

Workplace Bullying: 11 Reporting Tips to Make Reporting Easier

It's always a tricky proposition reporting a workplace bullying situation to HR or the appropriate Representative or Manager. If you play your cards wrong, it could make the bullying much, much worse. Even if you play your cards right, you may feel the increased pressure of being included in a much larger investigation.

One thing I like to remind my clients is that those you report to are facing many compromises. They may dread running an investigation as much as you may dread bringing it up in the first place. They may know that it's futile to take action against someone who is known to be a bully and whose behavior is tolerated for whatever reasons. They may understand that the rules are not fairly applied and that some people in some categories cannot be held accountable. Think about the pressure they must feel between listening to you and sympathizing with you and then enforcing a policy which may not be used to help or support you.

Make no mistake, they are also in the hot seat when a bullying situation comes up. So what do you do? Here's 7 tips on reporting bullying.

Tip #1: Stick to the Facts (i.e., Don't Label Behaviors or Actions and Don't Draw Conclusions)

When reporting or discussing your point of view about a behavior or incident, stick to the facts. That is — don't interpret or label the behavior. Even if you think you're being bullied, or others are being bullied, or the bullying behavior is damaging the company. It is really tempting to draw conclusions and label things but it HURTS you to do so because it sends up all sorts of red flags about you and what needs to be done. Nothing shuts down conversation faster than labels (because they're perceived as threats and challenges - meaning \$\$).

So, stick to factual occurrences and events. Just explain what happened and how it's getting in the way of doing your job. Use phrases like: "I thought you would want to know that (explain the incident) is happening." Ultimately, it is the bullying effect on your job, and the resulting impact on the bottom line that will give your argument traction.

Tip #2: Keep your Feelings to Yourself

Avoid bringing up how the particular behavior made you feel. Even though the behavior may make you feel small, humiliated, angry, helpless, or depressed, you're not going to win any arguments based on your feelings. In fact, being too emotional may shift the opinion that you may actually be the problem. I know this is hard to do because we feel strongly about what's happening but it WON'T HELP.

Tip #3: Gain Empathy by Mimicry

There's some great research on communication that recommends you mimic the body language, voice cadence and other non-verbal cues. Doing so puts the person into a mindset of empathy and cooperation.

Tip #4: Speak S-L-O-W-L-Y & In Short Sentences

The same research demonstrates that speaking slowly helps you to be heard and understood and also increases empathy and support for your point of view. The same hold true for short sentences. Our attention spans are mere seconds. Doing a "data dump" because you're anxious and want to make all your points doesn't do you any good and actually hurts your cause. This tip will be hard to accomplish so practice your conversation before you have the meeting.

Tip #5: Avoid Labels

Don't label the aggressive behavior as bullying. I know this seems crazy but really, if you call a behavior bullying (or harassment or discrimination) you are backing the person into a corner and not giving them a chance to handle the investigation. Labels create problems for people. They are going to get defensive, fear litigation, assume you're not reasonable and resist your labels. Very quickly they will resent you for cornering them with your labels and may seek to find facts that counter your point of view. They will relabel the experiences as "tough but fair" or as "a one time thing" or as "this is just the way he is" rather than call the behavior bullying.

Tip #6: Document, Document, Document

Going hand in hand with sticking to the facts, make sure you thoroughly document individual incidents of the behavior. What was said or done and when? What day? What time? How many times? Keep copious notes and have examples of the documented behavior ready to go just in case you need it.

It might be wise to hold back your documentation until a formal investigation begins. I have seen that submitting documentation early sometimes works against those who are complaining about the bullying behavior. I am not exactly sure why this is but maybe it gives the company more ammo to prepare a case against you.

If an investigation does happen, having the documentation prepared will give you much more credibility. It will also take some of the pressure off of HR to go hunting for facts, or trying to make decisions based on hearsay.

Tip #7: Keep Your Cool

Both while reporting the behavior, and after, it is important to retain a level head. As I stated earlier, overly emotional behavior will shift the attention of the problem from the bully to you. But you also must keep your cool after reporting the behavior, when the investigation takes place, and when the bullying behavior happens again.

That means don't overreact, don't retaliate, and don't become angry or impatient at the pace of the investigation. The more you take the high road and let the

bully's behavior implicate him or herself during the investigation, the better off you will be.

The most powerful position you can have is to be in control, reasonable but firm and assertive. The more out-of-control you are the easier it is for others to dismiss you as hysterical or defensive or unreasonable.

When this tips report was originally published, this tip "Keep Your Cool" received the strongest positive response from the readers. Everyone agreed with the importance of remaining calm! (We all hate emotional outbursts—they make us afraid, feel impotent and wishing things would just go away.) So, understand what happens when you bring your strong feelings to the meeting. I'm not saying don't have those feelings. I'm saying keep them to yourself.

Tip #8 Don't Give Up

In one case I witnessed the company stalled on the investigation and then determined that there was no cause for the complaint. My client reviewed her documents, talked to witnesses and then resubmitted her complaint by challenging the HR manager to redo the investigation. She did this calmly and assertively and eventually prevailed in her complaint.

Tip #9 Read up!

Make sure you have read the relevant policy/procedure so you know what should be happening and by when. Even if your company doesn't have a specific policy prohibiting bullying behavior, they have one on harassment issues and bullying may fall into the harassment category. Also, check for an anti-violence policy. If you have been threatened, then this policy might apply. And, look for a civility policy which can apply to a bullying situation. If you are in a protected category, e.g.: race, age, disability, gender, the anti-discrimination policy might apply. In my experience, many cases of bullying have been managed with the harassment and discrimination policies. We have to use what's available.

Tip #10 Get Support Where Possible

Access union reps or other reps to support you in making your complaint, and/or assist by being there as needed for an interview. But, be wary. Don't expect those who you think should support you to do so automatically. Everyone has their point of view about bullying, and their prejudices and judgments about the problems and the solutions.

I've found many union reps contemptuous of anyone who complains about bullying by labeling them "weak". Also, some managers and administrators believe that bullying is really "tough but fair" management or appropriate leadership so they won't be fond of "complainers and whiners". Finally, union or management reps may have been subjected to bullying themselves so they know how futile it is to take a complaint forward. If you find you can't count on those who cannot help you, don't take it personally. Refer to # 4 and Keep Your Cool!

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Tip #11 Get Good Advice

Oftentimes people are referred to me by HR professionals, counselors, lawyers and managers. These referrers know that they don't understand the bullying issues and know that I do understand them. There is a lot of advice out there—like "be assertive," or "shout back," or "go directly to the boss of the bully." The problem with that advice is that it's not all appropriate in every situation. It's critical to know what tool to use and when to use it. So, rather than be the judge of what steps to take, get the right advice from those who KNOW what to do and under what circumstances. It's better to wait and be right than jump in and have to try and fix things later.

If you want further help in preparing for the difficult conversation you will have when going to HR or a supervisor to discuss bullying type behaviors, then refer to my new ebook, "[Stop Arguing & Start Working: 6 Steps to Being Confident, Calm and Capable During Difficult Conversations At Work.](#)" The book is available now on Amazon.

For more tips on how to deal with workplace conflict and bullying behaviors, exclusive content, and detailed reports, sign up for my free newsletter at www.kathleenbartle.com/newsletter/

I've been a strategic consultant on workplace conflict to executives worldwide for more than 20 years. My work brings individualized solutions to your teams' lost productivity, loss of key personnel, low morale, and the high costs resulting from bullying, abrasive behaviors and interpersonal workplace conflicts