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Coping with the office bully

By Jill Haney

A reader asks: "I enjoy your column and read it on a regular basis. Could you address the office bully and how to handle one?"

It is disheartening and disturbing to know that bullying exists among adults. But research seems to support the idea that "Those who can, do. Those who can't, bully."

Dictionary.com defines a bully as a blustering, quarrelsome, overbearing person who habitually badgers and intimidates smaller or weaker people.

The office bully typically seems to think highly of himself but is actually hiding under a facade of confidence, is quite insecure and is attempting to compensate for inadequacies and shortcomings. Bullies often have few social skills and a low emotional quotient. When socializing, bullies generally converse on limited subjects, with themselves typically as the main topic.

Bullies often target workers who are successful, typically in an area where the bully feels especially inadequate. The bully's goal is to intimidate, isolate and nit-pick until the victim is on the verge of a breakdown or chooses to leave the company. Then, the bully will target another unsuspecting victim.

Bullies can be men or women. Women now account for more than 40 percent of executives, managers and administrators. We typically think of women as more nurturing and loving, and therefore prone to promoting an environment of support and acceptance. However, studies indicate women are just as guilty as men when it comes to corporate bullying.

When dealing with bullies, the victim has two choices. One is to go to Human Resources. Laws protect workers against sexual harassment, and HR can guide a victim if the bullying is sexual in nature. If not, the issue may take longer before it's addressed. Experts recommend victims keep detailed logs of the bully's behavior including time, dates, specifics and how this behavior is affecting job ability.

The second option is to stand up to the bully. Just as on the playground, bullies, when confronted, will often back down. At the heart of the bully is a weak coward with little or no self-esteem who may well choose to pick on someone else who won't fight back. Bullies need to be put in their place or their harassment will continue. It is important for the victim to be better, faster, stronger and smarter than the bully.

When confronting the bully, it is not the time to become emotional, especially if the victim is female. You may recall from a previous Image Rules article that women who show emotion at work, especially those who cry, can be seen as manipulative. It is important to stand up to the bully in a professional and calm manner. Set clear boundaries of behavior that will be tolerated and articulate that to the bully.

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