

# BULLYING: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

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**Bullying:** A course of persistent, unwanted aggressive or abusive behaviour directed towards a targeted person causing humiliation and distress, often from a place of power over the person being hurt. Bullying may be:

- Verbal
  - Racial slurs, threats, put-downs, etc.
- Physical
  - Hitting, slapping, pushing, poking, etc.
- Emotional
  - Causing social isolation or exclusion
  - Gossip
  - Constant criticism (e.g., appearance, performance, etc.)

## Purpose of Bullying Behaviour

People who bully often do so in order to cover for their own lack of confidence, competence or sense of shame. Bullying behaviour may also reward the bullying person and give them pleasure through:

- Gaining social status
- Gaining approval
- Gaining power and control

Bullying behaviour can be related to low emotional and social intelligence and a lack of awareness about how one's actions affect another.

## Two Types of People Who Bully

There are two primary types of people who bully, the pathological bully and the opportunistic bully. Pathological bullying is less common than opportunistic bullies. The two types can be characterized as follows:

### 1. The Pathological Bully

- This person will show patterned bullying behaviour. The pattern can be noticed by paying attention to the number of people who go on sick leave or leave their positions while working under this person. They leave a trail of destruction in their wake.
- This person appears likeable and smooth to those who are not being bullied. They often get promoted in organizations, as their bullying behaviour is often invisible or even unbelievable to those above them.
- They distort facts in their favour, blame others and will be vindictive towards those who hold them accountable.

- They will be adept at using policies and laws in their favour.

## 2. The Opportunistic Bully

- This person's bullying behaviour is often related to low emotional and social intelligence. They are less intentional about wanting to harm someone else. Instead they act out of self-interest without sufficient regard for the impact of their actions.
- People who bully opportunistically are often task focused and "either/or" thinkers.

## Changing the Behaviour

When addressing bullying behaviour it is more effective to speak to the aggressor in terms of what they have done rather than in terms of what they are (i.e., bully). By doing so, you can hold them accountable for their actions, which is what needs to be changed.

**For pathological bullying,** it will be very difficult to get the bullying person to change their behaviour as they will blame others and shift the focus away from themselves. Do not trust their testimony alone. They should be given very clear guidelines of what is acceptable behaviour by management. At the same time they should be performance managed to ensure compliance. If they are unable to stop the behaviour, they should be removed from the organization as soon as possible.

**For opportunistic bullying,** it may be possible to change the behaviour and retain valuable employees. Opportunistic bullies tend to have low emotional or social intelligence and may be unaware of how their behaviour is causing significant emotional (and financial) cost for the organization. Setting boundaries, being provided with clear behavioural guidelines by management and through personal coaching, can help them. They should also be monitored to ensure compliance with the behavioural guidelines.

**Caution:** Labeling someone a "bully" should be done with a great deal of caution as it seldom promotes behavioural change on the part of the "bully." To address bullying, one needs to focus on the specific behaviours or strategies being used by the "bully."