Sebastian, 2012. All rights reserved. ■*