

Managing People

Diagnose and Eliminate Workplace Bullying

by Baron Christopher Hanson

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As a turnaround strategist, I see a lot of companies in dire straits, where tempers flare easily and interpersonal problems have been allowed to flourish unchecked. Helping clients innovate while saving their companies frequently involves confronting a bully or bullying regime. In twenty years of experience, I've learned the differences between hard-charging bosses and executives who push for positive organizational results aggressively, and bullies who calculate patterns of fear to manipulate self-serving outcomes.

We have to start by defining the problem. Workplace bullying is defined commonly as *individuals or groups who use aggressive or unreasonable tactics against co-workers or subordinates persistently*. Bullying is not conflict, a personality clash, or being chewed out by a boss. It's not getting handed work you don't want to do. And it's important to remember that not every workplace-bullying claim is true — just because employees are upset, imbalanced, or overworked does not mean bullying is taking place.

But whether it's an entrenched dinosaur or extreme ladder-climber, anyone who manipulates selfish outcomes or seeks unfair advantage must be confronted expediently. Bullies are tremendously expensive for corporations in terms of productivity and human resource talents lost. When C-suites overlook blatant bullying, work is sabotaged, progress is blocked, and company value may be lost or stolen.

I coined the acronym "CAPE" to provide workplaces with a framework to distinguish more fairly between well-meaning hard chargers and sinister bullies. CAPE empowers heroic workplace leaders to eliminate bullying more effectively.

1. Confront. Addressing the problem is a key first step toward breaking the bully's hold over officemates. Research suggests the longer bullying persists, the more likely co-workers will align with them and enable bullying patterns. Impromptu meetings with a roundtable of diverse professionals — to interview suspected bullies, enablers, and victims separately — allows those far-removed and close to the situation to gather truthful evidence quickly.

An out-of-the-blue intervention catches potential bullies off guard, initiates witnessing, and gives hard chargers a fair chance — for once.

2. Analyze. Once granular evidence is gathered, the roundtable should employ contemporary bullying frameworks and literature for thorough analysis and fair deliberation. Valerie Cade offers a self-test that individuals and workplaces can begin to use analytically.

At this point, if the suspected bully responds positively to the roundtable's deliberation — via 180-degree change and public apology — these first two steps may prevent over-eager hard chargers from being falsely labeled workplace bullies. However, if a suspected bully responds negatively to the process, these next steps become exceptionally critical.

3. Present. Documented proof of bullying, presented in writing after steps one and two, is a giant leap towards engaging leadership with tangible evidence and roundtable witnesses. Don't rely on hearsay. Well-presented documentations have teeth. Dr. Namie of The Workplace Bullying Institute fervently argues one cannot negotiate, mediate, or engage in conflict resolution with bullies.

4. Expose. Outing bullies and their enablers courageously is the most important tool for eliminating bullying. Corporate bullies use fear of consequence as a main weapon to keeping victims and enablers silent. Once exposed, bullying regimes vaporize.

Once bullying is exposed, I recommend a forensic accounting audit. Some bullies are reacting to their own insecurity or incompetence, but others may be using the irrational claims, false evaluations, humiliation, fear, and other instruments of a bully's trade to cover up malfeasance, embezzlement or other illegal actions.

Confronting bullies isn't easy. Growing up, we moved a lot and I was often bullied. As a lifelong rugby player, a sport played sans pads, helmets, blockers, or whining, I learned that sometimes, you have to take the pitch fearlessly knowing your job is going to hurt — you have to forge ahead and play hard anyway. I still think about lessons learned with my rugby teammates when I have to deal with a particularly nasty office bully.

Job expectations are more challenging and competitive than ever. And tough assignments can hurt. But bullying has no place in any workplace. Honorable opponents shake hands and even applaud each other at the end of the day. Leaders owe it to the people on their team to *Confront, Analyze, Present, and Expose* bullies fully.

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