



How to Beat Bully Behavior



Helen Thamm

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By: Helen Thamm, CPC
Certified Professional Coach

Did you know more people leave jobs due to the stress of dealing with a workplace bully than any other reason? Conflicts with supervisors or peers can affect a team's ability to collaborate, reduce motivation to produce and even increase staff physical illness.

Bullies generally nowadays are not overtly hostile or physically aggressive. Rather, they are hostile in attitude, backbite, or make sarcastic remarks. Workplace bullies can be supervisors (the majority) but can also be peers.

There are three common reasons people bully others: 1) jealousy; 2) difficulty getting along with people in general; or, 3) actually wanting to be friends, but do not know how to get a potential friend's attention in a positive way.

Reason No. 1: "Jealousy"

Believe it or not, the most common reason people bully others is jealousy. These bullies see targets as competitors more accomplished than themselves. This may set off

their own feelings of inferiority when a target is a peer. However, if the person who bullies happens to be a supervisor, dealing with a stellar supervisee, the motivation might also include fear of losing his job to the target. Anyone in a management/supervisory position has had to deal with the “star” on their team. Depending on how the supervisor responds to stress, and how secure the supervisor sees her own position to be, can make a significant difference in how she deals with this common issue.

The other two reasons for bullying can also be challenging for supervisors, as the targets often need a lot of the their supervisor’s time, due to complaining about feeling they are being put down, disrespected and/or just plain feeling frustrated and angry in response to the bully’s behavior.

Reason #2: Difficulty getting along with people, in general

People with poor people skills often to not even realize they are hurting other people’s feelings. For example, the person who monopolizes and cuts people off when they try to speak in meetings, needs to be in control. However, these people come across as disrespectful and at times even verbally aggressive because they do not take anyone else’s feelings into consideration. Some, especially people in supervisory capacities may actually believe they have the only “right” answers or ways of doing something.

When a supervisee shares an idea or makes a comment on a decision the supervisor has made, it may challenge the person’s sense of authority. In this case, the supervisor’s fear may also be that others may listen to the target and want a change of decision. In

addition, if the supervisor listens to the supervisee's idea, changes his decision, and the person above him doesn't like the change the supervisor may fear repercussions.

Reason #3: Wants to makes friends, but does not know how to in a positive way.

The third type of bully has a different agenda. These people really want to be friends with the target. However, they may have had many experiences where they have been rejected or felt used. On a personal note, I worked with a peer bully on a psychiatric nursing unit. She began bullying me by making sarcastic remarks and talking badly about me to other staff behind my back. Then she made a decision to change a treatment plan of one of my patients when I was not on duty for a day. When I confronted her about it, she pretended she did not know she had stepped on my toes. I was bewildered because when we first started working together, I thought we might become friends. We both came to a University Hospital so we could obtain our master's degrees, while working as psychiatric nurses.

When she left her position, before finishing school, she shared she felt nursing was a "self destructive profession", which gave me some insight into her own life dissatisfaction. Then she also admitted she had trouble dealing with me because I was "so nice" she thought I was "politically ambitious". Again, like so many targets, I felt confused, until I remembered her father was a politician. I could picture him coming home after kissing babies during a re-election campaign, and maybe saying belittling remarks about the "dumb" people who believed he really liked babies, etc. With that

type of background, the nurse really had trouble with trust issues. Therefore, behavior most people would find to be attractive in a colleague or potential friend, created just the opposite response from this person.

What can you do to deal effectively with bully behavior?

So, how do you deal effectively with a bully and still keep your own health—and sanity? First of all, know you are not imagining things, if you feel you have become a target. It is real. Be aware that all bullying is based in fear, such as loss of authority, (or even a job), loss of control, or of getting hurt themselves. Then, learn new skills to deal with these challenging personalities, such as assertive communication. If you are a supervisor, develop healthy communication in your team. This may include creating norms where people are encouraged to talk respectfully to each other, with you as the “umpire” if necessary.

What is the cost to a team if bullying behavior is not stopped?

According to the Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute (WBTI) here are the startling stats regarding the top 12 consequences of bullied targets:

1. Severe Anxiety (94%)
2. Sleep disturbance (84%)
3. Loss of concentration (82%)
4. Feeling edgy, easily startled, PTSD (80%)
5. Obsession about the bully’s motives and tactics (76%)

6. Stress headaches (64%)
7. Avoidance of feelings or places (49%)
8. Shame or embarrassment that changes lifestyle routines (49%)
9. Heart palpitations (48%)
10. Recurrent, intrusive thoughts and memories (46%)
11. Body aches in muscles and/or joints (43%)
12. Clinical depression (41%)

Amazing isn't it how much damage a bully can do to an otherwise emotionally "fit" person. The targets I emphasize are not mentally ill, they are reacting to severe and prolonged stress and the reaction to the psychological abuse of bullying. Since there are real people's stories that make up these statistics, it is easy to see if bullying is not addressed, sad consequences can occur. It is a pity that when it is not identified and stopped, most often the more capable and dedicated staff end up leaving their jobs, while the bullies often remain for years to wreak havoc on new unsuspecting victims. Therefore it is imperative if you are a leader to both identify and stop bully behavior on your team.

How stress can affect behavior

In addition, one of the most difficult things to do is to take a look at our own responses to stress. For example, if I should feel my position as a supervisor is tenuous at my job, I might have a tendency to feel a need to "tighten up the ship" and be more in control. This response could be misinterpreted as my being controlling. I was told by one nurse

that I came across in a condescending manner to her once or twice when I was feeling “under the gun” about some staff I supervised being seen as less than therapeutic at times with patients. Therefore, I had to learn self assessment skills, and also began using relaxation techniques to help reduce my own stress.

In addition, when being targeted by a bully, the target can sometimes feel a sense of superiority to the bully because, with much effort, the target might continue to try to be “nice” to the bully. The bully, however, often interprets this response as “smugness”, which then actually can incite the bullying behavior to worsen. Continual team and self assessment i.e. increasing my emotional intelligence, has greatly increased my ability to identify and deal with bullies in the workplace.

Some important points to remember:

- If you believe you are a target, it is real.
- Learn what type of bully you are dealing with, and try some of the suggestions above to deal with him or her.
- Become more self-aware how you respond to stress, which often makes people act differently from their normal behavior with other people.
- Try to find a commonality, a bridge so to speak, to create a more positive relationship with the bully, which can often reduce the bullying behavior, understanding that this behavior is based in fear.
- Reach out to a mentor or coach to help find creative ways to reduce bullying behavior.
- Create behavioral norms with your team and encourage the team to share the responsibility of holding each other to the new behavioral standards.

Want More Tips?

For more powerful tips on how to deal with bullying behavior and other health care professional issues, receive our “Nurse Career Success Tips”, monthly as a free service. This valuable ongoing information is available at nursecareersuccess.com as well as the opportunity to participate in upcoming transformational teleseminar series and being updated about new articles and books, etc. from Helen and from other authors she recommends. Helen also works with a few select people in group and one-to-one coaching programs.

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Helen M. Thamm, APRN
Certified Professional Coach

738 Arapahoe St.
Thermopolis, Wy 82443
T.N. 307-864-3656

Helen@NurseCareerSuccess.com
<http://www.NurseCareerSuccess.com>