Coping with Bullies at Work
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Insufferable bullies can make life miserable, waste time and generally ruin a good day. At some point in life almost everyone runs into a bully at work or home. Bullies can be bosses, friends, coworkers, or club members. Bullies are threatening, cruel, and cause us great concern about what they can do to limit our future.

It doesn’t have to be this way.

Behind The Mask

Many bullies appear self-confident and strong. Muriel Solomon points out that many times the bully feels inadequate. They believe that using intimidation will distract others from perceiving their feelings. The bully fears being wrong or not in control. It is this basic insecurity that prompts them to treat others with hostility and scorn.

What You Can Do

- **Know your goal.** When interacting with bullies, it is important to know your personal “bottom line.” Bullies count on others being afraid and submissive. Ask yourself, I will end the meeting or interaction if ________? Knowing the limits of what you will withstand can give you a sense of control.

- **Be safe.** While most bullies will not be aggressive, it is important to make sure you are protected. Try to get the bully to sit down, keep out of range, and avoid gestures that can be viewed as attacks.

- **Let them run down.** Give them a little time to “vent”. This will set the stage for you to gain some control of the situation.

- **Change the atmosphere.** Getting their attention is one way to calm them down. Changing the setting and the climate of the interaction can help to change the bully’s actions. Some ideas include:
  - Call him or her by their name (don’t call them a name).
  - Drop a book or pencil
  - Comment on the bully’s attitude in a non-attacking way.
Stand up for yourself, but don’t argue. At some point you will probably have to take a stand in order to stop or reduce the bullying behavior. You can take a stand without fighting by using several verbal techniques. Try stating your views using these phrases:

- I guess I disagree
- I see it a little differently
- I can see that you don’t think much of ______, but my experience is a little different.

These phrases do not attack, but signal that you are speaking your own mind. Arguing with a bully will not change his mind, and can easily escalate the situation.

Maintain eye contact. Continuing non-attacking eye contact is effective in reducing bullying behavior. Avoid giving stink-eye.

Avoid ganging up on the bully. Even when others want to confront or discuss the problem, bullies will usually not be receptive to a group.

Bullies are one of the common types of personalities that we encounter at work and in our personal lives. These methods can be effective in helping you to cope with these difficult people. Remember that each situation is different and these suggestions are offered as guidelines. To map out a specific plan for coping with the difficult people in your life, talk to someone who can help.

References


I’ve seen bullying take on many different forms at work—not just yelling or hurling insults, but also talking behind someone’s back, sabotaging their work or spreading negative rumors. These are extremely difficult situations, and they can be even more challenging for “nice girls” like me who so value getting along with their coworkers and are often very likely to take a bully’s actions personally. If you find yourself in a situation like this, look for allies at work who can remind you that this behavior has nothing to do with you. Then when you see it take place, simply acknowledge it—“Oh, it’s happening again,” and remind yourself that he or she is the one with the problem, not you. This is a simple but powerful way of separating yourself from the other person’s toxicity. Call It Out.