

Bullying

If you run a typical New Zealand company — whether you have 10,000 employees or 10 — then you probably have or have had a bully in your business. Most New Zealand workers will report that they have experienced or witnessed some kind of bullying on the job - insults, threats, screaming, or ostracism. It's behaviour that drags down company morale and can be costly in innumerable ways: Think higher turnover, lower productivity, more sick days, just for starters.

How to Identify a True Bully

Goal: Understand what constitutes bullying and recognise it in action.

Most bullies don't act up in front of their superiors, so managers must rely on reports from other employees. Tools that let employees review their bosses anonymously, like the 360-degree performance review, can shed light on how a person behaves when management is not around.

It's not hard to identify a bully if you're getting complaints of screaming, tantrums, public humiliation, sabotage, and verbal abuse. But watch for the more subtle signs of a problem, as well: the person who always takes credit for things others obviously contributed to, or who dominates meetings with sarcasm, interruptions, or insults. Keep an eye out for people who are afraid to speak up, or signs of obvious tension in certain groups. Body language can be an indicator: Notice for instance, if Bob consistently doodles, rolls his eyes, or squeaks his chair when Sally talks — and only when Sally talks. Keep an eye out for "mobbing," in which a group of people gangs up on another worker. It often hides under the appearance of humour, but it's really, 'All five of us making fun of you'. A group may even ostracise one worker — for example, continually "forgetting" to put Sarah on the group email list despite her multiple requests to be included.

How Managers Unwittingly Encourage Bullying

- Pit workers against each other or emphasise a competitive work style.
- Have a lax management style, so that employees must fill in the blanks themselves regarding what is acceptable and what is not.
- Make unreasonable demands and goals of employees and managers.
- Fail to give supervisors the authority to reprimand problem workers.
- Set impossible deadlines or provide too little funding to accomplish a goal.

Confront the Person Sooner, Not Later

Goal: Act fast to show that your company won't tolerate bad behaviour.

The biggest mistake employers make, is that they don't pay attention to bullying until it results in a crisis. When grievances emerge, handle them immediately — otherwise victims will stop reporting bad behaviour. Talk with the bully and be direct but not confrontational or emotional. Be specific about the behaviour: Saying "You told someone

to shut up” or “You called someone an idiot” works better than saying “You’re not being nice” or “You’re not being a team player.”

After you describe the complaints, ask for the bully’s thoughts. Watch their style. Do they blame others? Do they get angry? Their reaction may tell you a lot about that person and whether they can change.

If bullying has proven to be a pattern, it’s important to seek some professional advice about the problem employee.

Target the Behaviour, Not the Person

Too many managers personalise the issue when confronting workplace bullies. Do not confuse the person with their conduct, he says. Do not ask them to “change” but instead tell them that the behaviour itself must stop. Don’t get sucked into a bully’s defence that their target somehow deserves the mistreatment. Tell them, ‘Regardless of your motive or the reason, it has to stop’.

Enforce a Clear Action Plan

Goal: Determine if the offender should be disciplined, get counselling, or ultimately be fired.

Bullying is like any other form of harassment. You will need to follow your company policies and procedures. If you have nothing in writing be sure to be consistent. “What you do to Bob is what you would do to Jim or Mary”. Seek professional advice before implementing any action.

If the employee is considered valuable — perhaps a star engineer, a top salesman, or someone who might walk and take key clients with them — then you may want to consider coaching, counselling, or anger management. But this only works if the person has the ability and desire to change. Don’t just transfer the person to a new job, because that only passes the problem along to someone else. Remember: the cost to your organization in terms of bad morale, turnover, emotional distress, or low productivity may be equal to or greater than the cost of lost talent or clients.

The True Cost of Bullying

Quantify how much time managers have spent dealing with complaints about that particular person and how much time it will take to look for replacements if co-workers or subordinates quit because of the work environment.

Devise Your Own Policy for a Civilised Workplace

Goal: Create a corporate culture of respect.

Bullies often tend to be smart, successful, productive employees, so managers may be slow to reprimand or fire them. For this reason, it’s important to have a policy on record. Outlaw tantrums, screaming, intimidation, threats, and any repetitive behaviour that undermines colleagues. Give employees the means to come forward and report any violations without fear of retaliation.

Perhaps the best way to discourage bullying is to make civility part of your corporate culture. Managers should take the lead, speaking kindly to employees, showing them respect, and encouraging open communication by being present and accessible. Give managers more autonomy and more responsibility for keeping teams together, and reward employees for working together and helping each other to meet shared goals. Teach your employees how to handle confrontation, and how to avoid emotional conflict, second-guessing, complaining, and arguing after a decision is made.

Point out bad behaviour to bullies immediately. Day-to-day follow-through and your interactions with staff will speak much louder than a corporate memorandum. For instance, if you see someone behaving inappropriately, such as intimidating or putting down others in a meeting, pull them aside immediately and tell them that their behaviour isn't tolerated at the company. I'd say, 'You need to back off and listen to others. And I'm going to check up on you.'

Screen for Bullies in the Recruiting Process

Goal: Stop the problem from recurring by identifying bullies during the hiring process.

To keep your company bully-free, be attentive in the interview process. Resist the temptation to hire a hotshot when it's obvious he or she is a jerk. Check references carefully to root out past instances of bullying. Pay attention to how your candidate interacts with administrative assistants and lower-level employees, and encourage those employees to report rude or disrespectful behaviour.

During the interview, pay attention to how much a candidate says "I" versus "we" when talking about achievements. Ask the person to describe a frustrating project. You can spot a potential bully if he or she mentions incompetent people or displays exasperated body language, perhaps rolling the eyes or using a disparaging tone. To gauge the level of compassion a manager might have in firing a worker, ask how they would handle incompetent employees. Observe their body tension, level of compassion, and tone of voice.

Gloves-Off References

If you want to dig deeper, ask candidates directly if anybody has raised issues about their ability to interact with other employees and request performance reviews from their former employers. Any applicant who objects a little bit about that — that says something.