

New Girl on the Block: Identifying and Coping With Workplace Bullies

Have you ever been the victim of humiliating or intimidating tactics such as ridicule, verbal abuse, being the butt of all jokes, being excluded and having your contributions purposefully ignored by a boss or colleague? Workplace bullying can take shape in many unidentified forms. According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, workplace bullying is "repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons by one or more perpetrators."

Workplace bullying, once a condition suffered in silence, has garnered widespread national attention in recent years. More than 50 million Americans have reported being bullied at work at a point in time in their career. I myself am included in this number. Behind closed doors, I was praised for my achievements, but belittled in public forums. My days on the job seemed to be a comedic movie script one day and the next, seemed more like a movie nightmare.

Unfortunately, women are more likely to become targets of workplace bullying than men. Studies conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute show a strong gender dynamic at play: 62 percent of workplace bullies are male, while women comprise 58 percent of targets. According to Planned Parenthood, adjectives associated with masculinity are "competitive," "non-emotional," "tough-skinned" and "aggressive." Whereas, words used to describe femininity include "passive," "sensitive," "emotional," "weak" and "nurturing." The unanswered question of why women are more likely to become victims of workplace bullying still lingers. Are women considered nurturing and passive-aggressive both inside and outside the workplace, making it easier for men to become bullies?

Research has shown there are many reasons why an individual bullies in the workplace. The most popular reasons include:

Self-Esteem

Bullies often times belittle others in order to boost their own ego and self-worth.

Power

A bully may abuse his/her position of power in order to gain control over their victim.

Organizational Culture

The morals and values dictate the workplace culture as well as expectations that are considered respectable behavior among employees.

Difference

Being new to the organization or considered "different" among counterparts may cause a person or group to become primary targets of workplace bullying.

Perceived Threat

Bullies may view an individual as a threat both personally and professionally.

Workplace bullies, and bullies in general, seek validation and often struggle with personal emotional issues. Being bullied at the workplace can also become emotionally draining and lead to other detrimental effects such as health woes and severe depression. Just remember, it's not you, it's them. Take the necessary steps to ensure you do not become a victim. It can lead to resignation from the job because of the stress incurred -- or far worse, termination.

Identifying the problem is the first step to combat workplace bullying. Many individuals are fearful to speak out or confront their bully due to possible repercussions -- which makes it almost impossible for the victim to find a solution. If the bully has created allies to support his/her claims against the target, potential repercussions include limited growth opportunities such as raises or promotions within the company. The intended target may also suffer from inferiority, low self-esteem and lack of confidence established by the bully. As a result, it makes it difficult for the bullied to speak out, especially since they feel their voices will go unheard and their claims will be undermined.

Unfortunately, an inability to cope with workplace bullying can lead to devastating health effects (i.e. mental, emotional and physical). Regaining power and control over the situation is the first step in the coping process. This includes backing and following up all information and conversations in writing especially verbal conversations! Having information compiled in writing will prove to be fruitful and beneficial when bringing claims against a workplace bully.

The next step is limiting the amount of personal information individuals may know about you throughout the workplace. Remember, that old saying "less is more." The less personal information the bully may know leads to less criticism and allegations. In addition, limit the amount of time you engage in water cooler gossip and identify someone to vent and discuss the situation with that is not associated with the company. Staying silent will not alleviate the situation, but will only make matters worse and heighten the mental and emotional turmoil. Lastly, familiarize yourself with the anti-bullying procedures associated with the company to gain a better understanding of the reporting process against workplace bullies.