

Background

Bosses behaving badly

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Bullying is always an abuse of power. It can be from a superior towards a subordinate or from an established to a new employee. It can range from aggressive verbal attacks and criticism through to much more subtle and hidden behaviour. It can result in nervousness, lack of self-confidence, and in some cases it can lead to serious stress-related illnesses in the person they are picking on. Nervous breakdowns are a frequent consequence.

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The bully may have been bullied himself, so it is learned behaviour. Bosses may bully because they are afraid that a bright and talented subordinate will threaten their position. Bosses often exert power over their subordinates to show that they are the boss. New arrivals may be bullied because they do not belong to the tribe.

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These are typically outspoken and verbally abusive. They like to perform in front of an audience and denigrate and humiliate their target. Aggressive bosses kill any creativity their employees may have by making them follow rules and procedures to the letter. When things go wrong they can then say, 'Why didn't you use your initiative?', or, 'Do I have to do everything myself?'. Aggressive bullies usually come to an unpleasant end, when their own bosses have to face up to the harm they are doing. In the meantime the bully causes a lot of damage.

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They show a total indifference to the needs of the people who work for them. They commonly give unreasonable deadlines and overload their subordinates with work. A boss might, for example, find something for his PA to deal with just before she leaves work to pick up her daughter from her childminder. They refuse to return calls or answer emails and like to keep their subordinates waiting. The message in all cases is, 'I am far too important or busy to deal with your concerns'.

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These bullies are much more of a challenge to deal with. They often make out their bullying is just a bit of fun or gentle teasing. They may even claim that it is a way of expressing their affection, or a kind of initiation into the group. It may include silly practical jokes or malicious damage to the victim's property. They generally have a band of followers and are often superficially charming and reward the followers with support and friendship. Secretly the followers are disgusted by the bully's behaviour, but become followers to avoid being a target themselves.

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If you are brave enough, you can tackle the bully yourself, but this can be difficult when you are directly under their authority. Standing up to an aggressive bully may provoke a terrifying reaction. A bully is basically a coward, but he can still be an extremely nasty person. If challenged, imperious bullies will automatically question your commitment. Subtle bullies will come up with a 'who me?' response and may even act hurt and misunderstood. Their standard replies may include, 'I was just having a little joke, you need to lighten up.'

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Unfortunately there are no easy answers. It is important to keep a record of bullying and the form that it takes. It is difficult sometimes to draw the line between tough management and outright persecution. If possible, get witnesses who are prepared to back you up. If you have a union or staff association representative, raise the subject with them. Otherwise you can try to speak to the bully's line manager and see if they are able to help you in any way. Of course, if the bully is at the top end of the food-chain, then it might be better to look for a job elsewhere. You can always hang around until he gets his just desserts, but my advice is to get a transfer, or get out while your psyche is still relatively intact.

Reading file 8

Exercises

1 Read the text quickly and match these headings to the paragraphs 1–7.

Subtle bullies Imperious bullies Why do people bully?
What is bullying? Outside help Aggressive bullies Tackling the bully

2 Read the first two paragraphs and answer these questions.

- 1 What two broad types of bullying does the writer identify?
- 2 In general, why do bosses bully their subordinates?

3 Read the rest of the text and answer these questions.

- 1 Make notes about the behaviour of each type of bully.
Aggressive: _____
Imperious: _____
Subtle: _____
- 2 What can happen when you confront the different types of bully?
- 3 What steps can people take to help themselves?
- 4 What is the difference between tough management and bullying?
- 5 How may outsiders be able to help victims?

4 How satisfying are the writer's ideas for dealing with bullying? What would you suggest?

5 Match 1–8 to a–h to make collocations from the text.

- | | |
|----------------|---------------|
| 1 verbally | a joke |
| 2 nervous | b association |
| 3 exert | c management |
| 4 unreasonable | d damage |
| 5 practical | e abusive |
| 6 tough | f breakdown |
| 7 malicious | g power |
| 8 staff | h deadline |

6 Using the text to help you, decide what the collocations in 5 mean.

7 Match phrasal verbs 1–8 to definitions a–h.

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1 pick on someone | a say someone is telling the truth |
| 2 pick someone up | b accept and deal with a difficult situation |
| 3 stand up to someone | c become cheerful and less worried |
| 4 back someone up | d stay in the same place |
| 5 lighten up | e collect someone |
| 6 face up to something | f treat someone unfairly |
| 7 make out something | g resist someone's unfair treatment |
| 8 hang around | h act as if something is the case |

8 Work with a partner. Use three of the phrasal verbs to tell your partner about a personal experience.

9 Look back at the text and choose three words that you could use in your day-to-day work.

10 Work in pairs or groups and discuss these questions.

- 1 If you witnessed or were subject to a case of bullying at work, what steps could you take to stop it?
- 2 There is a saying in English that goes, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' What do you think this means? Is it true that words can never hurt you?