

TOXIC CO-WORKERS, BULLIES AND YOU

Dealing With Them Without Becoming One of Them

Presented By

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INTRODUCTION

When I told people that I was putting together a training program about toxic co-workers and bullies, I saw similar reactions. I could tell that they were having a flashback of some kind; then they would tell me something like, “I’ve got a perfect story for you” or “Use MY workplace as the main case study.” Everyone seemed to have a story and everyone wanted to vent once they remembered it.

Annoying people seem to surround us at times, especially in the workplace. If the letters to my blog, Evil Skippy at Work (www.evilskippyatwork.com) are any indication, everyone works or has worked with at least one insanely strange individual. Still, there is a huge difference between the truly “toxic” co-worker or “bully” and the normal types of tensions and conflicts that arise from time to time in the average workplace.

In this session, we will cover:

- The difference between the merely annoying co-worker and toxic ones or bullies
- Impacts on the workplace due to toxic employees and bullies
- Ways to respond to different types of toxic or bullying behavior

I hope you find this class to be both interesting and helpful.

The Impacts of Toxicity and Bullying

Impacts on the workplace caused by bullying and toxic behavior are varied in both type and degree. While it is impossible to list every possible impact or harm, here are some common examples:

- Increased stress among other employees – sometimes to the point of causing physical symptoms
- Inefficiencies (supervisors spend time on problems that really shouldn’t be happening, deadlines are missed, employees spend time handling the personality conflict rather than work, etc.)
- Litigation (harassment cases especially)
- Increased use of sick and disability leave
- High turnover
- General workplace malaise and bad feelings
- Accidents
- Workplace violence

According to surveys of employees throughout the United States:

- About 50% of people who experience uncivil behavior at work report that they lost productive time worrying about it and its future consequences.
- About 25% of the individuals who were targets of repeated uncivil behavior acknowledged that they cut back on their work efforts
- About 50% of the targets contemplated quitting their job and 12% actually did so.

“Toxic Co-Worker” and “Bully” Defined

We don't have an official definition of either “toxic co-worker” or “bully.” There are hundreds of experts on the topics and almost as many definitions. The terms are used – perhaps over-used – but we can mean very different things when we use them. In addition, individuals can fall all along the “toxic/bully” spectrum, from “Ever So Slightly Toxic” all the way to “Psycho Lunatic Co-Worker”. For purposes of our discussion, we will use the following definitions to distinguish between merely annoying behavior and actions that are toxic or bullying:

Toxic Co-Worker: Someone who demonstrates an *ongoing pattern* of counter-productive work behaviors that can debilitate individuals, teams and even organizations over the long term.

Bully: Someone (or a group of people) who engages in *repeated mistreatment* of a co-worker through such conduct as verbal abuse, threats, intimidation, humiliation, sabotage or some combination of these or similar behaviors. In some cases, bullying is intended to place the target in a powerless position so that the bully can exert influence and control.

Toxic behavior and bullying are not mutually exclusive. A toxic co-worker may also be a bully and vice versa. At the same time, some toxic personalities are not bullies. (In my personal opinion, all bullies are “toxic” due to their impact on the workplace).

Personality Disorders

In addition to the basic definitions of toxic and bully, it is helpful to consider the role of personality disorders. It is not necessary to have a full-fledged personality disorder in order to be a toxic co-worker or bully, but it helps. Traits of one or more of the recognized disorders often seem to correlate to such people's behavior. “Personality disorders” are long-standing disturbances in personality that usually begin in late adolescence and continue throughout adulthood. These disorders reveal themselves when a person engages in repetitive patterns of dysfunctional interactions with other people. Often, individuals afflicted with personality disorders are not aware of the impact their behavior has on those around them.

The list below briefly describes some of the different types of personality disorders that can be found in the workplaces. Identifying, defining and diagnosing personality disorders can be a tricky business, even for mental-health care professionals. ***For that reason, please take a vow right now that you will not to try to diagnose your co-workers, friends and family.*** We are only covering this information as a foundation to help you decide how to deal with destructive behavior in the workplace – labeling the other person is seldom going to be a productive response. In fact, labeling people might cause other people to conclude that ***you*** are the bully or toxic person. Don't be alarmed if some aspects of these definitions sound familiar – for instance, because some points sound like you. Many of the traits described here can be “healthy” or even desirable in small doses.

Based on guidelines set in *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition* (DSM-IV), here are the standard recognized personality disorders:

- *Paranoid*: Highly suspicious, distrusting.
- *Schizoid*: Aloof from others. Does not really wish to have social interactions.
- *Schizotypal*: Really weird, even bizarre behavior. Odd beliefs or magical thinking (such as extreme superstitions, belief in clairvoyance, telepathy, or "sixth sense").
- *Antisocial*: No or little sense of morals. Fails to conform to social norms and shows no remorse.
- *Narcissistic*: Self-centered to the point they can't consider someone else's point of view. Characterized by a sense of over-inflated self-esteem and entitlement.
- *Histrionic*: Dramatic, flamboyant, over-emotional and shallow. In constant need of attention.
- *Borderline*: Moody, angry and the most likely to litigate. Usually has intense and stormy relationships.
- *Obsessive Compulsive*: Picky, obsessed with details and timeliness. Perfectionist. (Likely to be successful if the condition is mild).
- *Avoidant*: Consider themselves to be socially inept or personally unappealing. Avoids social interaction for fear of being ridiculed, humiliated, rejected, or disliked.
- *Dependent*: Overly reliant on others for security and self-esteem. Has trouble making individual decisions. Needs constant reassurance. Good but insecure team player. Often referred to as co-dependent.
- *Passive Aggressive*: Angry, but won't show it openly. Covert expressions of anger may include inefficiency, blaming authority figures, tardiness and other "quietly" obstructive behavior.

Many psychologists group the various disorders that are similar to each other into one of three "clusters":

Cluster A: *The Odd and Eccentric*

Includes Paranoid, Schizoid and Schizotypal Personality Disorders

Cluster B: *The Dramatic and Manipulative*

Includes Narcissistic, Histrionic, Antisocial, Passive Aggressive and Borderline Personality Disorders

Cluster C: *The Fearful and Anxious*

Includes Dependent, Obsessive Compulsive and Avoidant Personality Disorders.

Symptoms

The following is a list of symptoms that are common to most personality disorders. Knowing the symptoms is a first step in realizing that you have a larger problem than merely a periodically annoying co-worker. Perhaps in your past interactions with someone who you consider to be toxic or a bully, you recognized many of these things intuitively. Since one of the main symptoms of a personality disorder is

the inability to interact effectively with others, repeated problems with a co-worker can be a clue that a personality disorder is present. (Of course, if you have such problems with lots of people – it may be time to take a long look in the mirror and think about whether you might be the one with the problem).

The common symptoms are:

- Difficulties in interpersonal relationships
 - Reasonable requests are ignored, deadlines are not adhered to, simple differences of opinion become major arguments, a simple mistake becomes a corporate lawsuit. These are the people who fire off memos, hold grudges and are so petty about details that they infuriate others. They may spread rumors, be malcontents or “not on speaking terms” with someone else. These individuals can also be some of the most gifted and productive employees when they are not engaged in dysfunctional behavior.
- Ego-Syntonic
 - The ego-syntonic person sees his or her disorder symptoms as something normal or even virtuous. In other words, they are convinced there is nothing about themselves that they need to change. For example, if you tell someone with Obsessive Compulsive Personality Disorder that he or she is getting bogged down in details to the point that a project has stalled, that person will reply that they are focusing on essential matters and being thorough. In addition, he or she will now think that you are too careless and do not take the job seriously.
- Lack of empathy
 - Empathy is the ability most adults have to be emotionally responsive to those around us. It is a sign of maturity. For example, a person with strong approval needs might be so intent on getting his co-workers to offer reassurance about his capabilities that he fails to see that the co-workers are annoyed with the constant insecurities.
- Difficulties maintaining boundaries
 - This can include sharing too much information, making unwelcome comments, ignoring organizational hierarchies (chain of command) or even physical space issues.
- Rigid, irrational belief patterns
 - We all evaluate situations according to our patterns of belief, filtering experiences through our belief systems and then responding. We have different belief systems and interpret situations differently. Our belief systems do not have to be perfect – most are not – just good enough to make our way through the different situations we face each day. Most people’s belief systems are good enough. People with a personality disorder have rigid, irrational core beliefs about the world and the people in it. A few examples: “I am worthless if my ideas are not accepted”; “Only truly gifted and talented people understand me”; “If I follow orders, I am weak”; “Everyone picks on me all the time”; or “I must be the center of attention at all times.”
- Hidden agendas
 - These are individual (often unconscious) goals that sabotage the major goals of the team or organization. You may be dealing with a hidden agenda when simple tasks do

not seem to move in the expected direction or to the expected degree. Simple matters become convoluted, obvious facts are ignored.

- Lack of emotional intelligence
 - “Emotional Intelligence” means understanding one’s social surroundings and having an ability to respond to others and solve interpersonal problems in an emotionally healthy manner. It means being able to interact with others in appropriate ways.
- “Long term” and inflexible
 - People with personality disorders are often “one trick ponies” in that they respond to life in a pattern that does not vary from one situation to another. They often do one thing very well to the exclusion of other things. (If the characteristic is recent or temporary, it is probably not part of a true personality disorder. A person going through depression or an anxiety disorder might temporarily show signs of a personality disorder but not necessarily have it. Evidence of a true personality disorder can be traced back to adolescence.

Toxic and Bullying Behaviors

In the workplace, we often will not have the time or patience to evaluate our co-worker for signs of a personality disorder or to weigh their conduct to decide if they are just having a bad day as opposed to engaging in a pattern of destructive acts. While it is important to have an understanding of the definitions and clinical symptoms, it can be more helpful (and more simple) at times to focus on the conduct or behaviors without making an amateur diagnosis.

Toxic Behavior

Based on interviews with thousands of employees and mental health professionals across the United States, researchers have identified several types of toxic behaviors that are most likely to debilitate a work group or organization if the behavior becomes a regular pattern. These are:

- Humiliates others
- Uses sarcastic remarks
- Takes “potshots” at others in public
- Distrusts the opinions of others
- Monitors co-workers to the point of surveillance
- Meddles in others’ work
- Uses authority to punish (not including appropriate corrective discipline by a supervisor, of course)
- Demonstrates passive-aggressive behaviors¹
- Protects own “territory”
- Has difficulty accepting negative feedback
- Is clueless about their toxic behavior
- Points out other people’s mistakes

¹ Keep in mind that a person can display these behaviors without actually having the Passive Aggressive Personality Disorder.

Just as the personality disorders can be grouped into clusters, toxic behavior can often be categorized in one of three groups:

Behavior Group 1: Shaming Behavior

This includes humiliation, sarcasm, potshots and pointing out mistakes. For example, the person might embarrass someone on purpose by asking questions that they know the other person will not be able to answer. These behaviors will often start at the “irritation stage” and then become demoralizing as the behavior continues day after day. These behaviors can have significant effects on the target(s) self-esteem and well-being, and also hinder the organization’s ability to create and maintain a respectful environment.

Behavior Group 2: Passive Hostility

These include passive aggression, distrust of others’ opinions, territorial behavior, verbal attacks when receiving negative feedback and being clueless about their own toxicity. For example, the person might be friendly and collaborative when talking to you one-on-one, but then does not do what is instructed or agreed and may do the opposite of what he or she committed to do. They may exhibit distrust of others’ opinions in a team work environment as a passive way to stop work from moving forward. Instead, the group is stuck working on ways to solve the objections of the toxic person.

Behavior Group 3: Team Sabotage

Toxic individuals seem most adept at undermining teams. Behaviors include surveillance of co-workers, meddling and abuse of authority to punish. The toxic person might collect information to later use against others, undermine the leader or co-workers by not sharing information or shutting down if things do not go the toxic person’s way. This behavior group includes patterns of gripes and complaints that earn the person a label of “pot stirrer.”

Bullying Behavior

Similarly, many different surveys indicate that the following are common themes of bullying workplace behavior:

- Implied or direct threats of violence/Actual violence
- Blaming for “errors”
- Unreasonable demands
- Criticism of ability
- Inconsistent compliance with rules
- Threatens job loss
- Insults and put-downs
- Discounting or denial of accomplishments
- Exclusion, causing isolation
- Yelling, angry tones
- Stealing credit

(The first behavior on the bullying list is obviously the most serious. In such cases, the bully has clearly violated the employer's code of conduct and is creating a dangerous situation in the workplace. Management needs to take some sort of action immediately when it learns of such a situation. The other types of bullying behavior are far less clear. The underlying conduct is not (yet) creating a safety risk. We know we need to handle the situation, but the problem is not as imminent or serious as actual or threatened violence).

How to Respond

Warning: It will not be effective to base any formal action on whether or not a person has an actual Personality Disorder. In fact, basing any employment decision solely on the fact that an individual has a Personality Disorder would be illegal discrimination. While it is important to understand the facts regarding personality disorders when dealing with certain cases, at all times we need to focus on workplace conduct. Period. Therefore, suggesting to a person that they have a mental problem is what we like to refer to as a **Really Bad Idea**.

First, if you believe that you are dealing with a toxic co-worker or bully and have not already done so, you need to communicate your concerns to your direct supervisor and/or human resources. Your supervisor and H.R. may be able to explain some of the behaviors that have been a concern, or may be able to offer you some other sort of answers or relief. (This applies even if you are a supervisor and manager. Unless you are the head of your company – tell your boss.) Going to your supervisor and H.R. provides management with information that may be necessary for resolving the issues with the problematic employee. Management will use your information as a starting point for making a sound decision about what course of action is needed. (If your problem is with your direct supervisor, you need to talk to the next person up the chain of command.) If you have a union representative, you might also consult with that person about your situation.

Keep in mind that once you report your concern, you should almost never expect an instant resolution. Unless the other person's conduct was egregious, it is not likely that they will immediately be removed from the workplace based on verification of your concerns. Management may decide to do some sort of investigation or review. In cases that do not involve threats or other egregious behavior², it is more likely even after an investigation that management will issue counseling and corrective action rather than decide on termination. This means you must still work with the other person. (Due to privacy concerns, you might just be told that management is responding without being told the details.) It is also likely that counseling and corrective action will not produce an immediate and total cure. While the other person's conduct may improve, there probably will be a few reversals along the way. You need a strategy for taking care of yourself and also for communicating with the other person.

To that end and in addition to reporting the problem, here are tips for how to respond to toxic behavior and bullying both before and after you have reported the problem to management:

² Minor problems can become "egregious" if they are part of an excessive pattern.

1. **Don't get emotional.** Bullies and some toxic personalities take pleasure in emotionally manipulating people. Stay calm and rational to diffuse the situation. This can be difficult and you may have to “practice” remaining calm. As silly as it sounds, assign a role play to yourself and rehearse how you will react in front of a mirror in the privacy of your home. (Don't practice talking to yourself at work or you may end up being a subject of the office rumor mill).
2. **Don't blame yourself.** Acknowledge that this is not about you; it's about the toxic person or bully even though you are being affected by the conduct. Don't lose your confidence or begin to think you are incapable or incompetent. That would mean they are beating you at a mind game.
3. **Assess your situation.** Initially, you might be shocked that you are being treated unprofessionally. Take a deep breath and try to understand exactly what is happening to you. Is the behavior part of a pattern? (If you feel that you are at risk of physical harm, report your concerns immediately.)
4. **Don't expect to change the toxic person/bully.** Real behavior change is difficult and it takes time. You have no control over another person's willingness to accept that they have a problem and need to work on it. You can do your best to manage the situation, but it's really the company's responsibility to be observant and responsive to the needs of their workers and the general work environment. If your goal is to get them to agree that they are doing something wrong, you are bound for disappointment and frustration.
5. **Do your best work.** The bad behavior may seem more justified if you aren't doing your best work, or if you do things like come to work late, take long lunches, or turn in work after deadlines. Focusing on your work can also help keep your thoughts away from the other employee's bad behavior.
6. **Build a support network.** Instead of allowing the toxic co-worker bully to make you retreat into your office, work on building your relationships with your coworkers so that you have support and the other person doesn't turn them against you as well. As you do this, don't vent about the problem employee or join any kind of open feud. Constant complaining to your peers about the situation can quickly earn you the title of “office whiner.”
7. **Be Prepared for Conflict.** The best way to deal with a problem is to see it coming before it invades your work space. If you work closely or otherwise deal regularly with a bully or toxic co-worker, anticipate ahead of time how you're going to handle possible future situations. When you're unprepared, you're likely to react instinctively to your anger and annoyance with childish behavior. This will only succeed in making a bad situation worse.
8. **Don't Fuel the Fire.** You're going to be tempted to retaliate – to lash out at a hostile co-worker with equally low blows. This is the worst thing you can do. People who instigate confrontation and cause tension also thrive on controversy. Any exchange of negative words fuels their malice and makes them feel powerful. If you stoop to their level, you're opening the door for them to make you look like the bad guy. Instead, use the oldest trick in the book: “Kill 'em with

kindness” (or at least with professional behavior). In some cases, it can be the ultimate ammunition for fighting off irrational people. They will either end up too frustrated or too bored, eventually becoming weary of engaging in debate with you. Even if that does not happen, you will show that you are the adult and have emotional intelligence.

9. **Document, document, document.** Keep a personal journal of what happened (including where, when and who witnessed the incident) so that if the situation escalates, you have the detailed information you need to make your case. Be sure to also keep emails and notes that you may receive that relate to the situation.
10. **Communicate.** Only if you feel safe and comfortable doing so, talk to the bully or toxic co-worker in private and tell them that their behavior is inappropriate and will not be tolerated. Tell them that you will report all breaches of your company’s code of conduct. It might help to practice this conversation when you are by yourself – practice staying on topic, being direct and not lowering yourself to their level (with name-calling, sarcasm, irrelevant accusations, etc.).
11. **Get counseling.** It will help you deal with the stress, especially if the conduct is already affecting your physical and mental health. You have to take care of yourself. Counseling may be available through your employer’s EAP program, private health insurance or at local community centers.
12. **Stay healthy.** Maintain a healthy and balanced lifestyle outside of work to help you cope with the madness at work. Work out, get a good night's sleep and eat a healthy diet. (Heck, this is good advice even if you are not facing a bully or toxic person at work!)
13. **Educate yourself.** Learn everything you can about bullying and other inappropriate conduct, and your company's policies on such behavior. The more you know, the better your chances of successfully dealing with this situation.
14. **Agree to disagree.** If you personally dislike a coworker or boss, you can still learn from their opinions, viewpoints, and ideas. If you can find something to appreciate about them, comment on it in a favorable way. If that person senses your allegiance, they will be naturally drawn to you, and you may both learn to get along despite your differences.