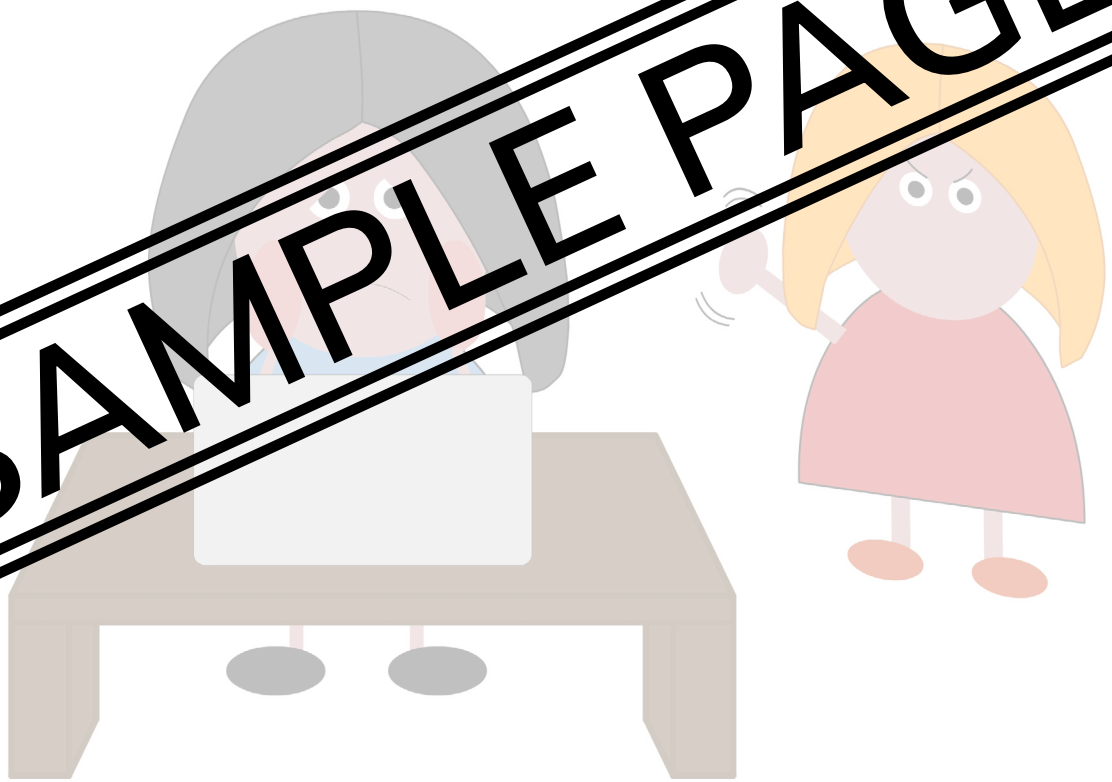
BULLYING IN THE WORKPLACE

SAMPLE PAGES



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Introduction

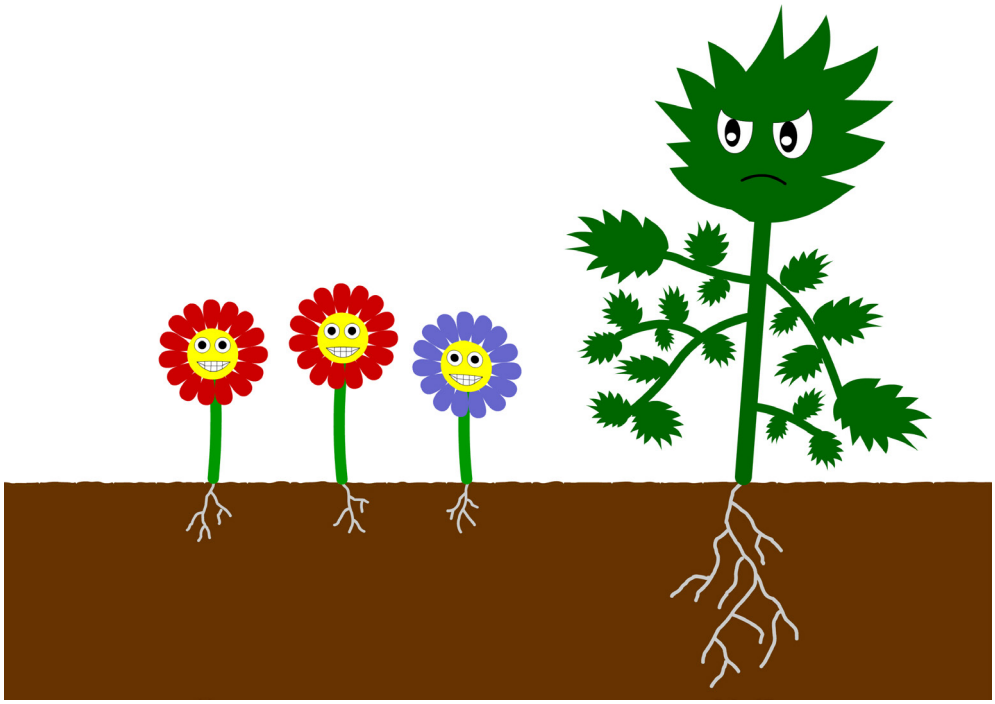
Most people associate bullying with the school playground. Perhaps they were bullied at school or witnessed others being bullied. Maybe they were even the one that carried out the bullying! However, bullying is also a growing problem in the workplace. There are endless reports each year that highlight this problem in organisations all over the world. As with school bullying, workplace bullying should be tackled as soon as it is reported otherwise it will fester and grow. This pack provides a company wide approach to bullying and includes guidance for businesses on how to manage bullying on a number of levels.

It can be difficult to investigate an incidence of workplace bullying because, in many ways, it is a secret activity. The target will often refuse to discuss the situation out of fear of reprisal, for example they may worry about being bullied even more, or fear they will be demoted from their current position or that they may even lose their job. Therefore tackling bullying at work can be a complex and delicate issue and it must be handled sensitively. It is also true that certain aspects of bullying can be incredibly subjective and what one person takes to heart another person will simply ignore. So what exactly is bullying in the workplace and how can it be dealt with effectively?

Staff must be kept informed and must know what action to take if they suspect anyone of bullying or any other form of inappropriate behaviour. Education is the key here and staff must be kept informed about the steps to take to lodge a complaint about bullying.

The second myth is ‘It’s About Programs’. Of course there are many good anti-bullying programs which are being carried out in organisations around the world, but preventing bullying is more about a process that once started has no expiration date. It must be firmly embedded in the culture of the organisation.

Finally, bullying is not really about bullying! This may sound ludicrous, but bullying is actually about the climate that managers set, and the culture that staff create from that climate. Bullying must be seen for what it is. Bullying must not be tolerated in any shape or form. As soon as there is evidence of bullying it must be weeded out and not allowed the time, space or energy to cultivate and grow.



Ultimately, bullies thrive in a work setting if they are not confronted. Initially it is up to the target of the bullying or any bystanders (people who witness the bullying) to report the unacceptable behaviour to a manager or the HR department. Those who witness the bullying may keep silent for the same reasons as the target, but it is only by taking a stand against the bully that things will change. Being able to recognise the different types of workplace bullying and being aware of how to address this behaviour are the keys to stamping out bullying in the workplace.

HANDOUT 1

What Exactly is Bullying?

What does bullying mean to you? Can you write a definition for bullying in one sentence below?

What is a bully? Write your definition below.

HANDOUT 2

Look at the following scenarios. Which ones would you class as bullying?

1. A new employee, a young man, is continually being pushed around 'playfully' by another worker, also a man. He constantly pushes the new man into cardboard boxes in the warehouse but he is just 'having a laugh'.

Bullying? YES ☐ NO ☐

2. A group of women regularly gossip about a fellow worker, also a woman, and comment on her hair, make-up and clothing.

Bullying? YES ☐ NO ☐

3. Nobody ever sits next to a certain member of the team. Nobody will work with them and during team activities they never get picked for a team.

Bullying? YES ☐ NO ☐

4. Somebody has been writing insulting remarks about a member of the team and pinning them to the notice board for the past few weeks.

Bullying? YES ☐ NO ☐

5. A group of people constantly ridicule another individual because they are of a different ethnic origin/culture/religion, but they are only 'having a laugh'.

Bullying? YES ☐ NO ☐

6. A group of people are passing round a photo of another member of the team via social media. They are making rude comments about the photo.

Bullying? YES ☐ NO ☐

There are an increasing number of websites that invite people to comment on the abilities and skills of people from certain professions, such as the education or health sectors. Some of the comments posted to these sites have been extremely insulting to teachers, school principals, doctors, nurses and many other professionals, while others are vulgar and totally unacceptable. Some people have reported that abusive pictures have been created of them and posted on websites or sent to others via picture messaging on mobile phones. This is an extremely cruel and vindictive type of bullying and it causes immense damage to the reputations of those involved.

Give out **HANDOUT 3** and ask the group to answer the questions.

Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a common type of bullying which occurs typically within the work environment. The expression is based on a 1944 film called ‘Gaslight’ which starred Ingrid Bergman as a naive wife and Charles Boyer as her evil husband. Boyer tries to convince Bergman that she is going mad. He uses all sorts of devious tricks and she even begins to believe that she is losing her mind.

In a similar way, the bullying form of gaslighting is an underhand and subtle form of manipulation. The bully will use every opportunity to undermine their target. In fact, the procedure is usually so subtle that the target of gaslighting starts to question their own ability. They may start to feel inadequate and their confidence and self-esteem will start to suffer. Gaslighting is a classic abuse of power and is a manipulative power game. It is bullying through and through.

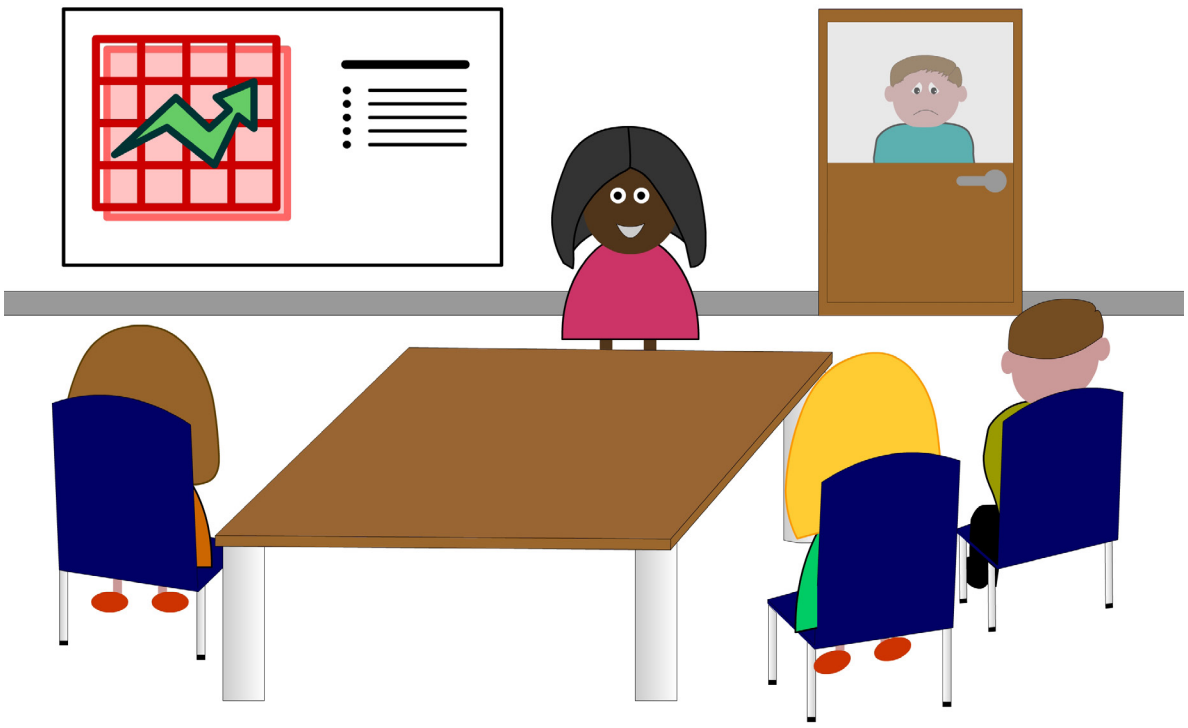
Very often a bully using gaslighting techniques will fail to follow correct company procedures, and they will also ‘forget’ to minute meetings or keep accurate records of complaints. They may also withhold information from the target, leave them out of crucial meetings, or invite them to meetings but change the times constantly, often at the last minute.

Another way a bully uses gaslighting is by continually moving the goal-posts or changing elements of an employee’s job description without discussing the matter with them first. Eventually, the target is totally confused, undermined, and very often takes time off work due to stress.

Signs of Workplace Bullying

There are a number of typical signs of workplace bullying. These are often evident to the target as well as bystanders and other people who may witness the bullying. Some of the signs to look out for include:

- Obvious abuse and misuse of power by a manager, director etc—this usually makes the target feel uncomfortable or humiliated.
- A noticeable atmosphere of constant criticism and belittlement—duties and responsibilities are removed from the target without a proper or valid explanation.
- Someone has a loud, overbearing manner accompanied by bouts of shouting as well as aggressive behaviour or threats towards certain ones.
- A colleague is constantly being ridiculed and always made the subject of jokes—this is often excused as 'just breaking the ice' or 'simply having a laugh'.
- A specific person is continually shown up in front of others—they are criticised in front of other employees and made to feel uncomfortable.
- A member of the team is being constantly excluded—they are not invited to group events or meetings and others are encouraged to ignore them.



Having a fit-for-purpose anti-bullying policy in place is not just for the benefit of employees. A company also benefits when there is zero tolerance for workplace bullying. If a company allows bullying to go unchecked it can have a negative impact on the business as a whole. Workplaces with high rates of bullying also experience negative consequences including:

- Low staff morale with a knock-on effect of decreased productivity.
- Financial impact due to legal costs or staff costs spent on bullying investigations.
- Increased bullying-related staff absences.
- High staff turnover rates.
- Poor teamwork, lack of collaboration and cooperation between staff at all levels.
- Lack of trust, professionalism and loyalty from staff.

When bullying goes unchecked it becomes easier for people to continue bullying, especially when the bullying is the indirect, subtle type. However, even if a company takes bullying seriously, and the bully faces serious consequences such as formal disciplinary hearings, transfers, or dismissals, this can still have a negative impact on the company.

Ultimately, the key to workplace bullying is a clear, robust anti-bullying policy. However, it is important to point out that high standards start at the top. The behaviour of senior members of staff and HR professionals is tremendously important because they set the standards which others must follow. If staff can see that those at the top set a good example in relation to behaviour, communication and team spirit, they are more likely to follow their lead and conduct themselves accordingly.

A successful company is one where there is:

- An atmosphere of trust and excellence
- Clear company values, goals and objectives
- Opportunities for advancement and development
- A low staff attrition rate
- Zero tolerance for workplace bullying!