



Break free

Bullying is all about power, which can be tricky in the workplace when you feel you can't do your work properly and your job is on the line. But understanding it can be key to bringing it to an end and protecting yourself from being targeted in the future, says **Ali Roff**

L The bullying dynamic

'The bullying dynamic is a two-way street,' says chartered psychologist, executive coach and author Aryanne Oade. 'The bully uses intimidating and aggressive behaviour in the hope of limiting the choices that the person they are targeting has when they attack.' Oade explains that the bully's aim is for their target to comply with their aggressiveness in order to control them.

Those being targeted feel overwhelmed and often taken by surprise. 'Very often they comply in an attempt to get it over with, because they don't know what else to do or because they're so shocked it seems the best thing is to do what the bully wants,' explains Oade. 'Once that has happened, the bully knows that if, for instance, they go up to their target's desk, with their feet >>>

>>> apart, arms crossed, using an abusive personal verbal term, that person will go on the back foot – and they’ve got them, so they keep doing it. That is the bullying dynamic.’

The most important point, Oade is keen to point out, is that even if the person being targeted uses chronically submissive and passive behaviour, they are never, ever, the one at fault. That blame lies 100 per cent with the bully.

‘For very well-intentioned reasons, people vulnerable to bullying start to use behaviour that works against their best interests, such as making themselves small. Short term, that can work, because bullies might go away if you don’t give them an emotional reaction or something they can use in their next attack. But it can perpetuate the situation, because this strategy makes it very easy for the bully as there are no consequences.’ According to Oade, who coaches people who have been bullied at work, the good news is that the person who’s been targeted has more room for manoeuvre than they realise.

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2 Why are some of us more subject to bullying than others?

Bullies look for vulnerability and confusion. ‘A bully makes an unjustifiable criticism, the aim of which is to undermine somebody’s self-esteem. If the targeted person takes it seriously because they haven’t seen it for what it is (a tactic that’s essentially dishonest), the reason that person will be more easily subjected to bullying is because they are confused by the behaviour. Also, as they themselves are honest and have integrity, they respond from that mindset and take it seriously,’ explains Oade. Because it is so unlike their own motives, the person being bullied tends to miss the reason behind the action, which consequently results in them making themselves vulnerable.

3 How to stop bullying in its tracks

Bullying is all about power. Out of fear of losing their job, targets of bullying can comply with the bully’s actions. But, as Oade explains, ‘Many people who are bullied over a long period of time have a mindset that says, “If I fight back, it will get worse”. Yes, if you fight back unskillfully, it will get worse, because bullies are incredibly effective at playing your emotions back to you. So if you say, “Stop doing this!”, all the bully will hear is the panic and wobble in your voice, and they’ll say, “Why, are you having a bad day?”’

But there are skilful ways of directing the issue back to the bully so the dynamic of the conversation alters, reveals Oade. It’s no longer about the target feeling how the bully wants them to feel (inadequate or scared), but turning the situation on its head. One thing Oade coaches her clients on is identifying the choices they have, behaviourally, verbally and intellectually which, at the moment of attack, changes the balance of power between them and the bully. ‘Even slightly, but very often greatly, the dynamic between them alters. And as soon as it’s altered once, the bully is on the back foot,’ Oade explains. ‘The bully is thrown off balance and it’s in that moment that the target of the bullying can regain some of their power, self-control and self-belief.’

‘So, for example,’ continues Oade, ‘the bully says, “That report you wrote was absolutely rubbish”. This is a fuzzy, unclear general criticism of a piece of work that the person they are targeting has done. In this example, let’s imagine that the report was OK – maybe not perfect, but certainly good enough. A person who is vulnerable to bullying won’t know what to do and might say, “Oh, sorry, can you tell me what’s wrong with it?” And what they’ve done is open the door for the next piece of abuse from the bully; unjust, unfair and undermining.’

‘A better response would be to say, “OK, what I just heard is that you think my work is really poor. So what I’d like you to do is to write down your criticisms of it and then you, me and my manager can discuss them.” Now most bullies won’t take up that challenge because actually, the point of the criticism wasn’t that the report was wholly inadequate, but was simply to undermine the self-esteem of the person,’ reveals Oade. If the person being targeted makes it clear that they aren’t affected by the bully’s statement, and instead holds the bully responsible for what they said, the dynamic is changed completely and the bully gets the message that the tactic of undermining doesn’t work.

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY IMAGES



“I am grateful for the personal development journey”

Wendy, 47, IT consultant

‘Mike’s initial tactic was to confront me in public, making loud, angry and critical comments about a simple decision that I had made. When I was away on holiday, he told the rest of the team that he was taking over a large area of my responsibility. I found this out from a junior member of staff. My team colleagues made no comment and offered me no support.’

I was upset, disappointed and confused by the silence from the rest of the team. I felt terribly alone, disempowered and undermined.

I invested a huge amount of my energy in simply coping.

Then, another member of my team started to make decisions about things that affected me on days when I wasn’t there. He spread misinformation about my supposed views, and in meetings, he dismissed my ideas with comments like, “I don’t know why, but I just don’t like the sound of that.”

After working on this with a coach, I saw that I’d been groomed for several years before being overtly bullied. I wanted to confront

my bullies, but I was advised to practise role-play first so I could learn how to confront safely and effectively. This session was one of the most useful and powerful experiences I’ve ever had. I returned to work and took back my area of responsibility. Mike didn’t dare attempt another coup.

I am immensely grateful for the personal development journey I have been on as a consequence of being bullied. I have made an in-depth recovery and every aspect of my life has improved.’ >>>

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What is the bully's motivation?

Each bully has their own context for bullying: jealousy, envy, fear and control. 'When the bully is jealous of the target's skills or successes, they feel the need to destroy the good that the target has earned. The bully tries to undermine the reputation of the target and cause others to doubt them,' says Oade.

'Envy is the wish to take the good that someone has earned and acquire it for oneself,' she says. 'The bully seeks to obtain the kudos and positive influence that the target has earned by injuring their reputation and taking unjust credit for their work.'

When the bully's motivation is fear, the bully is often afraid of failing, but rather than learning the skills needed to succeed, 'they scapegoat an innocent target in a misguided attempt to remove the focus from their own shortcomings and place it elsewhere,' Oade explains. And when the bully desires control, 'they attack the target's self-esteem, self-confidence and work in an attempt to cause the target to doubt themselves and relinquish their personal power to the bully.'

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How do you know if it is bullying?

Oade explains what workplace bullying involves:

- One-off, frequent or repeated personal attacks that the target finds emotionally hurtful or professionally harmful.
- A deliberate attempt by the bully to undermine the target's ability to do their work, or to injure their reputation, or to undermine their self-confidence.
- A deliberate attempt by the bully to remove personal power from the target and keep this power for themselves.

“When the bully is jealous, they feel the need to destroy the good reputation that someone else has earned”

“I learned what made me tick and where my strengths lie”

Sally, 39, healthcare manager

'I was bullied by my female line manager. At first, I didn't even realise I was being bullied. It took some "terminal events" to jolt me into realising, one of which was a colleague pointing it out to me.

Looking back, I can see there was an initial grooming period where my manager would be kind and jovial one minute, then cutting the next, leaving me feeling like I'd done something to offend her. She made herself my "mentor", but was faint with any praise and selective with support. She became increasingly irritated as I established myself.

The bullying developed into subtle undermining activity,

followed by unreasonable demands, culminating in more frantic and overt attempts to attack me both personally and professionally. She did this in front of others, behind my back and by email.

I felt lonely, low, frustrated and bewildered, and it took its toll on my health. I began to question myself. What had I done to deserve this?

I began to stand up for myself and challenge her behaviour, and this became the tipping point. She formed a clique of female peers to collude with and openly branded me a "bitch". I realised I couldn't stay in that job. For about a year I planned my escape, and when the

opportunity arose, I left. It was the best decision I could have made.

I worked on my issues for several years afterwards – coaching provided me with a safe place to really dig deep and come face-to-face with what had happened to me. It was hard and I cried – a lot.

I learned what makes me tick, where my strengths lie and what factors made me vulnerable to being groomed and targeted by a bully. I was given new tools through which to withstand bullying behaviour. I'm much happier, have a new job, and will never let anyone bully me again.'

'Free Yourself From Workplace Bullying' by Aryanne Oade (Mint Hall Publishing, £21.99) is out now; oadeassociates.com