

A stylized illustration in shades of orange and black. On the left, a large white letter 'Q' is superimposed over a dark background. To the right, a group of seven figures, possibly representing a team or a group of people, are depicted in a room. The figures are rendered in a simplified, blocky style. The background features a large, stylized wave or scroll-like shape. The overall composition is framed by a thick orange border.

# Q

## Responding Effectively to Workplace Bullying: Managing Behavior at the Time of an Attack

Aryanne Oade

Over a period of several months, a consultancy business owner subjects her office manager to a campaign of relentless verbal bullying, characterized by snide comments, unremitting criticisms and unpleasant remarks. She bullies him in their one-to-one meetings and, to a lesser extent, when other colleagues are present as well—although the tone and character of her words are less harsh on these occasions. Nevertheless, his co-workers realize that their boss singles him out for an unfair degree of verbal assaults but none of them finds it within themselves to intervene and offer him support at the time of an attack.

It is a sad fact that incidents of workplace bullying are on the increase. More and more people observe or are on the receiving end of bullying behavior while they carry out their usual workplace activities. Those of you who have been bullied at work, or are currently being bullied at work, know that as you start to tell your friends and family about your experiences, you find many of them have been subject to workplace bullying too.

What is so upsetting to people who experience or witness workplace bullying is that they expect to be able to carry out their work in safety. They expect their employer to take decisive, early steps when their safety is compromised. They do not expect to be on the receiving end of behavior that is psychologically and emotionally punishing and which renders them less able to perform to the standard they want and which their employer expects. They do not expect their employer to turn a blind eye or take ineffective action when incidents are pointed out to them. But as the frequency of workplace bullying escalates, so does the degree to which many workplaces are rendered unsafe for those people who experience bullying, and for those who witness it and become concerned that they might be targeted next. Many employers lose out as good people leave the company, and those who choose to stay find that their psychological contract with their employer has been damaged so sufficiently that they can't give their best thereafter.

This manifesto is written against a backdrop of increasing bullying at work. Its objective is to equip you with the interpersonal know-how and the insight you need to respond effectively to incidents of bullying workplace.

# Incidents of Workplace Bullying

Consider the following examples of workplace bullying:

- A factory worker notices that a group of her assembly line colleagues get together and repeatedly whisper and roll their eyes while looking at her, before laughing and turning back to their work. She thinks they are being unkind about her and wish to exclude her from their group but she doesn't realize that their recurring actions constitute workplace bullying.

*“What is so upsetting to people who experience or witness workplace bullying is that they expect to be able to carry out their work in safety.”*

- A manager in an insurance firm exaggerates the occasional small errors he finds in the work of one of his team members whenever he speaks about her with his peer group and managers. His consistent strategy of undermining the reputation of this team member is driven by his secret fear that this employee is better at her job than he is at his, and might be promoted above him.

- An IT consultant observes one of her managers using bullying behavior with another team member on a regular basis. She starts to worry that her manager might behave in a similar way towards her. Over a period of weeks her heightened anxiety, suspicion and constant vigilance drain her and directly result in her making a series of mistakes which her clients eventually comment on.
- A secondary school teacher begins a carefully orchestrated campaign of workplace bullying against the newest teacher in the school. She makes belittling comments about him behind his back, insinuating that his work won't be up to scratch and that he lacks experience. She interrupts him whenever he speaks at staff meetings, talking over him in a loud voice. She asks him for his opinion in front of other colleagues and rolls her eyes at his answer, whatever it is and however he delivers it. Her newest colleague realizes that he is subject to a campaign of workplace bullying but, being new at the school, doesn't know where to turn for support and feels powerless to do anything effective about it.

Incidents like these are not uncommon. They happen everyday, in many workplaces, everywhere. The issues they raise for you are as follows:

- If incidents of workplace bullying are on the increase, what can you do to protect yourself should you find yourself on the wrong end of bullying behavior at work?

- How can you tell when an erstwhile peaceful colleague starts to bully?
- What steps can you take to respond in a self-preserving way to an incident of workplace bullying at the time it occurs?
- What can you do to turn a potentially hurtful and damaging interaction with a bully into a clear message to your would-be assailant that you are quite able to respond to them effectively and they would be better off going away?

By the end of the manifesto I hope that you will be equipped with sufficient knowledge and practical actions that you know what to do and how to do it should you become subject to workplace bullying in the future. And I also hope that reading this manifesto will assist those of you who have already been targeted by a workplace bully to be able to process your experience and find relief from the nagging self-doubts that often form part of the aftermath of an experience of workplace bullying.

Let's start by briefly examining some of the ways in which incidents of workplace bullying can be mishandled by managers as well as managed effectively. We will then highlight what to look out for when a colleague starts to bully, before moving onto to explore how to handle the bullying dynamic at the heart of a bullying workplace relationship. At the end we'll return to the story we began this manifesto with and describe how the office manager responds to his bullying boss.

## Euphemisms and Excuses for Bullying

Incidents of workplace bullying can be handled by your employer well or poorly, and anywhere on the continuum in between. Some of you were bullied with the knowledge of your managers who made excuses for the behavior which injured you. These managers might have reduced the bullying you received to the bully “having an off day” or “not meaning it” or, worse still, might have dismissed the actions which hurt you with the words “that’s just his way” or “she’s always like that.”

*“ [Employees] expect their employer to take decisive, early steps when their safety is compromised.*

Others of you had managers who blamed you for not standing up to the bully, an implication which subtly shifted responsibility for the abusive behavior used by the bully from them and onto you, thereby making the bullying you were subject to your fault. Others of you had managers who simply turned a blind eye to the aggression that was used against you. They thereby failed in their responsibility to confront behavior which injured you and which happened on their watch. Hardest of all, some of you may be being bullied *by* your managers.

## Ineffective Action

Others of you had managers who wanted to take effective action but didn't know how. Maybe they "had a quiet word" with the bully and told them to "dial it back" but didn't realize that this strategy will more likely encourage them to carry out their abusive activity when they're not present. Or maybe your manager decided to offer you, the person being targeted by the bully, coaching so that you could learn how to "stand up for yourself." But they didn't address the both of you together, which sent out the message that the responsibility for managing workplace bullying is in with the individual being bullied. The bully got the message that they will escape censure.

## Effective, Decisive Action

However, some of you had managers who intervened effectively when they recognized abusive behavior being used at work. You had HR departments, line managers and executives who were determined to confront abusive behavior and who took effective action against those responsible for it once they knew what was happening. These effective colleagues observed that you were subject to bullying behavior, took note of it, acted decisively and held those responsible for it



accountable for their actions. They acted to prevent further incidents from occurring and gave a clear signal that those incidents that had already occurred were unacceptable and must not be repeated. They publicized clearly worded, effective anti-bullying policies, investigated formal complaints thoroughly and impartially, took swift action against proven bullies and role modeled behavior which firmly demonstrated their zero tolerance for bullying conduct at work.

But, even if your managers did intervene effectively and acted to prevent further incidents of bullying by a known bully, you cannot really be sure that you won't be subject to workplace bullying again. Here's what you need to know if you are it does.

## Starting to Bully

You may have had an effective or cordial relationship with a bullying colleague up until the point they start to bully you is point, or things might have been challenging from time to time as you struggled with different values or ways of getting things done. But, at some point, your bullying colleague starts to act differently and this new behavior introduces a new phase in their relationship with you characterized by their:

→ Wish to remove power from you and place it with themselves.

- Desire to remove choices from you about how you handle yourself at work.
- Intention to create a bullying dynamic in their relationship with you, one which they want to become the customary way in which you two deal with one another.

The way in which any workplace bully goes about achieving these aims will be specific to them. Each bully will have their own methods that they choose to employ. But what doesn't vary is their aim of creating a dynamic in their relationship with you which enables them to use coercive, aggressive behavior that keeps you on the back foot, feeling defensive and confused.

There are many, many ways in which a bully can signal their intention to start to bully. These include:

- Being abusive to you in a one-to-one meeting behind closed doors and then acting supportively towards you when other people are around.
- Intimidating you in a formal meeting in front of other people in the hope of securing their silent compliance in exchange for them not becoming the next target.
- Suddenly and unexpectedly introducing an abusive element into their dealings with you to wrong foot and confuse you, which enables them to seize the initiative while you are trying to work out what just happened.

You may not be able to anticipate an incident of workplace bullying, but you can learn from the first incident and act in a self-preserving and self-protective manner thereafter.

## Understanding the Bullying Dynamic

Every bully wants to create a certain dynamic in their relationship with you. They want to use overtly or subtly aggressive actions to put you on your back foot, removing power from you and places placing it with them. In creating a bullying dynamic in their relationship with you, the bully is hoping that you will feel compelled to go along with their agenda and will be unable to resist their will. You do not have to settle for or accept this.

So, what is “a bullying dynamic?” The bullying dynamic is the two-way, relational street between you and the person who wants to bully you. The bullying dynamic is about:

- The aggressive, unreasonable and coercive behavior the bully uses with you.
- Your response to that behavior at the time it is happening.
- The patterns of behavior that are therefore established between you.

The bully would like their relationship with you to be characterized by their use of coercive behavior in their dealings with you and by your outward compliance to their will. Inwardly, you may well be seething and resentful. But, it's what you do outwardly in their presence that counts. The bully hopes that, because you feel intimidated, because you are at work and caught off guard, because your livelihood and possibly your career are at stake, you will fail to react effectively at the time of an attack and they will succeed in setting a dynamic in place whereby they bully you and you comply. Even though you may go away afterwards and express your fury to your colleagues, friends and family, it is what you say and do outwardly at the time of an attack that maintains or interrupts the bullying dynamic.

## Disrespecting Your Boundaries and Your Choices

One of the things all bullies have in common is a capacity to disrespect your boundaries and your choices. A bullying colleague does not respect either the boundaries around your work or your right to choose how you carry out that work. Consequently, the more you approach working with a known bully as a collaborative venture, the more power you give them. You and your non-bullying colleagues will not usually be concerned with who has power in a working relationship—it will not be an issue for you unless something goes wrong and one of you oversteps

the mark. But for a workplace bully who is targeting you, gaining power is one of their chief concerns and their aim is to ensure that they have as much power as possible in all their dealings with you.

*“The bully would like their relationship with you to be characterized by their use of coercive behavior in their dealings with you and by your outward compliance to their will.”*

And their bullying will have no boundaries. They will call your clients without your knowledge to find out what is happening on your project. They will access your workstation when you are in a meeting and read your files. They will go through your diary or mobile phone records when you are out of the office to see what they can learn. This constant erosion of your boundaries can have the effect of rendering you powerless and leaving you feeling that you are being treated as a work object instead of a colleague.

However, knowing that this is how bullies operate gives you the chance to regain your equilibrium. How? Because locating the range of choices available to you in the moment of an attack and exercising your right to choose one of them preserves your boundaries, your dignity and your self-respect. It gives you some measure of control in an abusive situation.

# Locating Your Choices

The most self-preserving and self-protecting action you can take at the time of an attack is to locate your choices and select one of them. Telling the bully what you are and are not prepared to do, spelling out what you will and will not do, having the capacity to do this despite their intimidating tactics, gives the bully the clear message and that you and you alone are in charge of your choices. You and you alone decide what you will and will not do, even under pressure. They may use bullying tactics and subject you to intimidation and coercion, but they cannot decide for you—you, in the end, have the choice of what action to take. And when you make that clear, you take back some of your power. their power away and empower yourself. Locating the range of choices available to you in the moment of an attack and selecting one of them preserves your dignity and your boundaries and gives the bully something to think about.

I can almost hear your plea, “But they are bullying me! What choices do I have?”

While it is true that your options may be limited, and when the bully is also your manager, perhaps very limited indeed, you do have a choice in how you respond to bullying behavior at the time it occurs. And, crucially, it is in locating the options available to you and with the wise exercise of these choices that your true power lays at the time of an attack. In fact, the quality of your response can alter the bullying dynamic that the bully is trying to put or keep in play.

Even if it doesn't feel like it, and even if your choices are sparse, you will have some choice about how you respond at the time of an attack. Learning what these choices are and how to exercise them judiciously will protect you to some extent and will send back the message to the bully that they will not have it all their own way.

## Regaining Lost Ground

Let's return now to the story we began with—that of the office manager and the bullying business owner.

One morning the business owner approaches the office manager at his desk. She peremptorily informs him that she wants him to drive her to, and then accompany her during, a meeting with the firm's key client that afternoon. The office manager has found it difficult to get on with his work in recent weeks. His ability to concentrate and his energy levels have both been impaired due to the bullying he has received from his employer. He wants to spend the afternoon clearing up the backlog of work on his desk and thinks that his boss can just as easily take a cab. In fact, he thinks that her suggestion that he drive her to the meeting and then participates in it is simply a way of maneuvering him into a position where she can bully him away from the office and in front of clients. He decides to put his foot down.

Faced with a choice between saying “no” to his boss with all the unknown ramifications of that decision, or being bullied while he drives and subsequently humiliated in front of clients, he decides to draw the line despite the fact that in his mind this is a very uncomfortable, even risky thing to do.

*“Even if it doesn't feel like it, and even if your choices are sparse, you will have some choice about how you respond at the time of an attack.”*

He tells his boss in a firm but not impolite tone that he has much work to get on with that afternoon and would prefer to remain in the office and complete his work while she takes a cab and attends the meeting without him. Then, without pausing for breath or waiting for a reply, he tells her that his decision not to accompany her to the meeting is in the best interests of the company because it allows him to focus on the tasks he is paid to carry out and to which he would like to give his full attention. He finishes by saying that he can book a cab for her if she would like and asks her if she would like him to do so.



The business owner is thrown by this turn of events. She is used to treating the office manager in an authoritarian and aggressive way and to him complying outwardly with her wishes. He has not said “no” to her before and he has not demonstrated a capacity to adopt such a determined tone in his dealings with her before either. For a moment she doesn’t quite know what to say. Then she regains her composure and refuses his offer, saying that she is quite capable of booking a cab herself before sweeping out of the office manager’s office while she is still finishing her last few words. The office manager is relieved that she has gone but he doesn’t know how this encounter will affect his relationship with her thereafter. He worries that, even though he has saved himself from being bullied outside of the office on that day today, his boss might retaliate by escalating her bullying behavior towards him around the office.

Over the next week the office manager waits to see what happens. He notices that the business owner does indeed treat him differently, but it is not the difference he is expecting. She gives him the cold shoulder, shunning him publicly and otherwise ignoring him. She doesn’t come to his office to disparage him. She doesn’t deride him in front of his colleagues. She simply acts as if he is not present in the building, snubbing him when she sees him by not acknowledging his presence, and communicating with him via her personal assistant—who is, incidentally, not discourteous with him. While it is uncomfortable for the office manager to be handled in this way by his employer, he forms the view that it is better than being subject to constant verbal abuse.

Let's take a look at what happened in the dynamic between the bullying business owner and the office manager in this scenario. At the moment at which the office manager exercises his unilateral choice not to accompany the business owner to the client meeting, he succeeds in altering the dynamic between them. The bullying doesn't cease entirely, but the degree of intensity of bullying does reduce and so does the extent of the threat that he has to endure on a daily basis at work.

How does the office manager manage to alter the dynamic between him and his bullying boss? Why does his firm communication of his unilateral decision not to accompany her to the meeting with the firm's clients alter the balance of power between them? How can a single well-handled confrontation result in a bullying boss feeling the need to alter her bullying activity from constant, castigating, punitive verbal assaults to silence and public shunning?

Simply put, because in that one moment the bullying boss learns that her office manager can draw the line and defend himself. She learns that he is capable of resisting her. She learns that he does possess the composure to decide for himself, unilaterally, what he will and will not do, and the resolve to communicate that decision to her in a non-confrontational and self-preserving way. He covers all the bases and, for the first time in her dealings with him, she is thrown. There isn't anything she can say to re-gain the initiative in a conversation she had assumed would result, as previous ones had, in her bullying him and him giving ground.

But this time, she meets a different response. Instead of complying, the office manager neatly sidesteps her attempt to move her bullying of him from inside the office to outside. He refuses her the opportunity to bully him in a car and in front of her clients. And he does so without being abusive to her, insubordinate or unprofessional, but by making it clear that he would prefer to put his work first. He demonstrates that he is able to say “no” to her and is prepared to take the consequences despite not knowing precisely what they will be. He demonstrates that he won’t let himself be pushed into taking actions which place him at further risk or which compromise his commitment to his work. He tells her that he has, at last, got the measure of her and that he is quite capable of remaining in charge of his choices.

*“It is in locating the options available to you and with the wise exercise of these choices that your true power lays at the time of an attack.*

Faced with this degree of resolve in her office manager, the business owner experiences herself as less powerful than she thought she was. She cannot see her way clear to continuing to bully him verbally. She cannot take the risk that he will trump her again. She realizes that he has actually got the measure of her and that her tactic of using fear to control him has failed.

The bullying boss is sufficiently discomfited by her employee's stance that she feels compelled to alter her approach. She ceases her campaign of verbal bullying and replaces it with the tactic of silence.

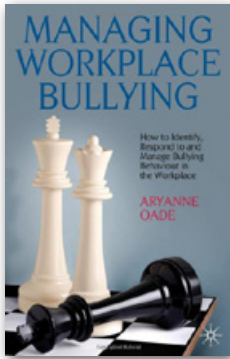
The business owner hopes that this move will unsettle the office manager sufficiently that he will relax his resolve. She hopes that sooner or later he will make the mistake of dropping his guard with her, perhaps because he wants to create a rapprochement between them or because he is tired of the stand off. And if he does make this mistake she will be ready. In fact, she may even be on the look out for such an opportunity, an opportunity she will ruthlessly exploit in an attempt to reintroduce the verbal bullying tactic that gave her so much control over him in their relationship. But, as long as the office manager continues to handle his workload well, respond to his boss on email and use his strategy of taking and communicating unilateral decisions he ought to be able to prevent her from finding and seizing upon such an opportunity. He will have to live with the cold, silent treatment from his boss, but as the alternative is constant verbal assaults, this is the less unpleasant option and a better path for him to choose as long as he decides to stay at that firm. Continuing with his newfound style will preserve some aspect of his self-confidence, self-esteem, and boundaries and that give him some measure of control in an otherwise abusive workplace relationship.

# The Last Word

Every incident of workplace bullying is unique in character, duration and impact. Every workplace bully has their own methods and motives for bullying. And every person subject to bullying behavior at work has their own dilemmas and conflicts to resolve as they try and respond effectively to the abusive dynamics they find themselves experiencing.

It isn't an easy thing to do to respond effectively day in/day out to a colleague who consistently uses bullying behavior in their dealings with you. But there are some key things that you can do to help yourself and to send back the message to the bully that they will not have things all their own way. I hope that this manifesto has given you some food for thought, some new perspectives on handling bullying behavior at work and some practical suggestions that prove useful as you go about your working day. 📖

# Info



**BUY THE BOOK** | Get more details or buy a copy of Aryanne Oade's [Managing Workplace Bullying](#).

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR** | Aryanne Oade is a Chartered Psychologist, author, coach and workshop facilitator. Aryanne worked for three consultancy firms before setting up her coaching and development business in early 1994. Aryanne equips executives, managers, business owners and people at work with the skills they need to handle challenging workplace contacts effectively, build their profile, gain greater influence at work and perform more effectively in their roles. Aryanne is the author of *Managing Politics at Work*, *Managing Workplace Bullying*, *Building Influence in the Workplace*, *Working in Adversarial Relationships*, *Starting and Running a Coaching Business* and *Managing Challenging Clients*.

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