

How to handle a bully

Bullying is an interesting generic term. We associate it with a school yard, something children do to other children but ultimately, bullying is a regular and almost daily occurrence in many workplaces.

It's very easy to blame the bullied in this context. Why can't people look after their own interests, deal with day to day adult encounters, fight their own battles, their own corner, 'man up' or similar. The truth is we are all different and we all respond to aggression and the misuse of power in different ways.

Indeed it is the misuse of power that is central to bullying. Evolutionary psychology and similar theories would have us think that bullying offers an evolutionary advantage. The ability to coerce others by force ensures an advantage that would not be bestowed upon weaker members of the community.

The reality is, in a modern organised society, bullying has no place in organisational relationships and whilst an individual, co-worker, boss or other may have 'normative power' by dint of their workplace role and place within the organisations structure, that does not mean that that offers a license to imbue fear and a sense of intimidation in those that surround that person.

The truth is that bullying is often mistaken for assertiveness and the key difference is again, assertive people respect the power and rights of others, bullies do not.

Bullying is therefore a significant issue in the workplace and one not to be taken lightly. A view of the victim of a bully, it is important to get sources of help and if you are prone to bully it is important to get sources of coaching and support to evaluate ones role and ones misuse of power and look at alternative strategies that may not be apparent.

For those on the receiving end of bullying, here are the following tips:-

1. You are not weak. The misuse of power by one individual does not mean that you as an individual are weak. We are all different and we all respect each other's values and rights. Frequently the bully exploits one's own observance of the rights of others. To be the victim of a bully is not about your own innate weakness. It may simply be about your gentleness, sensitivity and respect for others. So don't buy into the concept of weakness, buy into the concept of seeking solutions;
2. Avoid acceptance, the danger is, by sufficient strategies of conflict avoidance and accommodation of other people's behaviour we can somehow get by. We can somehow not attract too much attention to ourselves and drift through a bullying relationship by making it 'passable with care'. This unfortunately, does not address the issue for you or for other people who may be on the receiving end of bullying. Be clear, bullying is an unacceptable dynamic in a workplace relationship and should not be tolerated;

3. Establish clear boundaries. Bullies often exploit an inability of a person to draw a line, to say that that is enough and to indicate that they would be prepared to press their own rights if constant transgressions of those rights continue. All too often, the bully exploits the fact the individual will not do this and continues to constantly have their victims in a state of psychological retreat with such high levels of anxiety that they are unable to re-assert themselves. When dealing with a bully, it is important to draw lines. Often doing that, will reduce the gain that the bully gains from the transaction. Their ego needs, their sense of a need to feel superior or powerful, is nullified when one draws a boundary and says enough is enough. All too often, the bully will go elsewhere and visit their attentions on someone else;
 4. Talk about the experience. It is important to seek help either from friends and colleagues or, from independent sources such as counsellors, coaches, helplines etc. An opportunity to talk through a bullying experience can contemporise that experience and give you an opportunity to gain greater insight into your own role in the situation. It can often strengthen you to develop new strategies to counter bullying behaviour manifested by another person;
 5. Remember you have rights. No one has a right to bully or intimidate you. They have the right within the organisation to instruct you to do certain things if their role and responsibilities within the organisation require that. Equally you may be contracted to do certain things that are reasonable expectations of you. These are not in dispute. The issue is in the manner, style and quality of the communication that results in those roles being enacted. This is often where bullies take license to exploit their roles in order to effect some form of psychological gain for themselves that transcends simply getting the job done and honouring a contract of employment. Know the difference in this situation and seek help and advice when this is not the case;
 6. Establish a dialogue with HR. Companies vary enormously and some HR professionals can be in an over enmeshed relationship with their managers. Most however, are in a position of providing a genuine service to support employees and are an appropriate source of self-referral for help where bullying may exist. Remember it is not in the interests of the organisation to tolerate bullies.
- However successful they may be, however much business they may win for the organisation, ultimately if staff are bullied and oppressed, liabilities for the organisation far outweigh any advantages that can be conferred by the particular skills a bully may have that result in their bullying behaviour being tolerated. Bullying behaviour needs to be made apparent to managers so they can take appropriate action. Often management teams and HR are in blissful non awareness of the fact that bullying occurs. It is only when a staff member makes an approach that the beginnings of awareness ensue;
8. Learn assertiveness skills. Critical to countering the bullies interpersonal transactions, is your own abilities to assert your own rights and communicate clearly and effectively. Assertiveness is an important part of this. Assertiveness training skills are extremely helpful in such situations and can be gained from training courses, reading and indeed coaching. Gedanken produces a guide on assertiveness skills as part of our free website offerings;
 9. Only leave the organisation for something better. All too often, people tolerate bullying behaviour then simply find another position and go to it. This leaves them with unresolved feelings of injustice and in many cases a sense of personal ineffectiveness that is not addressed by the next work experience. It is important that leaving an organisation for another should be a positive experience, not one of escape and it is far better to deal with bullying experiences on an "in-house" basis rather than simply effect a retreat;
 10. Recognise that bullying is common. Assuming the premise above that it confers the evolutionary advantage, such behaviour has been around a long time. Whilst we should not tolerate it, we should nonetheless understand it and recognise that it is not a failure of self but a failure of others in this respect. This distinction is important in understanding where one stands when experiencing behaviour that may be bullying or intimidatory;
 11. Seek advice. Never stay in silence on this if HR do not support you, talk to CAB, to ACAS or even look if you have a legal help line attached to insurances, such as your household insurance. Do not suffer alone, seek, consult, inform your position and take action now.