



# Don't Be a Bystander to Abuse at Work



*It's an unfortunate fact of life—workplaces can sometimes be like schoolyard playgrounds. There's an in-crowd, an out crowd, cliques, petty squabbling, malicious gossip, and yes ... bullying and abuse.*

## Why Stick Your Neck Out?

You've seen it—someone doesn't fit in ... or gets on the wrong side of the office hot-head ... or makes the "rule-by-intimidation" person angry.

No one wants to be the object of hostility, so it's natural to keep a low profile when it happens to someone else. Hey, as long as the fire isn't coming your way, why stick your neck out? Right?

Wrong! Here's why: Because doing nothing means you're next. Studies show two frightening things about abusive work cultures.

## Don't Feed the Problem

**Employees mimic unchecked abusive behavior.** In other words, being a jerk is contagious. Every time you ignore workplace abuse, you increase your odds of becoming a victim yourself. Or worse, becoming what you despise: another bully.

**Simply observing abuse drives down productivity.** Why? Because witnessing abuse creates a negative emotional response that saps motivation, drains your energy, and takes your focus away from the work at hand.

This response is many times more intense and powerful than the response you would experience from a positive event, meaning that even a good work culture can be harmed by a few bad apples.

## Abusive Behavior

Abusive behavior includes but is not limited to:

- Yelling
- Interrupting
- Aggressively or intentionally violating personal space
- Giving the silent treatment
- Demeaning comments
- Cutting or over-the-top criticism
- Direct or veiled insults
- Jokes at the victim's expense
- Gossip
- Backstabbing

So what can you do? Abusive behavior primarily comes in two forms—peer-to-peer abuse and superior-to-subordinate abuse.

Abuse from the boss is more common and trickier to deal with for obvious reasons, but there are effective, indirect ways to help head off abuse from either peers or superiors:

- **Offer support to the victim.** Ask how you can help.
- **Be a deflector.** Take the focus off the victim by changing the subject or making a joke.
- **Head off public bullying in meetings.** Lend your own authority and backing to someone who is being attacked unfairly.
- **Let the victim into the inner group.** (This one is huge.) Include them in social activities and water cooler chat.

- **Make bullies aware.** Tell the person the negative effect on the victim and others.
- **Let bullies know about their bad behavior.** If bullies express satisfaction, ask flatly, "Are you proud of making someone miserable? Is that something you look forward to when you wake up?"
- **Give sincere and public praise for a job well done.** You don't have to be a boss to do this!
- **Build a positive culture.** Use words like "we" instead of "us" and "them."
- **Watch your own behavior** toward those in subordinate positions. Lead by example.
- **Recognize everyone's humanity** and encourage others to do this as well. Bullies often feel justified abusing underachieving employees. Help overachieving bullies recognize that poor work performance doesn't merit abuse. After all, we can't all be above average—it's mathematically impossible. Some underachievers are doing their best, but are either simply overwhelmed or cast into the wrong role.
- **Go to management.** Weigh this option carefully. You may get labeled as a troublemaker or be set up for retaliation. Be sure to get permission from the victim first. His or her wishes should be considered. Not sure? Talk to the EAP. The professional will help you decide what to do and whether other risks exist in remaining silent.

You don't have to be Captain America to have a big impact on others. Consistent intervention has a cumulative effect on bad behavior. The more you stand up and do right by others, the more your fellow employees will gravitate to your leadership. And as the old saying goes, there's strength in numbers.