

# Recognizing and changing **TOXIC WORKPLACES**



# Recognizing and changing toxic workplaces

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Most workers have found themselves saying “I really don’t want to go to work tomorrow” at one point or another. But there’s a fine line between wanting an extra day off and dreading going to work. Employees who dread work could be working in a toxic environment, which hurts productivity, employee well-being, customer relationships, and more.

In this special report, we’ve collected the best of Business Management Daily’s advice on toxicity in the workplace, how to identify it, and how to prevent it. Whether you’re a small business, Fortune 500 company, in-person, remote, or hybrid — we’ve got the insight you need.

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# How to recognize a toxic work environment

Have you ever found yourself sitting in the parking lot dreading going to work? Does thinking about work make you physically ill? Did you ever consider quitting a job you once enjoyed? You may have experienced a toxic work environment. The problem is prevalent, with more people dealing with it than you think. Since most of us spend about half of our waking hours at work, there's plenty of time for workplace dysfunction to emerge.

Striking a balance between the people who work and the people who pay for that work can be tough. Those who offer money for someone else's labor may see themselves as benefactors, doing laborers a favor by giving them money. Coworkers throughout the office can also be a problem, as some have cutthroat mentalities when it comes to making themselves indispensable. Some employees may feel the need to overwork to meet production standards, leading to burnout, poor physical health, and depression.

## What should employers do?

First of all, toxic work environments have plagued the workforce for ages. Some lawyers practice nothing but employment law for this reason. Labor unions constantly introduce bills to congress in hopes of enacting positive change. Laws like the EEOC were passed precisely to make life better for underrepresented workers. Laws often change in favor of workers.

There are plenty of great jobs where respect, courtesy, work-life balance, and fairness are given to employees. Toxic work cultures, on the other hand, often occur in young companies where fair employment practices aren't yet established (though not exclusively). They may say, "we just do things this way," even when it makes for a hostile work environment where workers feel targeted and attacked.

The more studies show about various toxic behaviors—nepotism, gossip, overworking, discrimination, harassment—the clearer it becomes how those

behaviors hurt the company's bottom line. Consequences include high employee turnover, a lack of communication, and a level of stress that affects everyone's productivity. So if you've ever heard that "life's not fair" when complaining about your toxic workplace environment, you can proudly answer that such unfairness actually results in worse revenues.

## **How bad cultures hurt productivity**

We humans are simple creatures. All we want is to do a good job and make others happy. Unfortunately, some toxic people take advantage of this desire by pushing us to our wit's end and demanding endlessly more. They often have expectations that are completely unrealistic, urging employees to "tough it out" or "work harder" without considering how they don't have any way of meeting their goals.

Let's be clear: this isn't normal.

[Numerous studies show](#) how toxic workplaces negatively affect productivity, leading to disunity, depression, stress, and burnout, all of which spread like wildfire until people start leaving in droves. They would rather work anywhere else than spend another day feeling unsafe at work. And this is the problem: contrary to "tough love" ideologies that encourage rigid compliance, pushing employees into an unhealthy mental state doesn't actually get results.

There are plenty of ways to challenge people that don't hurt their self-worth and self-esteem. Yes, creating a healthy workplace may require a little imagination to incentivize people to do better, but it almost always gets far better results.

Few people want to commit 8 hours a day (minimum) away from home and family to spend their energies on someone else's project. Yes, they earn money as a result, but if it's just a means to an end—if they are an easily replaceable cog in a machine—they'll probably leave to find work elsewhere.

Creating a healthy, positive work environment takes effort from executives, management, human resources, coworkers, and administrators. But by failing to do so, you may drive your best workers off to find greener pastures.

## **What are the signs of a toxic work environment?**

Most US-based workers hear that they have things pretty good. The standard workweek is only 40 hours across 5 days, plus they usually receive some amount of paid time off and even a benefits package if they're lucky. Isn't this enough to make them feel valued? Not quite.

While fair compensation is important, one cannot overstate the importance of a healthy work environment. After all, this is where their time is actually spent. A healthy work environment is what makes employees feel good about the work they do, both in real-world value and in the eyes of their superiors. [Studies show](#) that employees who feel recognized do better work, which means that eliminating stressors and promoting self-care is good for the bottom line.

Toxic work environments, meanwhile, overlook the value of employee well-being, substituting pizza parties for raises or tone-deaf executive memos for real interaction. Team members often feel that their best isn't good enough, sometimes to the point that they project that mentality onto others and create a chain reaction of negative attitudes.

When employees feel good about their jobs, companies see lower turnover and less absenteeism. When they don't, the entire workplace can suffer from a depressing gloom that leads to all kinds of nasty behaviors.

So what does workplace toxicity look like? Ugly.

### **Overworked employees**

Probably the most common toxic work trait is the company culture where managers and executives demand that employees give 110 percent at all times. It's one thing to hear this from a childhood soccer coach, but for day-in, day-out

performance, 110 percent simply isn't realistic. We each have good days and bad days, and employers need to respect those limits.

In a full-time job, we are constantly finishing one task only to receive another from the queue. There's no end in sight—it's not worth rushing what has no possibility of ending. Just because a sales team aggressively sells a product doesn't mean workers are suddenly granted superhuman abilities. They need time to do the job, which means that no company goal is realistic until it realistically accounts for the time it takes to make it happen. If your delivery team is constantly hard-pressed to meet goals—or berated for not meeting them—you suffer from poor leadership, not a lack of ambition.

This problem can be especially bad for salaried employees whose offer letters specified that "some overtime will be required." Far too many employees stay at work til midnight every other week deploying software updates they were told wouldn't happen often. It's not what they signed up for, and eventually, those extra requirements will bite you in the butt.

If each employee's personal life is taking a backseat because they are constantly overworked, it may be a good idea to ask why this is happening. Is this what they signed up for?

### **It's unusually hard to make friends at work**

Work is weird. We spend all this time talking to coworkers, only to clock out and forget about them once we get home. However, workplace relationships are important. To do your best work, you sometimes need help from others, which means making friendships here and there. Toxic employees, however, refuse to be your friend on principle.

It's hard to be sure about what's going on here, but suffice it to say some people are bullies. They let their insecurities drive them to treat coworkers poorly, making it extremely difficult to dig into work for anyone whose job requires some collaboration.

You'd think that anyone who gets their kicks by excluding others wouldn't make it far in a company, but in toxic workplaces, those people sometimes occupy positions of power. If you're stuck working with a toxic boss, it can be a huge headache, and asking to make conditions better is helpful to both the employee and the company.

Professionalism is all about eliminating barriers to productivity. When cliques form that exclude outsiders, feelings get hurt. Once that happens, bringing one's focus back on work can be difficult.

### **Nepotism & favoritism**

It's not unheard of for companies to have an inner circle where people who get there first have the best opportunities. An employee may have worked their butt off for years, but a VP's wife gets back from maternity leave and suddenly earns a senior position. Nobody likes it, and it's extremely challenging to overcome.

There's nothing illegal about hiring people you already know, but when they don't have the skills or experience to do the job well—certainly not better than someone who put in time to gain knowledge and value—it can make everyone else feel taken for granted. It's frustrating.

Most of us understand that job offers and promotions should be based on merit, not family relations. In healthy work environments, this is true, but in toxic work environments, fear of speaking out against unfairness can lead to further problems.

Sometimes, favoritism has worse consequences, such as when relatives of higher-ups are accused of illegal behavior. Companies have been known to go out of their way to shield loved ones from criminal penalties, often times bordering on illegal maneuvers to protect them. This is not okay. Just because an executive wants to give their family member a job at the company doesn't mean everyone else should have to suffer the consequences.



## **Everybody's talking about you**

Office gossip is one of the most painful traits of a toxic workplace. We're all trying our best out there, and to hear your coworkers talking about you behind your back can be a devastating revelation for even the most self-assured person.

Talking about coworkers is unavoidable. Gossip, however, is different. Unlike regular workplace chatter, gossip is hurtful speech about someone's perceived weaknesses or incompetence, and most of the time it gets back to that person. If you find yourself in a gossip crossfire, the best thing you can do is refuse to take part or change the subject.

Being the subject of gossip can put your psychological safety at risk. Not only does it hurt your feelings, but it impairs your ability to focus on work and get things done. If you keep hearing the same rumors from multiple people, it may be worth your time to speak with a superior and let them know that these conversations are getting out of hand. Confronting these issues is challenging, but suffering in silence is worse.

## **The red flags of a toxic workplace**

Look, it isn't easy to find work these days. It's hard to pass up an opportunity to earn money, even when you don't feel great about how the job posting is advertised.

**Here are a few red flags that show up in listing for a new job:**

- "Work hard, play hard" language that urges employees to go the extra mile at all times
- Salary ranges with high upper limits but undefined lower limits
- Trial periods requiring new employees to work for free or for low wages
- Old job listings that have been reposted numerous times
- Use of the word "extreme[ly]" at any point

Remember: employees aren't the only ones receiving something in this transaction, despite how employers may try to make them feel. Executives don't want to work all the time, and the only way to achieve that is to hire laborers to do the work for them. If they frame this as an unbelievable opportunity, remember that their time is also valuable.

It's worth mentioning that in this age of tight job markets, some startups hope to capitalize on unpaid internship-type employment positions. No matter how well employers frame it, unpaid internships cannot pay rent or buy groceries. If you can't afford to pay your employees, you can't afford to be in business.

### **Preserve mental health at all costs**

Employees matter. While you may seek to hire them at the lowest rate possible, they have the skills you need to earn revenue, and they deserve to be paid. Don't expect to hire them at a subpar salary if you want excellent performance. While your interest is to keep costs down, their interests are to improve their lives. Focus on the win-win deal.

The better your employees feel at work, the better work they'll produce. You can promote higher productivity simply by respecting their individuality and giving them what they need to be independent. Stay focused on their well-being, and they'll give it back to your company.

## **Keeping toxic positivity out of the workplace**

In a perfect world, we'd have plenty of time to get everything done that we need to. We could take breaks and eat lunch without negatively impacting our productivity, and oh yeah, we'd be in a good mood too.

Unfortunately, this kind of superhuman performance isn't realistic. No matter what kind of work you do or how much you're getting paid, there's a limit to one's

output. If you don't respect that limit, you'll end up with burnout and feel like you can't fathom another day of work.

Not all employers understand this. For toxic employers, it results in knowingly pushing teams beyond their capacity by looking on the bright side or talking down to them. For other employers, the push originates from naïveté. When an employee expresses a problem with their job, these “positive” employers will simply remind them of their amazing willpower and its value to the company, confidently reinforcing their ability to perform while invalidating the problem at hand. This is toxic positivity, and it's dangerous to your workforce.

## **How toxic positivity hurts employees**

On a daily basis, we are surrounded by all kinds of positive messages telling us how great the world can be. This extends from the screens in our pockets to the encouragement we receive from our friends telling us to cheer up. Optimism, generally, is more valued than anything else, while pessimism is seen as a negative trait. People who express belief in an idea are seen as having positive emotions, while people less eager to hop aboard are colored as prickly curmudgeons who relish unhappiness. There is pressure to stay positive, even if it means buying into something you shouldn't.

Examples abound where the charisma of dishonest leaders results in toxic loyalty from employees — WeWork, Fyre Festival, and Theranos just to name a recent few. In these companies, people who express doubts and highlighted real problems are cast aside as naysayers whose attitudes are dangerous to the workplace. Some of them are fired—even sued!—while the rest of the team follow their leaders off a cliff of terrible decisions.

So how does toxic positivity hurt employees? By making them feel like their real, valid criticisms are nothing but a product of their bad attitude.

## **Positive vibes only vs. positive thinking**

At its core, toxic positivity is a delusion. Rather than seeing the storms ahead, buckling down, and bracing for impact, these people stay the course believing that luck will change their situation. They would rather suffer permanent damage than sustain a blow to their mental state (or positive outlook).

This is substantially different from a positive attitude. Rather than ignoring reality and expecting things to change, people with a positive attitude take things as they are and work toward a solution. While toxic positivity sees high turnover as the fault of the employees for not seeing or embracing the overall vision, someone with a positive attitude sees high turnover as an opportunity to make effective adjustments that make the company better in the long run.

Basically, toxic positivity is like plugging your ears, closing your eyes, and going “la la la la” in the face of serious problems. It’s an ineffective approach that won’t get you anywhere.

## **Positive mindsets include negative emotions**

One generational difference that emerged over the past decade is the importance younger people place on mental health. At last, feelings get the treatment they deserve! Before, we couldn’t catch a break. People who suffered from mental illness were told that their negative feelings were just that—feelings. And since feelings are temporary, all they lacked was a positive attitude. Be positive, they would say, and your depression will go away.

Today, even though some still debate the validity of mental illness, more and more companies accept the fact that we don’t all think the same way. Workplace culture has started changing accordingly. Mental health days, for example, are a staple of many companies’ time-off policies. Employee Assistance Programs also appear more, giving people company-supported therapy to work through the emotional struggles of the human experience. Much training now also includes

respect for mental illnesses, helping to eliminate the stigma some feel to express their negative thoughts.

These are all good things, but not all companies are happy about it. The reaction is toxic positivity which invalidates those feelings. Rather than looking inward to see how the company can grow and evolve, some leaders blame their employees for their lack of positive psychology, with some even suggesting that they quit and find another job.

When a work environment encourages people to hide their negative emotions from others, the result is not greater employee engagement. Instead, it creates animosity between those who feel frustrated and those who condemn them for it, creating a rift across which productivity and collaboration can be impossible. It's bad, so avoid the inclination toward good vibes.

### **Pizza parties aren't enough**

If you've had enough jobs, odds are you've experienced the awkward pizza party. Usually, these happen just before or after something bad goes down, constituting a weak attempt to make up for poor treatment elsewhere. They open with a short brief from leadership and are followed by weak applause from the rest of the team. It doesn't take much guesswork to realize that no one's as enthusiastic as they're expected to be.

Here's the thing: there's no substitute for good working conditions. Fair pay, reasonable expectations, and respectful staff are the bread and butter of a healthy work environment. If your employees lack these things and feel unhappy about their jobs, giving them a free lunch only serves to stoke the flames of discontent. Employees come to work for money, not pizza. Perks don't pay the mortgage/rent. If your teams are being short-changed for things they didn't ask for, gratitude probably won't happen. Bonuses are better.

Employers are responsible for providing a safe, productive work environment. They should spend their time and energy on what will provide a better livelihood

for the people who execute their company strategies. And since you get what you pay for, cheap alternatives to employee compensation usually result in cheap performance.

### **Setting realistic expectations**

It's an interesting time to be an employee. The gig economy has rendered most jobs remote, and for some reason, bosses think working from home means more time and energy to generate exponentially greater output. The result is a slew of tight deadlines that only the most religious workaholics could achieve. For the rest of us, it's simply impossible.

There are two ways to handle unreachable deadlines: fail to finish the work in time, or work after hours. As you probably guessed, toxic positivity prefers the latter.

People who work late are often glamorized as go-getters who aren't afraid to get their hands dirty, i.e. deprive themselves of sleep. They are the archetype of diligence and perseverance because nothing stands in their way when it comes to doing whatever they set their mind to. There are many terms for these kinds of employees—rock stars, unicorns, etc.—but they are not a model to follow.

Still, this doesn't stop certain employers from pitting team members against overachievers as a way to encourage competition. Of course, it's a terrible way to build team unity, but for some people, output is more important than psychological health. If your teams are constantly working overtime to meet their deadlines, what's needed is more staff, not motivation.

### **Criticism is a good thing**

It's never pleasant to hear what's wrong with how you do things, but most of the time, those criticisms have merit. The pain we associate with criticism can help us move forward and become better at what we do, so long as we take the good and leave the bad. This goes back to the charismatic leader complex mentioned earlier—the more open you are to disagreements, the stronger you'll be as a

leader. Conversely, the worse you treat dissent, the worse your employees will feel about you.

Abraham Lincoln was famous for appointing a cabinet full of squabbling members who not only disagreed with him, but disagreed with each other as well. However, this constant push and pull was encouraged rather than resisted, and it resulted in some of the most forward-thinking advances of the time.

If you find yourself with an employee who is willing to raise issues about how things are being done, thank them and find ways to implement their feedback. They have broken through the echo chamber at potentially great personal risk to let you know how to do better. This is a good thing.

### **Not all happiness is genuine**

As Shakespeare says, “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” It’s important to remember that people adjust their behavior to the situations in which they find themselves. If they are in the presence of a CEO or VP, they’re less likely to air grievances than if they’re among friends. They’ll probably accept a bigger task or agree to a tighter deadline when asked by a boss than if asked by a co-worker who gives them the freedom to say no. This is normal. It’s also important.

Toxic positivity can lead to a person feeling out of place if they don’t have a smile to wear. They may avoid important conversations out of fear that their opinions could hurt their career, leading to a horde of yes-men who only reinforce what leadership believes. At worst, people may even suffer in silence because they don’t want to make any ripples.

Echo chambers are bad for business. When people are afraid to be themselves because company culture says not to, their psychological safety is jeopardized. If an employer disregards the real, genuine feelings of the employees in favor of a more pleasant atmosphere, productivity suffers. Why? Because a person’s emotional experience plays a role in how much work they do, and if they have to

wear a constant smile to keep their job, they probably won't relax enough to produce the same caliber of work as they would if allowed to act normally.

### **So, how do you avoid toxic positivity?**

Creating a healthy workplace isn't easy. Even the best companies have a hard time separating productivity from personality, let alone making room for a healthy work-life balance. But if you want employees to do their best work, the best approach requires allowing as much freedom as possible. Let people share their unfettered opinions. Check your own defensiveness in the face of their criticism. Listen.

Toxic positivity is a coping mechanism born from a desire to escape discomfort. Don't substitute positivity for real growth. Better to move in the right direction than to hold fast to principles that don't serve you. Give your employees a voice, and they will tell you how to be a better employer. You can do it!

## **Bullies at work — How to handle toxic coworkers**

Len, Janet's boss, saw Janet talking on the phone for an extended length of time. He assumed it was a personal call, when actually she was talking to a client. Instead of waiting until she got off the phone, he stood over her desk and yelled, "I know you're on a personal call. Why don't you do some work for a change?" The client heard this, and Janet was terribly humiliated.

Such scenarios are nothing new to Janet, despite her being a top performer in the organization. Over time, she's discovered Len has an almost paranoid fear that he will be played for a fool. Simple things such as coming back a few minutes late from lunch because of traffic trigger a rage about trying to take advantage of him. Janet has a bully boss on her hands.



And, she's not alone. Bullying is not limited to playgrounds or the junior high cafeteria. It happens in the work environment more times than anyone wants to admit, creating toxic work environments, harming productivity, increasing turnover rates, and paving the way for potential lawsuits.

## **What does workplace bullying look like?**

The [Workplace Bullying Institute](#) (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 in some combination of the above.”

So, while they may not demand your lunch money, workplace bullies still inflict anguish just like their schoolyard counterparts. The bully's need for control can make him (or her) incredibly overbearing. He can publicly humiliate you, use guilt to manipulate you to do his bidding, or blow up and make scenes to intimidate you. He may threaten to fire you and generally treat you like an unruly 2-year-old instead of a respected adult.

Above all, bullies are overwhelming. Their entire demeanor expresses aggression. When criticizing something you've said or done, they seem to attack not just the particular behavior, but you, and they do so in an accusatory way.

Think that remote work arrangements during the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down instances of bullying? That did not happen. Rather, bullies adjusted their type of bullying: belittling targets on video chat, sending threatening emails, withholding resources necessary to complete assignments, and raging over social platforms. For some offenders, cyberbullying proved an even better outlet. They could bother their target at any time in their own home, creating a greater sense of fear. Many figured their chances of getting caught were low, leading to harsher or more frequent bullying instances.

## **Who gets bullied at work?**

The [2021 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey](#) reports that 30% of American workers currently experience bullying or have experienced it in the past. Males account for two-thirds of workplace bullies, and they target other males 58% of the time. Female bullies greatly favor female victims. In terms of rank, bosses account for 65% of office bullies.

No standard method exists for figuring out who is likely to get bullied. Some bullies go after traditional “easy targets” — introverted, submissive people unlikely to call out the bad behavior. Other bullies opt for talented or popular colleagues out of jealousy or because they see them as a threat to their own status. Sometimes, bullies single out people because of their race, gender, disability, age, or weight. They cover for their own underlying insecurities by picking on anyone who is “different.”

## **The dangers of workplace bullying**

Bullying behavior takes a toll on the wellness of those experiencing it. Victims may develop mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and helplessness. They also may suffer from physical health maladies such as headaches and stomach trouble. Productivity may decrease because of difficulty concentrating. Absenteeism may increase due to the desire to avoid the instigator. Eventually, the person being bullied may decide to get a new job rather than face a hostile work environment.

Co-workers who witness bullying also suffer from the toxic work environment. Staff members may fear they will become the next targets of bullying. Morale drops if people believe company leadership lets bad behavior go unchecked.

As in the case of Janet earlier, clients may get wind of bullying behavior. Bosses and co-workers who bully in front of others make customers feel uncomfortable and damage the company’s reputation.

Bullies put organizations at risk for lawsuits. Bullying itself is not illegal. (WBI and other groups are working on a [healthy workplace bill](#) to rectify this problem.) However, harassment is against the law. Victims claiming sexual harassment or other types of mistreatment on the basis of membership in a protected class — such as gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, national origin, age, or disability — may decide to take legal action.

## **How to deal with a workplace bully**

As tempting as it might be to keep trying to ignore a workplace bully, the bad behavior oftentimes won't go away on its own. The traditional wisdom about a schoolyard bully holds true for a corporate bully as well: You have to stand up to him. Bullies can smell weakness in their adversaries, and they will move in for the kill. Like a schoolyard bully, however, they will often back down when you show them you are willing to fight.

While each person needs to decide his or her own route to “standing up,” the following actions often prove helpful during an encounter.

### **Send the right signal physically**

When you are attacked, your body language will indicate whether you're intimidated. If your shoulders droop and your eyes drop, the bully will get the message that you are intimidated and really lay it on. To send the opposite message, take a deep breath, which draws your frame-up. Look the bully square in the eye, and remain still.

### **Let the bully talk; don't interrupt**

If you ask anything, ask open-ended questions beginning with “who,” “what,” “when,” “where” and “how.” Ask permission to take notes so that you can get this matter resolved. After you ask a question, be quiet, and let the bully talk as you take notes. This will make him think he is getting results, which will calm him down and may make him stop seeing you as an enemy.

### **Don't expect to feel comfortable**

When standing up to a bully, you will feel confused, overwhelmed, angry, hurt, and afraid. That's what the bully is counting on. He uses those feelings to intimidate people. Even if you feel distraught and can't say just the right thing, do say something, anything, to counter his onslaught. Do not be overwhelmed by your fear and cave in, expect to feel uncomfortable and you take some of the shock out of the actions.

### **Allow time for the bully to wind down**

If the bully has lost his temper — yelling at you, crying angrily, or making noise — stand pat for a while to give him time to run down. Remain in place, look directly at him, and wait. When the attack loses momentum, jump into the situation.

### **Don't compete with a bully**

Never try to undermine this person's authority or unseat him or her. If you do find yourself competing with a bully, allow him or her to save face in case you win. Otherwise, you'll find yourself with a very powerful enemy.

### **Appeal to reason, not to feelings**

Aggressive people give very little weight to how a person feels. Showing emotion won't help you much. Use reason to make your point. Illustrate how your plan or approach benefits the aggressive person.

### **Use your knowledge of the bully's inner insecurity**

The bully's rage is often coming from some inner fear. Analyze what that fear is, and address the fear instead of the rage. Talk to the bully about it in a non-accusatory way. If you can visualize the frightened child the bully is frantically trying to hide, it may help you control your anger and make him easier to deal with.

## **Pulling it all together**

To see some of these ideas in action, let's return to the case of Janet. After Len's mean, unprofessional display, she refrained from yelling back that it wasn't a personal call. Instead, she finished talking to the client and then went into Len's office to ask to speak to him. Having figured out that Len's fear was that he'd be taken advantage of and played for a fool, Janet said, "Len, I know you're worried about people taking advantage of you, but I would never do that. You know I'm a good worker who does more than is expected of me."

Len had to agree that this was true. Janet continued, "I felt very humiliated by your yelling at me so loudly that our client could hear. We may have lost a sale. Next time you have a problem with me, please call me into your office, and let's discuss it privately." After Janet said this, Len actually apologized and promised to do what she asked.

Why did this strategy work? Janet addressed Len's fear instead of blaming him. She implicated him in his own bad behavior by saying "our" client, and "we" may have lost a sale. Instead of telling him what was wrong with him, she used an "I" statement, expressing how his behavior affected her. Lastly, she came up with a solution he could live with — calling her into his office instead of making a scene.

## **Getting help in handling a workplace bully**

Unfortunately, confronting a bully may not be enough to eliminate the bad behavior. Insecurity, jealousy, low self-esteem, and the need to control run deep in some people. If your efforts do not yield good results, getting others involved may be the best way to improve your life.

Start by documenting everything. Write down the date and place of each bullying instance along with what exactly occurred. Include any supporting documentation, such as a list of witnesses or a printout of an offensive email.

Next, see if your employee handbook addresses bullying. Some companies have little tolerance for such behavior. Pinpoint what policies the offender has violated, and look for guidance on who to contact regarding the matter.

A bully is not just hurting your feelings. She is sabotaging business success. She creates a toxic environment that damages morale, focus, and maximum productivity. Smart employers realize bullies harm the company's bottom line and take action. Thus, talking to your mutual supervisor could be a good idea when the bully is a co-worker. If you are dealing with a bully boss, notifying the HR department may prove a helpful route. In either case, bring along your documentation to demonstrate the history and severity of the bullying. Pull out the employee handbook to cite the specific policy violation.

### **When reasonable actions don't yield results**

Unhappy with results? Some victims of bullying continue to talk to others in human resources and management until they find someone willing to take effective action. Filing a formal complaint may make leaders listen more carefully. In cases of slow or non-existent assistance, the target of bullying may consult a lawyer to explore legal options. Rather often, victims decide to look for a new job rather than continue in a toxic workplace.

Individuals dealing with workplace bullies or similar difficult people may find it helpful to talk to a mental health professional. A therapist can suggest other strategies for handling the situation based on the particulars of the case. He also can help the victim deal with the corresponding feelings of frustration and helplessness. While a target cannot always change a bully, the victim can learn how to better respond to and cope with the psychological power imbalance from which the bully gains strength.