

## How to Talk With a Bully at Work

Type "dealing with bullies" in your favorite Internet search engine and you will get nearly a quarter of a million hits. This is no great surprise: according to a recent poll by the Workplace Bullying Institute and Zogby International in late 2007, over a third of employees report being bullied, half of them to the extent that it affects their health. That represents a lot of misery out there.

But here is the real surprise: type in the exact phrase "what to say to a bully at work" and you get \*zero\* hits. Simplify it to "what to say to a bully" and you will get about 50 hits, some of which are from people trying to sell you a book or program, and none of which appear to actually tell you what to say to a bully.

Why so much silence on such an important subject? Because bullies are seen in most of these resources as one-dimensional enemies to simply be fought or avoided - some even flatly recommend that you do not engage a bully. As a result, nearly all of the advice out there revolves around the legalities of handling bullies: documenting specific abuses, when to speak with your HR department, what your legal rights are, and the like.

Perhaps a more balanced view comes from the government of South Australia, which has strict legal protections against workplace bullying. A recent report from them describes workplace bullies (the majority of whom are supervisors) as people who often lack basic management skills and do not know how to behave differently. In their words, "They believe that good management is "tough" management which involves making instant decisions, tolerating no dissent or disagreement, driving people to work harder or faster, dispensing with anyone who cannot keep up and generally treating everyone in a harsh and unfeeling manner. Such managers also believe that if they do not behave in this way they will be seen as "weak" and therefore unlikely to survive in their position."

Of course, some bullies cross the line into inappropriate behavior, like someone a blogger recently described as knocking over filing cabinets to make a point. (I have a good three-word technique for this situation: "call the police") Others may be sexist, racist, or out to exploit power for their personal gain. But for others - perhaps the majority - I honestly feel that the right communications skills can help defuse these situations and build mutual respect.

Here is my view, from a communications skills standpoint: We tend to view bullies as evil villains, and this view colors our responses. But bullies generally respond to being challenged the way most of us do, by fighting back and rationalizing that you are the problem. This is nothing more than classic cognitive-behavioral psychology.

This means that if you change the script of what you say, you can often change the outcome - particularly if you speak to their interests while maintaining your own dignity and boundaries. So here is my advice on what to say to the garden-variety, non-sociopathic office bully:

1. Start the conversation in a safe place by acknowledging and validating their agenda. For example:

- When someone has an angry outburst, say, "I can tell by your tone of voice that you are pretty upset."
- When someone has been spreading rumors about you, say, "I understand you have some concerns about my performance" or ""I understand you aren't happy about what I said to Sally."
- When someone is pressuring you to do an unrealistic amount of work, say, "It sounds like we are under a lot of deadline pressure. Tell me about it."

Yes, it feels funny to talk like this with someone who acts like a jerk. It feels like sucking on a lemon for most of us. And no, it doesn't always work, particularly when things cross the line into discrimination or abuse. But perhaps 70% of the time, this will get you into productive dialogue. Try it and see what happens.

2. Ask non-threatening, factual questions about their behavior. In general, when you make statements and tell people what to do, they push back - but when you ask questions, you are both giving them the floor and holding them accountable. For example:

- "What would you have liked me to do instead?"
- "How would you have preferred that I handled things with Sally?"
- "Tell me more about what our clients are expecting by the deadline. Do we have any flexibility with them? Could I speak with them directly and see how we can help?"

3. Set boundaries while offering to address their agenda. Bullies usually fight back when they are challenged, but a surprising number of people will respect you for standing your ground if - and this is a big if - you also speak to their interests. For example:

- "I don't want to see you upset, and I don't want to be yelled at in the future. Where can we go from here?"

- "I don't want you to feel criticized, and I also want to be free to be honest with other people. How can we solve this in the future?"

- "I want to make the client happy, and I feel I can honestly do X much work between now and then. How should I best use my time between now and the deadline?"

I feel that everyone is entitled to a workplace that is free from harassment, and fully support legal protections designed to put an end to workplace bullying. But in the meantime, I also feel that in many cases, your communications skills can make a big difference in stopping these situations in their tracks.

Rich Gallagher is a communications skills expert and seminar leader who has been called "one of the founding fathers of modern customer support" by one of its leading professional societies. He is the author of several books including Great Customer Connections (AMACOM, 2006) and What to Say to a Porcupine (AMACOM, 2008). Visit him on-line at <http://www.WhatToSayToAPorcupine.com>

{mosgoogle}