

Workplace Bullying – A free guide

What is Bullying?

The subject of workplace bullying is often in the media and is becoming increasingly recognised as an all too common problem in the workplace. Bullying and harassment can take many forms and can range from obvious aggressive and intimidating behaviour to more subtle, covert behaviour. The bullying may not necessarily be face-to-face – it may be written or visual, be carried out through email, social networking sites or through phone calls or text messages. It may be directed at one person, for example, a manager bullying a member of staff through an abuse of power or position, or it might involve groups of people or “mobbing”, for example, a group of colleagues bullying the person in their team who got the promotion.

ACAS define bullying as:

“Offensive, intimidating, malicious or insulting behaviour, an abuse or misuse of power through means intended to undermine, humiliate, denigrate or injure the recipient.”

ACAS define harassment as:

“Unwanted conduct affecting the dignity of men and women in the workplace. It may be related to age, sex, race, disability, religion, sexual orientation, nationality or any personal characteristic of the individual, and may be persistent or an isolated incident. The key is that the actions or comments are viewed as demeaning and unacceptable to the recipient.”

Some examples of bullying and harassing behaviour include:

- Unnecessary and persistent criticism on a colleague’s personal or professional abilities
- With-holding information with the intent to create extra work for an employee and deliberately affect their performance
- Ignoring or isolating or excluding staff and preventing them from accessing opportunities
- Humiliating someone alone or in front of others
- Spreading malicious rumours, or insulting someone by word or behaviour (particularly on the grounds of age, race, sex, disability, sexual orientation and religion or belief)
- Verbally and/or physically threatening behaviour
- Setting a colleague up to fail
- Undermining an individual’s professional ability in front of others
- Placing unreasonable demands/setting impossible deadlines on a colleague and over-monitoring their performance
- Treating someone unfairly
- Excessive supervision or other misuse of authority or position
- Unwelcome sexual advances e.g. touching, standing too close, displaying offensive materials, making decisions on the basis of sexual advances being accepted or rejected
- Making threats or comments about job security without foundation
- Intentionally blocking promotion or training opportunities to prevent career progression
- Regarding any employee suffering from stress to be weak and inadequate and coercing them into giving up permanent positions
- Cancelling annual leave

Is it bullying or just firm management?

One person might consider a behaviour to be bullying, whilst another person might just consider it to be firm management. So what is the difference between a firm, fair manager and a bullying manager?

FIRM, FAIR MANAGEMENT VS. BULLYING & HARASSMENT	
Firm/Fair Manager	Bullying/Harassing Manager
Assertive and respectful	Aggressive
Consistent and fair	Inconsistent and unfair
Determined to achieve the best results, but is reasonable and flexible	Unreasonable and inflexible
Knows their own mind and is clear about their own ideas, but willing to consult with colleagues and staff before drawing up proposals	Believes that they are always right, has fixed opinions, believes they know best and is not prepared to value other people's opinions
Expects high standards of service in both the quality of, and behaviour within the team - with the focus being on support and constructive solutions rather than apportioning blame	Insists on high standards of service and behaviour but blames others if things go wrong
Will discuss, in private, any perceived deterioration in performance before forming any views or taking action	Loses temper regularly, degrades people in front of others and threatens official warnings without listening to any explanation
Asks for people's views, listens and assimilates feedback	Tells people what will be happening, does not listen
Appropriate Behaviour	Inappropriate Behaviour
Consistent	Inconsistent
Shares information	Withholds information selectively
Fair	Has favourites
Truthful	Distorts, fabricates
Delegates	Abdicates
Builds team spirit	Creates fear, divides
Leads by example	Sets a poor example
Listens	Snaps
Admits mistakes	Blames others
Challenges constructively	Avoids conflict

In reality, these behaviours might not be quite so clear-cut and extreme and the person(s) may display characteristics that fall somewhere in the middle. It is good practice for employers to make it clear about what is unacceptable behaviour in their organisation and to give examples of the kinds of behaviour they do not tolerate. It is also good practice for employers to have a Bullying and Harassment or Dignity at Work policy, to clarify what the expected standards of behaviour within their organisation are. Essentially, this is about treating colleagues the way in which you would like to be treated yourself, with respect at all times. Make sure you are familiar with your organisation's policy on what constitutes unacceptable behaviour, and what your organisation recommends as appropriate course of action.

If you feel you are being bullied or harassed, keep a record of incidents and if you can, inform the person who is bullying you that you find their behaviour unacceptable and ask them to stop – they may not be aware that their behaviour is bothering you. If you are unable to do this, or the behaviour does not stop, you may want to speak to your manager or another colleague and seek advice. Your organisation's policy may encourage you to seek support from your HR department or Occupational Health service.

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