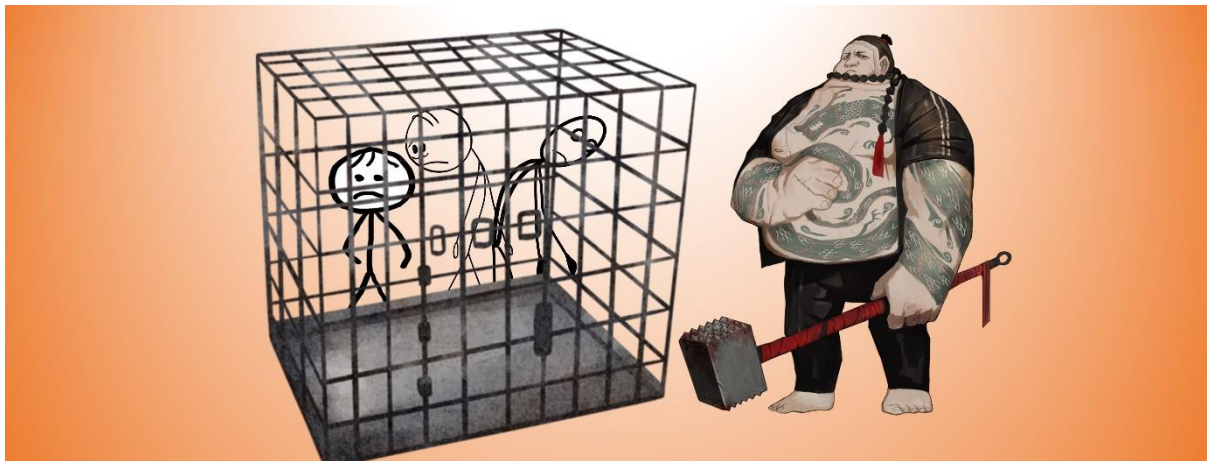


# How To Deal With Bullies at the Workplace

*Shôn Ellerton, September 18, 2024*

*Some of us, at some time or another, have experienced being bullied or harassed. The question is, what can one do about it?*



Let's get one thing clear from the outset.

I seriously dislike and despise bullies in the workplace. Especially those who are managers as well. I've seen a lot of them in my career and I've seen firsthand, some of the effects they have had on their employees and co-workers.

I'll tell you why I hate bullies so much.

As a teenager, I was often poked at and made fun of.

Why?

Because I wasn't part of the crowd. I liked to do solitary things. Rather than participate in team sports, I was off doing solo expeditions in the mountains, sometimes in the dead of winter, or exploring some difficult-to-access cave system. There were many of these in Colorado, the place I grew up. I was interested in the mystical and esoteric, which many around me simply could not understand. I was the classic eccentric. I was also on the pudgy side and riddled with acne, a nasty affliction for any teenager. In essence, my confidence around others was chequered, but I still felt secure in my own being.

But later in life, this gave me strength. I could live alone, which I did for many years until I started a family in Australia. I had changed my lifestyle significantly to improve my health. I always had a very small circle of friends which I could rely on. And I moved from place to place and worked through many careers and

companies with a resilient attitude that I would always, somehow, do well in the future.

I was the stoic achiever.

Now in my fifties and having worked across many careers and companies, I have come across the occasional manager showing all signs of insecurity and irrational behaviour, and then bully and intimidate often younger and more malleable employees into submission. And this is the worst thing, the bigotry and double standards when these same managers promote mental health and RUOK days.

I've been threatened from time to time by such managers, and I can tell you, it's not a pleasant experience. As a child, it's often difficult to fight back for fear of being pummelled and knocked about. However, in the corporate world, it is the fear of being fired. Getting on the wrong side of a bully-like manager may not be wise.

There are, of course, many reasons why a manager may not like one of their employees, but often, it is because they are threatened or challenged rather than from underperformance. Although, of course, a vindictive and manipulative manager may set an employee up for failure by targeting that individual with a series of unreasonable tasks. There are laws in place to protect employees but proving them is often difficult.

Employees who work under a bully manager often clam up preferring not to openly express their opinions around their peers. Other symptoms that manifest themselves within an environment led by a bully may be a high turnaround rate of employees, poor attendance due to sickness, lack of enthusiasm, and toxic gossip.

Karma often gets the better of those who exhibit bully-like behaviour, particularly those who have not become self-aware of their actions. They, themselves, begin to sink lower into self-doubt, become increasingly absent due to sickness, and find that they are quickly losing any respect or admiration from their employees or peers, if they had any to begin with.

Those who are bullied at the workplace, whether it from their peers or managers, can, of course, file a complaint with the HR department. In Australia and some other western world countries, despite the highly penalising and protective measures in legislation put in place to prevent bullying and harassment, it is not an easy path for anyone to take. Without strong evidence being presented, it is

usually likely that the case will not succeed. In most cases, bullying occurs privately between two individuals with one word against the other as the only evidence. The other common concern is that employees who take a stand may risk the chance of having their name tarnished across the business community, especially in small cities where many of those in high positions in the corporate world are connected. There are, of course, those employees who have much less to lose in such scenarios and are, thus, more likely to strike and fight back against bullying and harassment.

So, what are some other options when bullying occurs?

Before taking any action, and I only speak from experience, one must first ask if the bullyish behaviour is directed only at you or across many other individuals. If it is the former, it's important to ask a few questions about oneself.

Why am *I* being targeted and not others?

What am *I* doing wrong which the others may be doing right?

However, if it is the latter case, there is an obvious case of bullying which should be addressed. But unfortunately, it usually requires a high level of courage and conviction, and usually, initially by one person to do so because most people who are bullied are already in such a state of fear and suppression that, to poke the bear, a popular saying, is the last thing most want to do.

I tend to be the first to attract the ire of insecure office bullies because of my tendency to vocalise my opinions without sugar-coating them or when promoting new and innovative ideas to improve the business. For those that know me, I can be quite direct. To some, this may come across as challenging and threatening rather than being useful and constructive. For me, the good news is that, in those instances in which I worked alongside my peers, I usually form very good relationships with them, even former bullies, although usually at a later time after any dust had settled. However, if the bully in question had the power to inflict any adverse effect regarding my employment or my professional brand, that would be an entirely different story. I tend to avoid conflict, but everyone has their own personal boundary, and if transgressed, sometimes warrants fighting back.

This leads me nicely to the topic of whether it's worthing fighting back or laying low when a bully at the workplace is dictating your every moves on a day-to-day basis and then attempts to put you in your place by admonishing you.

The answer is not straightforward because we all have various personalities.

One could take the reactive approach, as in the sci-fi comedy movie, [\*Back to the Future\*](#), when Marty McFly, played by Michael J Fox, after being called a chicken, rebukes, 'No one calls me chicken!', and fights back. In the workplace, it wouldn't be physical but rather, an emotional altercation would ensue. I daresay that this tactic would be, usually, in favour of the bully. Although, I did witness a heated moment back in my telco days when one chap with an exceedingly strong German accent did just that in an online meeting. All of us were in stunned silence, but this guy was not answerable, in any way, to the bully leading the meeting. It was, moreover, unusual insofar that the bully was admonishing more than one person at the same time. Bullies are normally careful enough to keep their discourses with their targets on a purely one-to-one basis.

Another approach would be just to take the bullying and lie low and well below the parapet as much as possible. This is, unfortunately, what mostly tends to happen in the workplace. It's the '*I don't want any more trouble than I have*' attitude. To take a movie analogy, being Milton, the guy with the red stapler, who can't fight back and just sucks it all up in the comedy movie that *every* professional must watch, [\*Office Space\*](#). This is the response most bullies hedge their bets and capitalise from.

And then there's the silent and emotionless approach, which occurs far less frequently. This is the moment when James Dean in the immortal classic, [\*Rebel Without a Cause\*](#), watches a gang of bullies take apart his car while he sits there, disciplined and with little emotion, quietly thinking on how to deal with this later. However, it is the most effective approach and one that catches most bullies off guard, sometimes leading them to their demise. In the first two cases, bullies tend to expect either a fight or a submission, but with the third, those who are being bullied are smart enough to wait it out but gathering as much evidence as possible to support any allegation of bullying. Most of us are either too emotional or too fearful to take this approach, but it is, by far, the most effective one.

As I mentioned before, I personally form good relationships with most anyone I have worked with, and furthermore, I am very supportive when needed to assist anyone I had worked with as well. On those occasions where I have transgressed into someone's personal boundary, I humbly apologise, but equally so, I expect those who have transgressed my personal boundary to do the same. In this regard, it's an effective and constructive way not to hold grudges against people.

We will always have bullies in this world whether they reside in the playground or in the corporate world. In the corporate world, there seem to be an increasing number of new bits of legislation to protect employees from bullies, but ultimately, most cases of bullying are overlooked and employees are usually afraid to make a stand against them. Corporate bullies capitalise on this but they can be caught off guard if one plucks up the courage to take a stand.