



How to stop bullying in your workplace



There is no place for bullying in today's society. Not only is it incredibly harmful to the victim on so many levels, but there can also be awful repercussions for your business too, as it...

- + Puts your responsibility to provide a safe and healthy working environment into question.
- + Can lead to disciplinary and grievance situations (which are stressful for everyone involved).
- + Creates a bad culture, which impacts your team's morale and motivation.
- + Increases employee turnover and recruitment costs.
- + Ruins your company's reputation and employee branding.

Allowing bullying to happen in your workplace is a big mistake.

But what defines bullying in a workplace setting?

There's no legal definition, unlike with harassment. However, Acas says bullying is 'offensive, intimidating, malicious, or insulting behaviour, or abuse, or misuse of power through means that undermine, humiliate, denigrate, or injure the recipient'.

It typically involves a power relationship. That could mean a manager and subordinate, but it can include other dynamics, too, including groups of employees misusing their authority.

It's important to note that bullying doesn't have to take place in the workplace. Today, we see a lot of bullying take place outside of work, and even online. This can include via social media, text messaging, and even at social events unrelated to work.

And bullying can happen for any reason. It doesn't have to be due to a protected characteristic, as would be the case with discrimination, for example.

The entire issue around bullying is a complex one. That's because the UK currently has no legal position on it, and no one piece of legislation that tackles workplace bullying.

That being said, as an employer, you do have a legal responsibility to protect the health and wellbeing of your employees, as well as their safety, as per the Health and Safety at Work Act.

Is bullying really a big problem?

Yes. Bullying can affect any workplace, and it has huge potential to destroy your workplace culture entirely.

In a study by CIPD, 15% of employees reported that they had experienced bullying. That's twice the amount that reported harassment.

The good news is, there's no evidence to say that incidents of bullying have increased since the 90s. However, people's attitudes towards challenging bullying behaviour have changed for the better, and that's a positive step.

Sometimes, it may be the case that rather than being an act of aggression from a colleague, bullying reflects organisational culture and an ill-advised management approach. That may mean that unacceptable behaviour goes unchallenged or reported issues aren't responded to.

In other cases, managers may report that employees are oversensitive to feedback or constructive criticism. While this may be justified, it's still important to take allegations seriously and investigate them thoroughly.

How do you tackle bullying?

While it's vital to respond to reported incidents of bullying, it's equally important to put preventative measures in place, too.

That means creating a culture where bullying is simply not accepted in any form.

The first step towards this goal is to create a policy that is clear about your stance on bullying, what behaviours are unacceptable, and how incidents will be dealt with, as well as the possible consequences if someone is found to be bullying. This should be communicated to all employees, including managers.

Next, you should look at your leadership team. These are the people who have a big influence on how people behave, and indeed the entire workplace culture.

These people need to demonstrate your values and how bullying behaviour will not be tolerated. This means fast action when issues are reported, showing everyone respect, being amicable, and raising concerns privately and confidentially.

You may also consider learning and development as a tool to stop and prevent bullying in your workplace.



Awareness training is a good place to start, to make everyone aware of what constitutes bullying behaviours, as well as what to do if they know it's happening around them.

Likewise, coaching and mentoring training may be suitable to help managers focus on interpersonal relationships and to diffuse any potential problems before they arise.

Taking preventative action has many benefits, but one of the most valuable is arguably the way it can encourage open and honest communication within the business, creating a more comfortable environment for everyone. It can also be a huge point of growth for managers, as it makes them more confident when dealing with conflict and difficult situations.

What's important is that everyone within the business is on the same page when it comes to bullying. Managers need to be confident in dealing with issues, and employees need to feel confident that managers will act appropriately (if that belief isn't there, it makes it far less likely that problems will be reported in the first place).

What to do if someone is being bullied

Even if you've worked tirelessly to create a culture where bullying isn't tolerated, it's possible that there will come a time when you receive a complaint of bullying in your business.

It may be due to new hires, fractious relationships, or a shift in dynamics, for example, but what's important is that your employees all know how to raise a complaint, who they go to, and that they feel confident in doing so.

Typically, a complaint should be raised with a line manager. However, if that line manager is alleged to be bullying, then it can go to someone more senior. This should all be outlined in your bullying policy.

Complaints don't have to be reported in writing, but if they're not, it's good practice for whoever is dealing with the complaint to arrange a meeting with the complainant to record the allegations.

It's worth noting that in some cases, someone may raise a complaint, but not want to take it further (potentially for fear of reprisal), but it is your duty to respond to an allegation once it's been reported. If you fail to challenge or investigate it, it could suggest that you are colluding with or condoning the behaviour.



Take any allegation seriously. It's likely been a difficult decision for the complainant to report the issue, and it may have been going on for a while. Reassure them that you will investigate, show concern for their wellbeing (you may offer counselling as part of your duty of care), but don't take action without properly investigating.

Remember, you also have a duty of care to the person accused of bullying during your investigation. That means ensuring clear and timely communication and providing support where appropriate.

You also need to be cautious not to place your own bias on the situation. Even in circumstances that may seem minor, you must take into account the perception of the individual. The reported incident may be the straw that broke the camel's back, so to speak. Leading to that event may have been a stream of other incidents or microaggressions that you don't yet know about.

Investigate the complaint fully, fairly, and thoroughly. At this point, it may be beneficial to involve both professional support and someone independent to investigate. This could be someone from your HR team, outsourced HR support (hi!), or a senior manager from another department in your business.

Inform the alleged bully of the complaint against them, and if necessary, suspend them on full pay (it should be made clear that this is a precautionary measure only). If the allegation is serious enough to consider suspension, it should be reviewed ongoing, and timebound.

Where this isn't necessary, you may arrange to move the alleged bully to another department or location to prevent contact between parties. Don't move the person who reported the incident though, as it may be viewed as a punishment on them.

While you investigate, you may find witnesses wish to remain anonymous. Whilst you may be able to do this, make no guarantee, because reports often make it easy to identify people, and in cases of cyber bullying, online accounts may need to be screenshotted, etc. (while we're on this subject, it's important not to disclose any personal information while investigating this type of bullying).

It may also be the case that if the complaint reached a disciplinary hearing, the alleged bully may wish to challenge claims, which will lead to identities being revealed.

After thorough investigation, if you believe bullying has taken place, you must take action according to your relevant procedure (usually this would mean disciplinary action). At this stage, you must remember your responsibility to demonstrate intolerance of bullying behaviour, although dismissal should not be an automatic consequence.



For advice on conducting disciplinarys, ask us for a copy of our recent guide.

If, on the other hand, there is insufficient evidence of bullying, you must inform the complainant of how that decision has been reached and why no formal action will be taken. You must also inform the alleged bully of the outcome.

If the complaint is genuine, it's unlikely that there will be nothing to the allegations. It may be appropriate to consider learning and development needs for the alleged bully, and the company as a whole. You may also find the need to offer mediation to help rebuild the relationship between the employees involved.

However a complaint arises, it's extremely important that you take the necessary time and resource to deal with it properly. That includes investigation, resolution, and ensuring procedures are followed. What is equally, if not more, vital, is that you take proactive steps to implement the correct preventative measures in the first place.

This is something we can help your business to do. Give us a call to arrange a no obligation conversation.



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