



## Five Tips For a Bully-Free Workplace

March 13, 2008

It's not a new problem, but workplace bullying continues to hurt productivity and morale, while increasing turnover and the potential for litigation. According to a recent Zogby poll, workplace bullies affect half of the U.S. workforce, or 71.5 million workers, when witnesses are included.

While it may be widespread, human resource experts, business consultants, psychologists and other experts say businesses can discourage this behavior in several different ways. Most say that it starts at the top - executive leadership that is engaged and committed to a harmonious workplace will not tolerate managers or employees who bully others.

"I think a lot of managers are not so much naïve, but they turn a blind eye to bullying because they don't want to get rid of someone who is a high-producer," says Jodee Blanco, author, anti-bullying activist and CEO of Chicago-based consultancy The Blanco Group.

But, she says, high-producers are not so impressive if their actions result in high turnover or low production among those who are bullied.

The following tips should serve as a guide for creating a bully-free workplace.

### 1. Stand Your Ground

Generally speaking, bullies tend to back down when confronted, says business and HR consultant Donna Flagg, via email.

"It's amazing, actually, how bullies' bravado dissolves right before your very eyes when faced directly and called out on their behavior. They want to make you afraid of them and when it doesn't work and you're not [afraid], they are muted," writes Flagg, president of The Krysalis Group LLC in New York.

Since bullies prey on the weak, a culture that encourages strength in the face of bullying eventually will eliminate it, writes psychotherapist and executive coach Alan Allard, based in Lawrenceville, Ga., via email.

"Colleagues of bullies need to learn to be assertive and stand their ground, or they will be bullied," Allard writes. "Assertive responses applied consistently will stop the bullying."

### 2. Create a Bully-Free Culture

Companies that ignore the fact that they have a bully in their midst inevitably send a message to the entire organization that bullying is okay, says Beverly Kaye, CEO of Career Systems International, based in Los Angeles.

By establishing core values and communicating those values to the entire organization, businesses can create an environment that is unwelcoming to bullies, writes author and team-building consultant Keith Ayers, president of Integro Leadership Institute LLC, based in West Chester, Pa., via email.



"When companies define their operating values, they obviously need to include how co-workers treat one another and reaffirm it through their office culture," Ayers writes. "When an organization has established, and lives by, its values, it will not tolerate behavior that deviates."

As a manager, part of creating a bully-free environment is allowing employees to come to you with problems or concerns, even to admit a mistake, Blanco says. One common scenario, she says, is the ambitious bully who waits for someone to make a mistake, then goes to the boss and tries to suck up by offering to fix that mistake for him or herself.

Instead of being defensive, the bully's victim needs to go to their boss first and admit the mistake. But that's difficult if the boss is not so approachable, she says.

"The victim of the office bully is so insecure and so downtrodden, that they tend to get defensive and want to cover up their mistakes," Blanco says.

### **3. Have a Written Policy in Place & Enforce it**

Top-level managers must make sure bullying is covered by a written, communicated and enforced code of conduct; make sure employees and managers at all levels understand the meaning of bullying and how to detect it; and allocate resources and specific procedures to handle complaints of bullying, says Marie Apke, president of San Diego-based Bensinger DuPont & Associates, via email.

Drafting and strictly enforcing a code of conduct that does not tolerate bullying is absolutely critical, but companies also should consider going that extra step, Blanco says.

"I think every single new employee at a company needs to go through empathy training. Employees need to be trained on how to recognize the warning signs that a coworker is in trouble," Blanco says.

But simply having a written policy, even reinforced with training, is useless if it is not enforced, Allard writes via email.

"Few companies have clear policies for dealing with bullies and out of the ones that do, few enforce the policy," he writes. "If a disciplinary process is followed all the way to the end, the bullying will stop or the bully will leave or be terminated."

### **4. Deal With the Problem Swiftly & Consistently**

It is absolutely critical to follow through on complaints promptly and consistently, sources agree. Otherwise, the bullying not only escalates but others are given a sense that it's no big deal.

Some bullies are worth saving, Kaye says, but they have to own up to their behavior and be fully willing to initiate change themselves. But for the most part, according to psychologists contacted for this story, workplace bullies have been that way since childhood and likely will not change.

Since California is an at-will employment state, firing someone simply for being a bully is perfectly defensible, says San Francisco attorney Michael Kelly, a partner with Squire, Sanders & Dempsey LLP. Still, he suggests addressing the situation first.



"We suggest that employers take the bullying employee aside and discuss their behavior. If you wait too long, often it's too late to rebuild those relationships," Kelly says.

If it becomes clear the employee's behavior will not change, and he or she must be fired, then having documentation that the employee was first reprimanded for unacceptable behavior can go a long way in preventing an unlawful termination lawsuit, he says.

Blanco recommends using a third party to help resolve bully-related disputes, especially for businesses lacking human resources offices.

"If you're a smaller company, I think you should reach out and have a relationship - even contracted on retainer - with an HR professional, therapist or a mediator," Blanco says.

## **5. Don't Hire These Jerks to Begin With**

In a perfect world, hiring managers would be able screen out bullies before they even return for a second interview. This is an imperfect science in reality, but there are ways to minimize the odds of hiring bullies.

If the right questions are asked and the interviewer is observing the right cues, a potential bully can be spotted, says HR consultant Roberta Chinsky Matuson, principal of Human Resource Solutions, based in Northampton, Mass.

For example, an applicant who consistently blames others for being fired from past jobs, or who fails to adequately answer why they were at past jobs for such short periods of time, may be a bully or at least have behavioral issues, she says. Also, she adds, references can speak volumes without saying too much.

"More often than not, what they don't tell you is more important than what they do tell you. If you ask [references] whether they get along with other people, and get a long pause," then that could be a red flag, Matuson says.

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