

CHAPTER 4

'IT WAS ONLY A JOKE!'

An injury is much sooner forgotten than an insult.

Philip Chesterfield

Workplaces are made up of people who might not have anything in common except their place of employment, so naturally there will be difficult or tense moments where a degree of patience and tolerance is needed, when it is wise to follow old adages such as 'Silence is golden' and 'Patience is a virtue'. Because of this, you might excuse abusive behaviour for some time before the truth finally dawns - you are being bullied.

How can I tell if I am being bullied?

Bullying exists if there is persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse of power or unfair punishment, which undermines your self-confidence and makes you feel upset, threatened, humiliated, vulnerable and highly stressed. As we have said before, isolated incidents of aggressive behaviour, while to be condemned, should not be described as bullying. In the workplace environment there can be conflicts and interpersonal difficulties, many of which are industrial relations issues that should be dealt with through the appropriate industrial relations channels. Only behaviour that is ***systematic, ongoing*** and ***deliberately hurtful*** should be regarded as bullying. This can range from the obvious (actual physical harm) to the far more subtle, for example, a dishonest style of dealing with people and issues, such as the 'two-faced' person who

pretends to be nice while sabotaging you, plays favourites or makes nasty, rude, hostile remarks directly to you (behind closed doors) while putting on a pleasant face for others.

She had them all fooled. She'd make 'witty' comments, starting off with, 'I say this because I care about you', or 'I'm telling you this for your own good' or 'I mean this in the nicest possible way', and then say something malicious about my clothing ('your suburban-Mum look'), my hair ('Did you cut your own hair again?'), my make-up ('Did you use a trowel to put on your make-up this morning, dear?'), or my dress-sense ('There must have been a black-out and she dressed in the dark.'). Ads for Jenny Craig and Weight Watchers were left on my desk. Most days I ended up in tears. The others didn't understand – they thought she was being nice. (Nicole, 33, insurance officer)



If you are unsure if your boss or supervisor or co-worker may have crossed the line between bad behaviour and bullying, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does this person already have a reputation for bullying behaviour?
- Has your mental or physical health been affected by this person's behaviour towards you?
- Are you the subject of damaging gossip or innuendo?
- Are you on the receiving end of regular verbal abuse, put-downs, insults, obscene or threatening gestures, or attempts to humiliate or belittle you in front of other staff, clients or customers?
- Are you being ignored, isolated from work activities, excluded from information or being over-monitored in your workplace?
- Are your efforts being constantly undervalued or your work regularly criticised unjustifiably?
- Is this person claiming credit for your work or ideas?

- Does this person repeatedly give you impossible tasks, set unrealistic deadlines for work or pressure you to work longer hours?
- Are Post-it notes left on your desk or your work instructions being sent by email so that no face-to-face discussions take place?
- Have you been demoted, had responsibility taken away, had your telephone removed from your desk, been moved from your office or had your work circumstances similarly changed without any warning or consultation?
- Are your work guidelines being constantly changed?
- Are your applications for leave or promotion being refused or has already approved leave been abruptly cancelled?
- Is your work performance being deliberately sabotaged or impeded?

If you answer yes to several of these questions, you are probably being bullied or, at the very least, the behaviour is inappropriate in the workplace. Remember, behaviour does not need to be violent to be considered bullying – it can be as simple as a continued negative response to your contributions in meetings (such as sighs, eye-rolling, condescending comments), continual hovering over you, ignoring you or constant accusations of incompetence. As long as it is persistent and prolonged in nature and consciously done, it is bullying behaviour. If the behaviour is affecting your work performance, your personal relationships, your self-esteem or your physical or mental well-being, you are being bullied.

If the behaviour is only occasional, triggered by a difference of opinion between you and the offender or by opposing working styles, *it is not bullying*. No job is free from stress. We can't work in isolation, and we can't insist on working only with compatible people. Workplaces are made up of individuals with

different skills, ages, levels of education, background and ethnic origin, and we have to accept that we will not get on with everyone. Difficult or obnoxious personalities, whether supervisors, co-workers, customers or clients, are an unavoidable part of working life and, to a certain degree, we have to tolerate such people.

Some of our interviewees suggested that, because females are 'over-sensitive', they are more likely to interpret certain behaviours as bullying.



Gives me the shits, frankly, that I have to waste my time on all this political correctness when I'm so busy. Women are too sensitive. Give me men any day. I make no bones about it, I am tough to work for. I'm the boss, I tell them what to do. If I shout at them, the men take it on the chin and will still have a beer with me after work. But the women... they turn on the waterworks. (Clive, 65, hotel manager)

Where do I draw the line?

If you make your distress obvious, often the offender's response will be along the following lines:

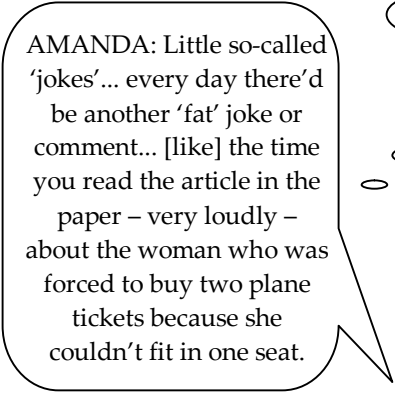
- 'It was only a joke.'
- 'Don't you have a sense of humour?'
- 'You've gotta be tough in this game.'
- 'You're really paranoid, you know that?'
- 'Why don't you grow up!'
- 'You're being over-sensitive.'
- 'It was just a bit of fun.'
- 'Learn to take it, or else!' (implied threat)
- 'You're reading something into this which just isn't there.'

In other words, *it's your fault*. That's the bully's way – blame the victim. *You* are the one at fault. *You* are the one who lacks a sense of humour.

To assess whether the behaviour is bullying, you need to make an ‘intention and interpretation’ assessment.

Intention: The joker who deliberately sets out to hurt you, and continues with the behaviour despite your distress, is a *bully*. Bullies intend to hurt and they repeat their behaviour over time.

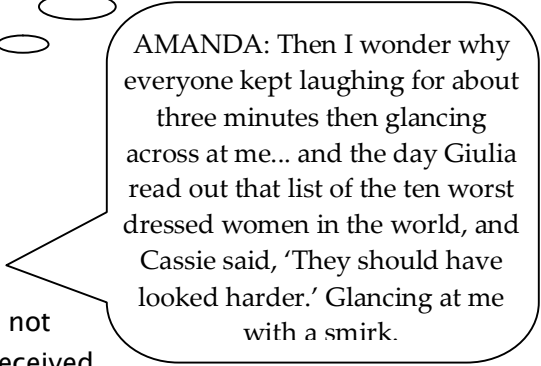
Interpretation: A comment that one person finds highly amusing and harmless can be hurtful or offensive to another. Humour is a very personal thing. Though sometimes caustic, jokes play a vital part in bridging differences. If we can laugh at the things that separate us, they lose their power to divide. So don’t rush off to the union with a complaint. First, document the incidents and think carefully about them. Ask yourself: Could I be over-reacting? Were those criticisms valid, even though harshly delivered? Does this person just have an unfortunate manner?



AMANDA: Little so-called ‘jokes’... every day there’d be another ‘fat’ joke or comment... [like] the time you read the article in the paper – very loudly – about the woman who was forced to buy two plane tickets because she couldn’t fit in one seat.



CASSIE: It was funny. It wasn’t directed at you.



AMANDA: Then I wonder why everyone kept laughing for about three minutes then glancing across at me... and the day Giulia read out that list of the ten worst dressed women in the world, and Cassie said, ‘They should have looked harder.’ Glancing at me with a smirk.

Sometimes a joker may not know when to stop. He received a laugh the first time, liked the reaction and kept the joke running, selfishly enjoying the response from his peers without considering your feelings. Some people try to hide their

personal inadequacy and lack of people skills behind humour, without realising they are being cruel. However, teasing and jokes are only fun if both parties involved agree that they are fun. When particular behaviour has an ongoing negative effect on your professional or personal life, it is time to take a stand.

Am I being oversensitive?

Bullies often get away with their conduct by making victims feel it is their fault, that they are being hypersensitive or paranoid. Under the pretence of friendship or humour, they make damaging or insulting or inappropriate remarks. Remember: if someone's conduct repeatedly hurts or offends you and the attacker does not stop after a personal approach, *you are being bullied*. Remind yourself: You have the right to be treated with respect and dignity.

However, some people *are* more sensitive than others. Behaviour that one person will tolerate or shrug off could impact seriously on another's self-esteem and physical and mental health. According to American psychologist Elaine Aron, 15 to 20 percent of people suffer from a genetic condition, Sensory Processing Sensitivity. These Highly Sensitive People (HSP) digest information and experiences more deeply than others, feel things (and become overwhelmed by them) long before anyone else, and have the least resistance to stress. HSPs may be the ones who seemingly make false accusations of bullying against their supervisor or manager because, for a HSP, being 'constructively criticised' is tantamount to standing in front of a firing squad. They take offence easily and are more likely than others to misinterpret the tone of emails.⁷⁷

Should I stand up to the bully?

Standing up to a bully can be daunting, particularly if the bullying – and the consequent build-up of your stress levels and loss of your self-esteem – has been going on for some time. Employees who are unduly shy, lack education or learning ability, or have physical disability or sensory impairment, are known to be unwilling to complain. You may even blame yourself for the abuse. Remember, you have the right to be treated with respect and dignity, and to work in an atmosphere free from aggression and fear.

It is most likely that your attempt to reason with the bully will be unsuccessful but, if you feel the need to clear the air, take time to think about your approach. If the bully is a colleague or co-worker, you should be able to face the person and express your point-of-view. Avoid appearing aggressive; focus on the unacceptable behaviour rather than attacking the person. Don't stand over the bully as this will make him feel intimidated. Communicate at eye level, explaining calmly how the incidents are affecting you. Try not to dissolve into tears or otherwise show your distress; this will make you appear weak and vulnerable and the bully will feel confident that he has got you where he wants you.

If the person bullying you is your supervisor or boss, state that the behaviour is having a detrimental effect on your work performance and you would like it to stop.

It is possible (though not likely) that the 'bully' is blind to the effect his behaviour has on you and, once this is brought to his attention, that behaviour will end. Marnie's case (on the next page) is unusual.



I stood up to her and she backed off. I couldn't believe it was so easy. If only I had done it months ago. She started on another girl then, but I said, 'Leave her alone or I'll report you.' You wouldn't believe how different the atmosphere is now. (Marnie, 28, nurse)

If the person apologises because he genuinely did not realise the consequences of his actions and the behaviour stops, try to put it behind you. His actions were clumsy or stupid or selfish, but the degree of hurt was unintended. Move on.

Regrettably, our own experiences and our research reveal that it is rarely possible to stop a workplace bully with a personal approach. Most bullies do not care how their victims feel. In the overwhelming majority of cases, the bully will become defensive, refuse to accept your grievance, and counter-attack. He may try to put the blame on you by belittling your work, accuse you of harassing him, or complain about your attitude in an attempt to humiliate you in front of your witness. Standing up to a bully, in fact, usually only antagonises him further.



He just looked at me blankly, as though I was an annoying insect. With a superior look on his face, he said, 'Eric, you have always been an extremely difficult person. This latest behaviour – manufacturing a complaint against me – is intolerable. Your attitude needs to change substantially if you wish to remain in your position. If you don't like how management works here, you have the option of finding alternative employment.'
(Eric, 36, IT consultant)

Though your attempt to reconcile has not succeeded, this effort could stand you in good stead if you later pursue a formal complaint.

What if the behaviour continues?

Many victims put up with bullying because they need the job or they love their work; the workplace might be convenient to home (that is, minimal travel to and from work) or they are close to retirement age and know they will not be able to get another job – the reasons are many.

Other victims will leave as soon as they can, or seemingly accept the bullying but start applying for other positions, trying to keep on the ‘right’ side of the bully in order to receive a ‘good’ reference when they go. The problem is that the bully will then turn his attention to the next victim, causing a rapid turnover of staff over time and depriving the organisation of years of experience and training. If more victims were prepared to report bullies, to stand up to them and take their fight to court, more importance would be placed on workplace bullying as a genuine health and safety issue.

Your options with regard to taking action against the bully are outlined in Chapters 10 to 12.

*Never be bullied into silence. Never allow yourself to be made a victim.
Accept no one's definition of your life; define yourself.*

Harvey Fierstein
