

5 Types of Workplace Bullies and How to Identify Them

Fast Company | Megan Carle | May 16, 2023

Bullying is about one person dominating another. It's about dehumanizing, degrading, and devaluing targets. It's about power and control.

My first memory of being bullied was when I was 10.

It was December 1975, a typical winter day in Spokane, Washington. Grandpa Mike and I had made the two-block trek to Cannon Hill Park, where I would hit the ice and skate my heart out for my audience of one.

I was putting on my best performance ever when suddenly I stopped mid-pirouette. Five girls from my school had surrounded me. "Is that her?" asked one, pointing at me. "Is that the stuck-up one?"

It had been such a great day. I had been fearless, attacking the ice, feeling so special and safe. Then, in a blink, my feelings of joy and triumph were undercut.

BULLYING HAPPENS EVERYWHERE

Bullying not only happens at neighborhood ice skating ponds, school playgrounds, and parks—it happens in workplaces as well. It's confusing. It trips us up. It blindsides us. It makes us unsteady on our skates.

When bullied as a child, I fled to the safety of my grandpa. When bullied at work, Ruth Namie didn't flee. Instead, in 1997, she and her husband, Gary Namie, founded the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI). In the nearly three decades since, workplace bullying has been studied more deeply, but little has been written from the perspective of targets, those who are preyed upon. First, we need to understand the fundamentals of the game.

For starters, just what is bullying? It's not simple rudeness or incivility. It's not healthy debate, creative tension, or a difference of opinion. It's not about being challenged or pushed or having a bad day. And it's not about conflict.

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WHAT IS BULLYING AT WORK?

It's so important to understand that workplace bullying is real, has a name, has perpetrators and targets. Why? Because unless you name it, you can't deal with it. The WBI defines workplace bullying as "repeated, health-harming mistreatment by one or more employees of an employee: abusive conduct that takes the form of verbal abuse; or behaviors perceived as threatening, intimidating, or humiliating; work sabotage; or some combination of the above."

Workplace bullying has affected almost 80 million U.S. workers, according to a 2021 WBI survey. To provide some context, that means one out of every two workers have been affected

by workplace bullying. One out of two. The survey goes on to highlight that 67% of workplace bullies are men, and their preferred targets are women. The preferred targets of female bullies are also women. Although one in three employees reports workplace bullying, workplace bullying remains "the indiscussable," says the WBI.

So let's discuss it.

Workplace bullying changes lives. It instills doubt in people who are confident and competent. It freezes clear-minded, goal-oriented, visionary leaders in a fog of self-doubt, unable to move forward, backward, or sideways.

Bullying leads to the loss of talent. Because the targets of bullying can be at literally any level of the organization, this loss of talent occurs across the entire breadth of any company that tolerates or enables bullying. Bullying forces targets to leave organizations in which they're still contributing at a high level with plenty of runway ahead.

FIVE TYPES OF WORKPLACE BULLIES

Bullying is either public or private. It is either overt or covert. Overt bullying behavior is obvious: it's yelling, banging on a table; aggressive, threatening behavior. Covert bullying behavior is hidden, nuanced, subtle. It's quiet and confusing, at times delivered in one-on-one meetings. Public bullying is witnessed by others. Private bullying is witnessed by only the bully and the target.

The In-Your-Face (IYF): The public/overt bully's sole purpose is to denigrate someone in a public setting. The IYF bullies want witnesses. They want everyone to know that they're in power, they're in charge, they're untouchable. In the workplace, they're the managers who yell, bang the table, point the finger.

The Rat-Face (RF): The public/covert bully lives to trip you up. This bully's name is taken from an American slang term that I first heard when I was 11 and my mom took me to the movie *All the President's Men*. I learned that "rat- f*#king" was a way to create confusion. In the workplace, RF bullies play dirty, sabotage your work, and can be easy to spot because they're the ones who like to laugh at other people's expense. Like the IYFs, they want you to know they're in power. Unlike the IYFs, though, they're sly and sneaky; they want to keep targets and everyone else guessing. In the workplace, RFs are the managers who intentionally mispronounce your name, plant their operatives on your team, and look at their phone and laugh while glancing at you.

The Two-Face (TF): The private/overt bully is first-team "all you" in public but humiliates and diminishes you in private. Like the IYF and RF bullies, TF bullies want you to know they're in power, they're in charge. But their beatdown will happen in private, after singing the target's praises in public. In the workplace, they're the managers who tell anyone and everyone what a great job you're doing and, in private, cut you down with biting, demeaning language.

The About-Face (AF): The private/covert bully is a special breed of bully, so named because just when the AF seems to be heading one way, this brand of bully will abruptly pull a 180. Tough to put your finger on, the passive-aggressiveness of the AF is nuanced, subtle, hidden in the shadows. AF bullies are particularly gifted at making you believe they are your friend when

they're simply using you and the information you share with them to direct their desired narrative, while advancing their own agenda and interests. In the workplace, AFs are the passive-aggressive managers who ask you about your meeting when they've already been updated about it from their precisely placed operatives.

Gaslighters: Within the covert bullying family is a particularly disturbing kind of bully, the Gaslighter, which lands somewhere between the Rat-Face and the About-Face. Gaslighters (whose name comes from the 1944 film *Gaslight*, starring Ingrid Bergman as the target) overachieve in their ability to trick and deceive. Gaslighters are the ultimate at head games. They want you to know they're in power, that they're in charge by keeping you guessing and off-balance. In the workplace, gaslighting is done by the managers who sabotage your work, ask you for information you've already given them, move meeting locations and then ask, "Where have you been?"

Fun fact? Workplace bullies can be one type, several types, or all types. In other words, one day a target might be contending with an In-Your-Face, and the next day—or, better yet, later that day—the same bully shows up as a Rat-Face. The common theme? Power and control, either real or imagined.

Targets are left unsteady, unsafe, and uncertain about which technique is going to come at them next. The cumulative effect of the constant bullying assault is debilitating, paralyzing, and frightening, making the targets feel as if they are disappearing. Targets end up feeling confused, crazy, and responsible for their own deterioration. Because of bullying, I've seen once-confident people start to doubt their capabilities—one in particular stared back at me in the mirror.

At the park that day in Spokane so long ago, I experienced In-Your-Face bullying in a very typical way—name-calling. In today's culture, being called "stuck up" would be like leaving someone open on Snapchat or not following someone back on Instagram. It was a public display meant to trip me up.

And it did—even if the grown-up version I'd later face would make it pale by comparison.