



# Bullying: Are you an Offender, Target, Enabler or Sideliner?

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*In any work environment, there is always a social dynamic that defines our role within the group. Anytime there is a bully in the group, we tend to fall into certain roles as well. What role do you play? Does your role change depending on the circumstances or the environment? Do you see yourself in any of these roles?*

## The Roles

### The Offender

A lot has been written about people who bully or those who sexually harass others, and what motivates them.

Social scientists tend to view the bully—especially if an adolescent—as the victim of a difficult background, who is hobbled with low self-esteem, which causes them to lash out at others. The sexual harassers are often viewed as being crippled by a deep insecurity about their ability to attract sexual partners.

Human resources expert Lynne Curry, author of *Beating the Workplace Bully: A Tactical Guide to Taking Charge*, categorizes office bullies in some general types:

The ‘shape shifter’ is a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality who seems like two different people. This bully is charming to those they seek to take advantage of or who offer opportunity to them, but they’ve got their claws out for anyone else.”

The ‘scorched earth’ bully pulls out all the stops to make sure that the victims in their sight are hurt in some way. Many cyber bullies fall into this category, Curry explains.

The ‘gossipy bully’ tells stories and defames the Target behind their back, says Curry. “This bully can be particularly dangerous, because your reputation may be damaged before you know it’s even happening or can defend yourself.”

## **The Target**

Anyone who has ever been harassed by someone has a single wish. That it simply stops.

But the reality is that anyone at any time can become the Target of a bully for no obvious or justifiable reason. Offenders tend to Target those who have less rank in the work space; a lower status based on income or some other random measure of success, or simply because they appear vulnerable enough that the Offender feels safe to get away with their behaviour without being challenged.

It's natural for a Target to ask themselves what they have done to deserve it, yet there is no satisfactory answer to that question.

Targets try a lot of different ways to deal with bullying that range from ignoring it, laughing it off, going silent, crying, taking days off, going on vacation, complaining to co-workers and family, and occasionally even confronting the bully to ask them to stop. Often though, none of that works.

Bullying can occur quietly and subtly, so that it's often the Target alone who witnesses the abuse. Therefore if the Target complains to others, it is easier to fault the Target for exaggerating the problem, or being a whiner.

The family of someone who is harassed at work feel the effects as the Target begins to show the stress of being abused all day, and then comes home worn out and depressed.

Some people who are bullied simply give up and quit their jobs to avoid the Offender. In the meantime, loss of wellness, productivity, satisfaction, career opportunities, income, fractured work teams, and even lawsuits result.

## **The Enablers**

The Enabler is the bully's sidekick who tries to stay on the bully's good side; partly out of self-preservation, just in case the day comes when the abuse is turned on them. 'Keep your friends close and your enemies closer' is a rule of thumb that underpins the Enabler's loyalty to the bully.

The Enablers themselves may have little self-confidence but recognize the danger the bully poses to their career prospects, if not their peace of mind.

The Enablers—and there are often more than one attached to a bully—not only don't intervene to defend the bully's victim, they may actually jump in on the action. Or they will reinforce the abusive behaviour with approving smiles and gestures, eager to listen to the bully's taunts and nasty comments, perhaps mimicking what the bully is doing to his Target.

Receptive and eager to hear the bully's latest gossip and slurs about the Target, the Enabler shows the bully appreciation, even respect and attention, reinforcing the abusive behaviour. The result is that the bully gets the message, their behaviour is not only acceptable, it is winning them allies.

The Target perceives that not only is the bully against them; it appears "the whole office" has ganged up on them making the behaviour twice as troubling and twice as damaging.

## **The Sideliners**

These are the majority of the population, sometimes called the 'innocent bystanders', in any given workplace. The Sideliner is often aware of the harassment and bullying that takes place but does nothing to stop it. He or she does not necessarily approve of the bad behaviour of the offending bully or harasser, but may be thwarted from intervening out of fear for their job, fear of the Offender, ignorant of what to do to stop the harassment, and perhaps even not fully aware of the damage it is inflicting on the Target.

Because part of them may feel guilty for their inaction or because they themselves are not a Target of the Offender, the Sideliner's go-to is to rationalize the harassing behaviour with statements about the Offender such as: 'He's just kidding. He doesn't mean anything by it.' All of these roles combine to create a workplace dynamic that can be toxic; damaging to the individuals involved, and corrosive to the entire group.

How would you describe your role in the office where you work, or on your team? Is there more that you could do to support a healthier, more respectful environment that contributes to your business rather than drags it down?

## Do you recognize an Offender where you work?

While bullying is a form of aggression, the actions of an Offender can be both obvious and subtle. It is almost always an ongoing pattern of behaviour that can last weeks, months, even years and shows itself in ways such as this:

- Spreading malicious rumours, gossip, or innuendo about the Target.
- Making offensive jokes to or within the Target's hearing or reading
- Excluding or isolating the Target socially from the group.
- Intimidating the Target with threats or physically getting in their way.
- Undermining or deliberately impeding the Target's work.
- Tampering with the Target's personal belongings, their workstation, computer or other tools.
- Withholding necessary information or purposefully giving the wrong information.

If you are not sure an action or statement could be considered bullying, try imagining how you would you feel if someone caught your behaviour with a work colleague on video and posted it on Facebook and then sent it to your colleagues, your clients, your family and friends? Would you feel exposed? Embarrassed? Ashamed? Angry?

We want you to engage in an open dialogue about workplace harassment so that we can learn more about your perspectives on what needs to change, and how we can help stop this behaviour from affecting you, your team, and your office.

If you have experienced workplace harassment or have ideas about how it can be prevented, please share your story with us. Email: [communications@fvreb.bc.ca](mailto:communications@fvreb.bc.ca)