



Surviving toxic managers: A guide for employees

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Imagine the following scenario: You're somewhat new to a company; you've been in role about 4 months. You just finished wrapping up a large-scale program that your manager used to run before he was promoted. On the whole, the program went pretty well. Clients were pleased and engagement was at an all-time high. On the last day of the program, you turn to your manager, and, in a burst of excitement say, "I am so pleased with how the project has gone. Our clients seem so happy and excited with our product. When this wraps up, I'm really excited to share some ideas with you about how our team might be able to make it even more of a success next year!" Your manager appears to bristle at the suggestion and walks off.

As the months go by, you've notice a shift in your relationship with your manager. You bought him a holiday gift that goes unopened on his desk for months. Everyone in the department signed your birthday card except for him. He cuts you off frequently in meetings that you used to run. When you come up with ideas for the next program, he belittles your ideas and tells you that you're just "not good at brainstorming." He never seems to give positive feedback on your ideas, instead, everything is critical and negative. Instead of being constructive with specific suggestions to help you grow, your boss makes grand claims about how you're a "poor communicator" and you "don't know what you're doing." When you need to take medical leave for a serious matter and come back, your boss slams you with the suggestion that you're "not a good fit for the role." You're floored - you have only been in the role 6 months in total, and nearly a month of that time you were on medical leave. While you were on leave, you suffered from a serious problem that almost left you permanently incapacitated. Your boss didn't seem to demonstrate any concern about what you had gone through, and instead he seemed angry with you about your taking time off.

You want to fix the problem, and you want your manager to like you again so that you can work effectively together to get the job done. You start to examine your own behavior. However, the constant negative feedback makes you feel as though your ideas aren't valued. You have been in this line of work a while – you start to wonder, "have I made the right career choice? Should I even be doing this anymore? Was I ever any good at it to begin with?" After a few months, you start to lose enjoyment in experiences you used to love. This problem is so frightening and it's all you can think about - you so badly want to right the situation. You wonder - will you be fired? Will anyone believe you if you share your experience?

Toxic managers are, unfortunately, all around us. And, workplace bullying is far, far too common of an occurrence. 27% of American adults have experienced bullying at work. Workplace bullying is defined as "repeated and persistent negative actions toward one or more individual(s), which involves a power imbalance and creates a hostile environment." Bullying is not just a physical phenomenon.

Examples include the following: isolating someone socially; undermining or deliberately impeding a person's work; removing areas of responsibilities without cause; constantly changing work guidelines; withholding necessary information or purposefully giving the wrong information; establishing impossible deadlines that will set up the individual to fail; criticizing a person persistently or constantly; belittling a person's opinions. Furthermore, most (75%) workplace bullying is perpetrated by leaders toward those they manage.

These employees tend to exhibit narcissistic and psychopathic traits. They think they're better than everyone else: they brag, they exploit the work of others, they are unable to maintain healthy relationships, and they act in interpersonally aggressive ways. They are charming and can spin negative events in their favor. In short, they tend to make poor leaders. Narcissists, in particular, are very sensitive to criticism and will be extremely reactive to defend their ego. Essentially, they are likely to bully others so that they can maintain the sense that they are "on top." They tend to focus on targets* to bully when they feel threatened. Narcissists and people with psychopathic traits are also likely to feel less empathic for the emotional needs of the rest of their team. Finally, they are likely to tear down their targets in a slow, pernicious way. They are persistent in their bullying.

What kind of an impact do these workplace bullies have on businesses? On one hand, many companies focus on retaining high-potential employees. These people are likely to increase the bottom line by \$5,300 annually because of high productivity. On the other hand, toxic bullies are likely to decrease the bottom line to the tune of \$12,500 annually because of associated high turnover costs. After all, no one likes working with a toxic colleague!

What kind of an impact do leaders who are toxic bullies have on employees? The employee in the above scenario was clearly having a hard time coping with her job and may have been suffering from depression. Indeed, in the psychological research, those leaders who display both narcissistic and psychopathic traits are likely to influence levels of employee depression. In extreme forms, workplace bullying can lead to an increase in employee suicidal ideation, which is a chilling prospect. Additionally, bullying has been associated with employee anxiety and PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) symptoms. In the above example we can see why the employee felt so low - when being faced with the constant drum beat of "you're never good enough," those messages may have started to sink in and chip away at her self-esteem. In turn, her job performance may start to suffer and it's any wonder why. However, employees in these types of situations are not alone - large-scale studies support the fact that employees who face workplace bullying are likely to experience impaired job performance.

What do you do if you find yourself in a situation like this?

1. Document everything. It's best that you provide evidence of bullying, because a bully will likely become defensive and make excuses for his or her behavior. Start documenting bullying interactions as they occur with this toxic colleague. Don't underestimate this process - documenting your experiences may make you relive these negative experiences. Documentation is hard work.



2. Talk to HR. If you start to experience bullying behaviors from someone on your team, describe them to your HR representative and see if he or she may be able to help. Perhaps your HR rep will suggest mediation, and as uncomfortable as it might feel, it can be an opportunity to put your fears on the table in a protected and confidential environment. If grievances are aired in front of the bully, however, make sure you protect yourself (again, documentation is useful here) because bullies may want to retaliate because of the perceived threat to their ego.

3. Talk to trusted colleagues for emotional support. If you feel comfortable sharing these issues with colleagues on your team, learn about their experiences with the toxic colleague. My guess is that you are not the only one who has felt so belittled by this person. Sharing your experiences will make you feel less alone and help you to realize that you are not the problem in this situation. Maybe your colleague will feel brave enough to air their grievances with HR too, which can make your case more powerful. More likely though, your colleague may feel afraid of the backlash and may not want to speak to HR.

4. RUN! OK, not so fast, but leaving your role and/or company is something you should consider. You should seriously assess the situation and determine if it is worthwhile to stay. If you're unable to leave your job for financial reasons, making such a decision may be even more difficult than it would be otherwise. However, the psychological cost you may experience in the long term may warrant taking such a step. Another issue to contemplate is the extent to which your company has helped you through the situation. If you feel they have turned a blind eye and offered only tepid support, your company may not be worth your time or energy.

My opinion: You will get through it. Without meaning to minimize such an issue, your toxic colleague is just one person, and your job is just a job. Your self-worth, pride in your competence as a professional, and self-esteem are not worth risking anything else for. No matter what happens, you will learn something from this experience. Perhaps the learning is as simple as, "When I interview for new jobs, I will more thoroughly vet what types of roles and what types of future bosses I say yes to." Perhaps the learning will be more profound. Either way, you will have learned something from this intense time and, once you fully unpack, digest, and heal from the experience, it may be possible for you to bounce back stronger than before.

*A note on labels - if you experience bullying, you are a target, not a victim. If you are able to take the step to speak up about mistreatment, you can also become a survivor.

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