



Unit 2

Anti-Bullying Practices at Workplace

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- Know some ways to protect yourself from bullying
- Know what to do if you are bullied
- Identify appropriate solutions for a bullying incident (within and outside the organization)
- Assist in creating an anti-bullying policy

Unit 2

Anti-Bullying Practices at Workplace

What to Do If It Happens to You

Telling it Like it Is

We now know that bullies often play mind games. This can cause the target to lose all sense of right and wrong and up and down. Their sense of reality becomes totally warped and distorted by the bully's actions. They are often made to feel guilty and responsible for what is happening to them.

When targets are being bullied, they may rationalize the bully's behavior with thoughts like:

- I did really terrible on that project. I deserved to be yelled at.
- Times are tough. My manager is just doing what is necessary to keep the team on track.
- I just need to build a thicker skin.

Remember: No matter who you are, you do not deserve to be bullied. To give you some perspective on what bullying is, let's look at when bullying occurs and what it often looks like to the target.

When Does Bullying Happen?

Bullying is always about power and control. Bullying situations often happen when the balance of power shifts. Some common **scenarios** include:

- A new person is managing the team
- A new person joins the team
- Two teams merge together

Gary and Ruth Namie identify three common **reasons for being bullied**:

- The target refuses to bend to another's wishes
- The target is better than the bully in some way (smarter, better with people, more attractive, etc.)
- The target is a whistleblower and has high moral standards

How Do I Know If I'm Being Bullied?

Here are some things that might indicate bullying is present. We would suggest that if three or more of these points apply to you, you can be fairly sure that you are being bullied.

- You have severe anxiety about going to work.
- You are physically ill when you have to go to work. (Many bullying targets report vomiting in the morning.)
- You feel so ashamed and/or guilty about what is happening that you haven't told anyone.

- Although you haven't told anyone about the bullying, your co-workers, family, and/or friends have asked if something is wrong at work.
- You use sick days as sanity days to get a break from the bullying.
- You notice that you are treated much differently from co-workers. (Sometimes bullies treat their targets as alternately the golden child and the problem child, further confusing the target.)
- You don't enjoy activities outside of work and time spent with loved ones.
- Work that was acceptable before is never good enough.
- You feel that the bully doesn't trust you to complete work. They micro-manage and interfere.
- You suspect that others have been through your personal space at work (such as your desk, computer, and personal belongings).
- The bully's actions are undermining the company. For example, you have to re-do a project so many times that it puts you behind schedule and makes other projects late. (Of course, this reinforces the message that you are an incompetent failure.)
- You have frequent emotional outbursts, such as crying or yelling.
- You believe that you're responsible for what is happening to you.
- Other people at work have been warned that you are a problem in the workplace, asked to file complaints about you, or asked to avoid you.
- Other people at work see what is happening, agree with you, but do not want to act.
- You often receive unpleasant surprises at work, such as short-notice meetings, deadlines moved, and new projects assigned. Other people do not experience this to the same degree.
- Others verbally harass you with insults, yelling, and put-downs.
- Others accuse you of harassment, incompetence, and criminal offences.
- Personal information, such as medical records, is brought into the workplace and used against you.
- You get a performance review that shows that you are incompetent, despite excellent reviews prior to this.
- You are not allowed to transfer to another department or apply for other positions.

What Works and What Doesn't?

Strategies That Don't Work

If someone is bullying you, here are some things not to do.

Ignore or avoid the bully.

This is an approach many people take because they think it's the least harmful. It's actually more harmful: the victim suffers in silence and the problem doesn't get resolved.

Try to appease the bully.

No matter what you do, it will not be good enough. Making jokes doesn't work either.

Comply with the aggressor.

Bullying is a power struggle. Once you give into one demand, they will push for more.

Aggression.

Cursing, yelling, or otherwise abusing the bully doesn't resolve anything. It makes you look out of control and shows the bully that they do have power over you. It can also put you at risk for violence.

Short-Term Survival Tips

Being bullied is never easy, but there are some things that you can do immediately and in the short term to help you survive.

As we discussed earlier, it is important to be **assertive**. Say no and make others respect your boundaries. Often, if you take a stance right away, the bully will go look for easier prey.

Your **body language** plays a big part in this. To show assertiveness, stand up straight, don't fidget, and maintain eye contact. Ensure that you're not physically cornered.

Remember that **becoming the target of a bully is in no way your fault**. It has nothing to do with your actions or who you are as a person. This may help you detach yourself emotionally from the bully's verbal abuse. We know that it's hard not to get upset when someone is slinging abuse at you, but remember that you don't have to take it!

Do what you can to **minimize contact with the bully**. Try to communicate with them via e-mail or over the phone as much as possible. You shouldn't completely avoid them, as we mentioned earlier – just to try to have interactions with them on your terms.

Most importantly, build a **support network**. Focus on the people who trust you at work and who have positive things to say about you. Keep those things in mind when you're dealing with a bully – not their unfounded accusations and mud-slinging.

Long-Term Strategies for Success

In contrast to typical advice about harassment, Gary and Ruth Namie recommend **not** consulting HR, management, or your union when you realize that you have been bullied. Their research has shown that these resources do more harm than good.

Step One: Take Care of Priorities

Your first priority is yourself. Once you have identified what is happening to you, call it what it is: bullying. Take control of your emotions and stop the cycle of denial and self-blame. You did not incur this on yourself, nor do you deserve it.

Next, start looking for a new job. According to the Namies' research, 64% of bullying targets lose their jobs as a result of the bullying. Fair? Definitely not. But it's a reality that you must be prepared for.

Step Two: Take Time and Make a Plan

Take sick time or vacation time if at all possible. You may even want to go on short-term disability if your physical or mental health is being affected.

Use this time to plan your approach. There are several key things that you should do:

- Make an appointment with your doctor for a check-up. Bullying and the resultant stress can do real damage to your body.
- Talk to a licensed professional about what has been happening to you. This will help you get perspective and start the healing process.
- Do some research on your company's policies as well as the laws in your area. Find out what your rights are.
- Create a file that documents all the bullying incidents and what impact the bullying has had on the organization. Stick to facts and figures as much as possible.
- Meet with an attorney to confirm your research and determine what the best plan for you is.

Keep your complaint and any documents related to it to yourself. Make sure that everything is secured in a safe place – away from prying eyes.

Step Three: Act!

There are three basic routes that you can take at this point. Be sure to think through all of your options carefully. Take your time and talk it over with friends, family, your attorney, and other professionals. Do not talk about it in your workplace, however!

Walk Away

Many bullying targets choose not to file a complaint or lawsuit. They simply walk away from the organization and cut their losses.

The advantage to this is that it offers you a clean break and a fast way to start over again. It also means that you can usually still secure a good reference. However, you may not feel closure or resolution – important factors in the healing process. As well, it is likely that the bully will just pick a new target. However, remember that you're the most important priority. If this is what you need to do, then do it.

Stand and Fight

If you decide to fight back against the bully, be aware that you're facing an uphill battle. Sadly, bullies almost always win, and the target is forced out of the organization (or worse).

Your first step should be to file an internal complaint in the organization. Be aware that you may not be believed and retaliation is quite likely. Be sure to include only the barest facts in your filing and file as soon as possible after you have identified the bullying. As well, do not sign or agree to anything without reviewing it with your attorney first.

We're aware of instances where someone has been bullied or harassed at work, and they sign an agreement as part of a mediated resolution that can later restrict them from using that employer as a reference. This can really interfere with your ability to get the next job, so you need to be diligent about what is included. We have also seen people sign unlimited medical releases, and then employers use that information against them in the bullying case.

Many employers offer counseling support through an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). See if this is part of your benefit package, or if psychological counseling is covered elsewhere by your extended health benefits. If you have no benefits, sometimes there is help through a community organization in your area. If you are a member of a union, they are normally obligated to help you. Professionals can help you work through emotions that surface and give you an objective form of support as you go through this process.

If this does not work, you can pursue other legal actions, such as criminal or civil lawsuits. These are expensive, lengthy, and usually unsuccessful, but they are an option.

Stick to High Ground

Gary and Ruth Namie recommend a third approach which we find quite interesting. They suggest building a business case showing the financial impact of the bully and presenting it to the executive team. Speak their language and you might be surprised at the results that you get!

You may still end up leaving the company, but you can feel confident that you at least tried to make a difference. As well, this approach is often less emotional and intimate than a formal complaint.

Applying My Skills

Choose one of these scenarios to role play:

- An employee has submitted a project that needs some revisions.
- You just found out that a co-worker didn't complete their part of a project.
- An employee has been sick a lot lately and has used up all of their sick time.
- The seating arrangement in the office needs to be changed.

Notes

State clearly that bullying is not acceptable in the workplace and will be dealt with. Then, state what the rules are in the company. Make sure that these rules are in line with the laws in your area.

Specific behaviors, examples, and circumstances.

The document should spell out what behaviors are and are not acceptable. Providing specific examples that are relevant to the workplace will help guide employees' behavior. (For example, saying that yelling is always a bullying behavior might be an issue if employees work on a loud factory floor.)

Safe from reprisal.

Make sure the policy clearly states that no one will be acted against for bringing a claim to the employer's attention or attesting to details within that claim.

The consequences.

Make sure you include the possible solutions and consequences for a bullying incident, including what disciplinary action may be taken. Also include consequences for false claims.

A complainant's rights.

Make sure victims know what will happen if they file a complaint and what rights they have, including confidentiality, privacy, and the right to a fair hearing. They should also know their avenues of complaint: the union, internal Human Resources department, appropriate government department, police, or the legal system.

Above all, ensure the policy is clear, up to date, and updated periodically.

Educating Staff

After the policy has been written, Human Resources (or the immediate supervisor) must go over it with all staff. You need to go beyond stuffing a copy of the policy in the employee mailboxes and hope they read it; have an HR member sit down with a small group and go over every word in the policy. When new employees are hired, make sure that they receive the same education. All employees should receive this education again when changes are made to the policy.

In addition, make sure you distribute the policy at least once a year. If changes are made, you will want to do a sit-down review as suggested above. If no changes are made, include the policy in a newsletter or some other official communication.

Implementing and Enforcing Anti-Bullying Policies

We've all been in workplace situations where a policy is put into place and then forgotten about. Here are some things that will help your anti-bullying policy stick.

Lead from the top down.

The anti-bullying movement should start from the top and flow downward (just as bullying does). The executive team is your most important supporter in the movement, and should be employees' biggest advocate and protector against bullies.

Lead by example.

Your bullying movement won't have much force if your CEO is a temperamental person who likes to slam doors, throw things, and berate staff.

Be proactive.

Encourage managers to be hands-on and interactive with their teams. Educate them about the roots of bullying and how to stop it before it starts.

Be clear and consistent.

As mentioned previously, be specific in what constitutes bullying. Then, be sure that the rules are applied constantly and consistently. Bullies will often back down if they know that someone is watching them.

Say it loud.

Ensure that all employees (executive team included) read and sign the anti-bullying policy. When addressing complaints, physically pull out a copy of the policy and refer to it during discussions with employees.

It is also a good idea to post the policy in a public location and to require that anyone who interacts with the organization (including suppliers and clients) abides by it.

Give people the tools to fight.

Train employees about what bullying looks like, what they can do, and what the employer will do for them if they are bullied. Traditionally, employers have been more hurtful than helpful when addressing bullying issues; we would like to see that change.

Lessons for the Workplace

What does your company's anti-bullying policy look like?

What formal and informal measures are in place to prevent and manage bullying?

What is the overall attitude towards bullying in your organization?

What gaps in attitudes, policies, and programs do you see in your organization?

What is your vision for your workplace?

What needs to happen to get there?

Whose support will you need?

What will you do to help stop bullying in your workplace?

The Law on Bullying

Bullying laws are a fairly new addition to our toolbox. So far, they haven't proven to be very effective, but it is important to be aware of the legislation in your area.

Australia

Each state has its own legislation. Check the laws for the area(s) that your business operates in.

Canada

As of this writing, Quebec, Ontario, and Saskatchewan have passed legislation on bullying. Check the laws for the area(s) that your business operates in.

Ireland

Ireland has a specific Code of Practice enforced by the Labor Relations Commission. As of this writing, it was available at <http://www.lrc.ie/viewdoc.asp?m=u&fn=/documents/publications/codes/6Bullying.pdf>.

Sweden

Sweden's laws are outlined by the Swedish Work Environment Authority and applied to the entire country.

United Kingdom

Workers' rights are outlined in the Protection from Harassment Act of 1997. It applies to England, Wales, and Scotland. As of this writing, it was available at <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1997/40/contents>.

United States

As of this writing, 46 states have anti-bullying laws, with two other states in the progress of passing anti-bullying laws.

Note: This information was accurate at the time of printing. BOLC takes no responsibility for the accuracy of this information, whether by inclusion or omission.

Further Reading: