

How Bullying Manifests at Work — and How to Stop It

by Ludmila N. Praslova, Ron Carucci, and Caroline Stokes

November 04, 2022



master1305/Getty Images

Summary. The term workplace bullying describes a wide range of behaviors, and this complexity makes addressing it difficult and often ineffective. For example, most anti-bullying advice, from “anger management” to zero-tolerance policies, deals with more overt forms of bullying. Covert bullying, such as withholding information or gaslighting, is rarely considered or addressed. In this piece, the authors discuss the different types of bullying, the myths that prevent leaders from addressing it, and how organizations can effectively intervene and create a safer workplace. [close](#)

While the organizational costs of incivility and toxicity are well documented, bullying at work is still a problem. An estimated 48.6 million Americans, or about 30% of the workforce, are bullied at work. In India, that percentage is reported to be as high as 46% or even 55%. In Germany, it's a lower but non-negligible 17%. Yet bullying often receives little attention or effective action.

To maximize workplace health and well-being, it's critical to create workplaces where all employees — regardless of their position — are safe. Systemic, organizational-level approaches can help prevent the harms associated with different types of bullying.

The term workplace bullying describes a wide range of behaviors, and this complexity makes addressing it difficult and often ineffective. Here, we'll discuss the different types of bullying, the myths that prevent leaders from addressing it, and how organizations can effectively intervene and create a safer workplace.

The Different Types of Bullying

To develop more comprehensive systems of bullying prevention and support employees' psychological well-being, leaders first need to be aware of the different types of bullying and how they show up. We've identified 15 different features of bullying, based on standard typologies of aggression, data from the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI), and Ludmila's 25+ years of research and practice focused on addressing workplace aggression, discrimination, and incivility to create healthy organizational cultures.

Workplace Bullying Taxonomy

The dimensions, features, and sample behaviors and outcomes of workplace bullying.

BULLYING FACET	BULLYING FEATURE	SAMPLE BEHAVIORS AND OUTCOMES
Goal direction/ motivation	Hostile (aka “hot,” “emotional”)	Yelling at someone in anger; throwing things. Lying to get someone fired or otherwise make them suffer out of personal or identity-based hate (harassment) or intense insecurity
	Instrumental (aka “cold”)	Spreading rumors/lies/distortions to remove a perceived “threat” of someone’s talent or claim their office space, funding, position, or other resources
Immediacy	Direct	Punching, yelling, open blaming and shaming, sending angry messages, antagonistic and hostile body language
	Indirect	Spreading rumors, withholding information, circumventing, sabotaging
Visibility	Overt	Humiliating, silencing someone in front of others
	Covert	Gaslighting, withholding information, subtle blaming
Targeting	Downward	The bully boss (65% of reported cases)
	Horizontal	Peer/lateral/coworker bullying (21% of reported cases)
	Upward	Bullying by subordinates (14% of reported cases)
	Mixed	A mixed-position clique (supervisors and subordinates) bullying in multiple directions
Costs	Physical	Physical illness, burnout, disability
	Psychological	Anxiety, depression, PTSD, insomnia, nightmares, loss of confidence, suicidal ideation
	Social	Loss of reputation, friendships, trust, support, and professional networks
	Economic	Loss of income
	Organizational	Loss of time, productivity, and revenue; turnover and replacement

[See more HBR charts in Data & Visuals >](#)

These 15 features can be mapped to some of the common archetypes of bullies. Take the “Screamer,” who is associated with yelling and fist-banging or the quieter but equally dangerous “Schemer” who uses Machiavellian plotting, gaslighting, and smear campaigns to strip others of resources or push them out. The Schemer doesn’t necessarily have a position of legitimate power and can present as a smiling and eager-to-help colleague or even an innocent-looking intern. While hostile motivation and overt tactics align with the Screamer bully archetype and instrumental, indirect, and covert bullying is typical of the Schemer, a bully can have multiple motives and use multiple tactics — consciously or unconsciously.

Caroline mediated a situation that illustrates both conscious and unconscious dynamics. At the reception to celebrate Ewa’s* national-level achievement award, Harper, her coworker, spent most of the time talking about her own accomplishments, then took the stage to congratulate herself on mentoring Ewa and letting her take “ownership” of their collective work. But there had been no mentorship or collective work. After overtly and directly putting Ewa down and (perhaps unconsciously) attempting to elevate herself, Harper didn’t stop. She “accidentally” removed Ewa from crucial information distribution lists — an act of indirect, covert sabotage.

In another example, Ludmila encountered a mixed-motive, mixed-tactic situation. Charles, a manager with a strong xenophobic sentiment, regularly berated Noor, a work visa holder, behind closed doors — an act of hostile and direct bullying. Motivated by a desire to take over the high-stakes, high-visibility

projects Noor had built, Charles also engaged in indirect, covert bullying by falsifying performance records to make a case for her dismissal.

Workplace Bullying Myths

Common myths about bullying — for example, that it’s simply “holding people to high standards” or having a “competitive personality” — suggest that bullying does not harm and may even spur performance. However, bullying and the myths about it hinder outcomes.

A common assumption is that bullies are often star performers and that high performance justifies bad behavior. However, the actual star performers are more likely to be targets than bullies. Bullies are usually mediocre performers who may appear to be stars, while in fact they often take credit for the work of others. Moreover, bullies are not motivated by organizational goals. They’re driven by self-interest, often at the expense of organizations. Research indicates that bullies often envy and covertly victimize organization-focused high performers — those who are particularly capable, caring, and conscientious. Not only are bullies not the stars, but one toxic employee negates the gains of the performance of two superstars and likely creates additional costs.

The “motivation” myth justifies bullying as “management” or “motivation,” helping low-performing individuals improve. Indeed, low performers are more likely to experience bullying than mediocre ones — but it does not help them improve. Rather, it can further hinder performance, creativity, collaboration, and delivering on business goals due to employee distress.

Ineffective Interventions

Research has thoroughly documented that bullying is detrimental to individuals' productivity and organizational outcomes. Unfortunately, even when organizations attempt to address it, the interventions are rarely effective.

Traditional methods of addressing bullying tend to be unsuccessful for several key reasons:

- The **reactive approach** addresses bullying *after* individual and organizational harm has already occurred. However, the first line of defense against all workplace stressors should be prevention. Preventing harm from occurring in the first place helps avoid both individual and organizational costs of bullying.
- **Placing the burden of proof and anti-bullying work on the target** ignores the fact that bullying is trauma, and that for most people, documenting their own trauma while it is happening while maintaining productivity is an impossible demand. In Ludmila's neurodiversity work, some of the most difficult situations are where bullying targets are told to "just fix it/figure it out" with the bully. The process is disproportionately taxing for those who are already disadvantaged and have fewer coping resources (such as autistic employees, who are bullied more often than others; those with extensive history of trauma or depression; as well as those who are economically disadvantaged). Targets are likely to leave because they don't have the resources to fight through the painful process of documenting and reporting with little hope for a just outcome, while bullies move on to new targets.
- **Individual-level focus** attempts to address bullying via "fixing" personality characteristics of targets and bullies via assertiveness training or self-control training/anger management, respectively. Not only does this ignore the stability of personality characteristics, it also largely ignores the notoriously hard-to-

address characteristics involved in various forms of bullying, such as the sense of egotistic entitlement or fragile ego.

- **A focus on overt and hostile bullying** does nothing to address covert and instrumental bullying.

A Systemic Approach to Creating a Safer Workplace

W. Edwards Deming famously wrote that 94% of issues in the workplace are systemic, and only 6% attributable to individual-level, idiosyncratic factors. Effectively addressing all types and manifestations of bullying requires a systemic and prevention-focused approach.

While bully characteristics matter, bullying is a behavior of opportunity enabled by organizational environments that allow it to occur and continue. Organizations can't eliminate egotism from human nature, but it is possible to create systems in which egotistical behavior is discouraged rather than reinforced.

Effective organizational systems of bullying prevention do not need to be designed from scratch. The mechanisms that support productivity via asynchronous work and facilitate inclusive and psychologically healthy organizations do double-duty in preventing bullying. Effective anti-bullying mechanisms are rooted in organizational justice, transparency, a focus on outcomes, and the use of valid instruments in decision making. They are supported by tools that facilitate inclusive, flexible work; voice; and participation.

Addressing hostile bullying — stopping the Screamer

Some degree of prevention of hostile/emotional bullying can be achieved on the individual level, with selection and training. Organizations legally can and must screen out based on negative characteristics demonstrably related to poor performance, such as arrogance in leadership.

Training employees in non-violent communication is another important tool. For example, communication regarding suboptimal work can be violent/bullying: “You call this a report? This garbage is insulting. You don’t know how to write.” The same point phrased non-violently is: “I am disappointed that I cannot forward/use this draft of the report. I need clarity. Please arrange the numerical data in tables and write four or five clear bullet-point takeaways.”

Systemically, hostility is typically triggered by resource scarcity and overall stress. Reducing the stress of unrealistic deadlines, chronic under-resourcing resulting in workplace “hunger games,” management by fear, and moral compromises can help decrease hostile bullying.

Addressing instrumental bullying — stopping the Schemer

To prevent instrumental, indirect, and covert bullying, organizations should ensure transparent, fair, equitable, and legitimate ways to obtain rewards. Promotions, resource allocation, and other crucial decisions should be made based on transparent and accurately measured performance outcomes. “Eyeballing” performance rewards bragging, credit-taking, and possessing external markers of privilege.

Moreover, ensuring justice in organizational decision making requires a mechanism for correcting high-stakes decisions when necessary (such as if the information they were based on was incomplete or false, as in Noor’s case). For example, an independent group (e.g., a committee of ombudspeople) could verify the evidence supporting demotions or progressive discipline. Specific mechanisms differ based on the type of organization (state, private, unionized, etc.) and employment, often taking the form of grievance committees serving a specific type of employees (e.g., classified or unclassified, salaried or

hourly). In any case, grievance and check-and-balance mechanisms may help disincentivize the reliance on instrumental bullying to get ahead.

Asynchronous work tools like taskboards and shared documents may also help prevent instrumental bullying in the form of credit-taking or unfair evaluations. Beyond their purpose as productivity tools, they serve an additional function of documenting performance and contributions.

Valid and well-designed recruitment, selection, and talent-management mechanisms that focus on demonstrated skills, results, and the ability to support others (rather than the ability to talk oneself up) also play a significant role in establishing a positive organizational climate. These can help prevent the hiring and promotion of takers and overconfident but incompetent individuals by identifying early signals of someone's potential bullying behavior. For example, asking candidates to describe their experiences of failure or of enabling others to succeed will reveal degrees of humility, self-awareness, and orientation toward others.

Preventing downward bullying

To prevent downward bullying, where the bully targets someone more junior to them, HR and upper management must pay close attention to subtle signals. While 360-degree evaluations and climate surveys are helpful and must be read carefully, sometimes the most valuable information is between the lines. Someone who is bullied or threatened may fear that sharing their reality — even on an “anonymous” survey — may jeopardize their employment or incur repercussions from their superior. Multiple employees providing non-answers like “I really have no ideas to share here,” “I’m not in a qualified position to respond to this,” “I think I responded to that earlier,” or “I know this person is under a great

deal of pressure to get the job done — they have a very hard job to do” is a red flag. Leadership development focused on creating psychological safety might be in order.

Further organizational weak-spot assessment can involve analyzing climate surveys to reveal greater context or underlying issues by team, or department. Using both 360 evaluations and culture assessments enables Caroline to work closely with clients to identify and design successful leadership interventions or purpose-oriented reinvention strategies to remedy bullying that can derail engagement, retention, and growth.

Preventing upward bullying

To prevent upward bullying, where the bully targets someone more senior to them, organizations need cultures of transparency with clear role and behavioral expectations. At onboarding, employees must understand their responsibility for contributing to positive environments. Training for new managers must include dealing with multiple interpersonal scenarios, including upward bullying. For example, leaders who struggle to confront poor performance or aggressive behavior may inadvertently empower those who upward-bully them. Ensuring that leaders have the confidence and skill to address disrespectful, manipulative, or aggressive behavior head-on helps to curtail it early on. Role-playing such scenarios can help develop the necessary confidence, skills, and mental “scripts.” In addition, grievance and complaints systems must support supervisors as well as non-supervisory employees.

Preventing horizontal and mixed-direction bullying

To prevent horizontal and mixed-direction bullying, where an individual bullies a peer or a group bullies in multiple directions, organizations should avoid creating environments of unhealthy

internal competition. One key way to do that is avoiding rank-and-yank performance evaluation, which encourages cutthroat behavior.

Be sure to distribute resources in fair and transparent ways and balance team-level and individual rewards. Also, ensure that cross-functional partnerships are grounded in shared metrics to incentivize collaboration. In addition, develop mechanisms to constructively air and address the natural tensions that exist at organizational seams. For example, regularly convene those who must collaborate to reach shared results — in psychologically safe environments. Finally, discourage drama triangles and manipulation by ensuring transparency and setting an example.

...

All relationships have the potential to go wrong. Even experienced managers may lack understanding of the cultural or psychological nuance involved in specific situations. Ideally, in organizations aiming to maximize psychological well-being, managers and employees will be supported by professionals trained in developing and maintaining psychological, relational, and workplace health who can serve as neutral parties.

Addressing bullying is not easy, but doing so systemically supports well-being and belonging and may prevent organizational demise. Ignoring or placating bullies results in losing conscientious performers. Over time, those organizations will be poisoned by a critical mass of toxic individuals and a snake-pit culture.

LP

Ludmila N. Praslova, PhD, SHRM-SCP, author of the *The Canary Code*, uses her extensive experience with neurodiversity and global and cultural inclusion to help create talent-rich

workplaces. She is a professor of graduate industrial-organizational psychology and the accreditation liaison officer at Vanguard University of Southern California.

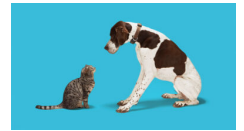
Ron Carucci is co-founder and managing partner at Navalent, working with CEOs and executives pursuing transformational change. He is the bestselling author of eight books, including *To Be Honest* and *Rising to Power*. Connect with him on Linked In at RonCarucci, and download his free “How Honest is My Team?” assessment.

CS

Caroline Stokes specializes in business sustainability, people strategy, and executive leadership development. Connect with her on LinkedIn at oCarolineStokes and use her Workplace EQ tool to design a sustainable organization to tackle societal, economic, and environmental change. Caroline is the author of *Elephants Before Unicorns: Emotionally Intelligent HR Strategies to Save Your Company*.

Recommended For You

How to Confront a Bully at Work



PODCAST
Gaslighting at Work-and What to Do About It



How to Avoid Hiring a Toxic Employee



6 Signs You're the Bully at Work

