

BULLYING THEIR WAY TO THE TOP



According to the Workplace Bullying Institute, more than 50% of workers have witnessed workplace bullying, and 35% of workers have experienced it first hand.

Those are alarming numbers, but perhaps more alarming is the WBI's conclusion that although bullies can be found in all organizational ranks, the vast majority are managers, supervisors, and executives.

Given that most individuals and organizations claim to abhor bullies, how are so many of them ending up in the corner office?



NOT YOUR AVERAGE BULLY

To understand how they frequently end up in positions of power, it is necessary to understand the characteristics that make bullies uniquely suited to climb the corporate ladder. When most people think of the archetypal bully, they tend to picture characters like Biff from the 1985's *Back to the Future* or Ben Affleck's Fred O'Bannion in *Dazed and Confused* – socially maladjusted individuals who lash out because they don't know how else to relate to the people around them.

Although this type of bully is by no means missing from the workplace, the type of bullying most often encountered in the corporate world is far more insidious. In 1999, a group of psychologists studied the behavior of ringleader bullies and their followers in a group of children. They discovered that not only was the common notion of the socially deficit bully incorrect, but also that ringleaders were often more socially skilled than their followers or targets. Workplace bullies tend to fall more in this camp – expert manipulators and politicians who harass others not out of social frustration but to fulfill their professional ambitions.

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PSYCHOPATHS IN DISGUISE

Bullies share a number of characteristics with corporate psychopaths:

Turbulent childhood – In their paper *The toxic triangle: destructive leaders, susceptible followers, and conductive environments*, Robert Hogan, Art Padilla, and Robert Kaiser state that parental discord, low socioeconomic status, paternal criminality, maternal psychiatric disorder, and child abuse are common themes among exploitive adults.

Ruthless ambition – Although this type of childhood adversity is sometimes associated with positive lessons for those who overcome it, for bullies and psychopaths, the powerlessness of these early-life experiences often create a ruthless drive for power and an ideology of hate. This ideology of hate legitimizes the use of aggression, coercion, and retribution as tactics to get ahead, and helps bullies view their targets not as human beings, but as objects to be manipulated for personal gain.

Social awareness – Psychologists Nicki Crick and Kenneth Dodge posited that the ability to read motivations and emotions assists bullies in identifying situations in which victims are most vulnerable and knowing how to best inflict damage. Likewise, psychopaths are skilled at identifying individuals who are to some extent emotionally dependent and manipulating their targets' need for approval to their advantage.

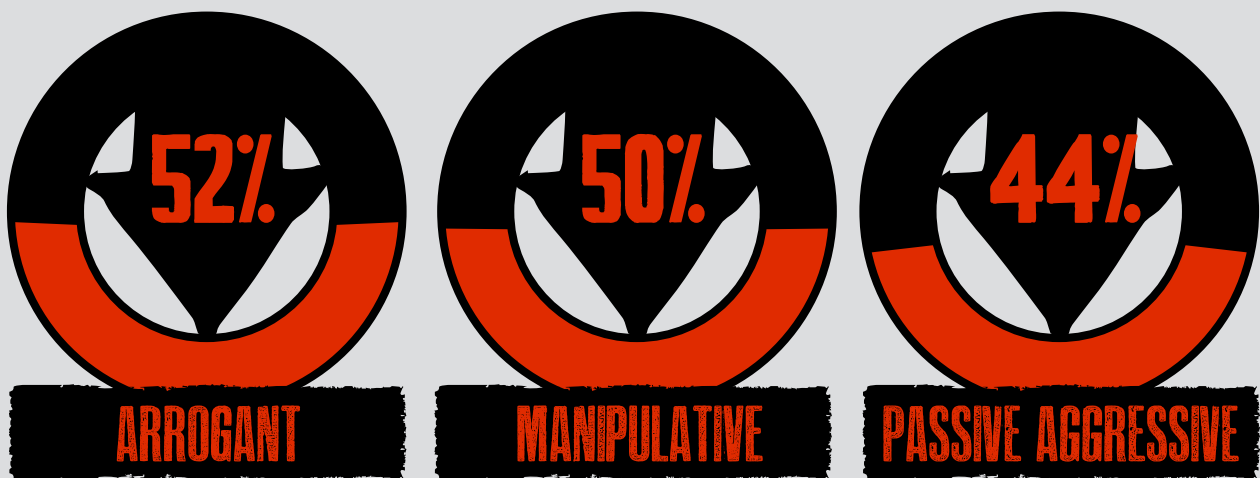
Rule by fear – In a 2007 paper, G.R. Ferris described the nature of leader bullying as proactive; strategically selected self-aggrandizing tactics by leaders designed to place targets in a submissive, powerless position where they are more easily influenced and controlled. This is the principal difference between bullies and corporate psychopaths – where corporate psychopaths use charm and deceit to gain the loyalty of others, bullies rule through targeted acts of terror.

Unfortunately, their ambition, political savvy, and ability to manipulate others to their own advantage make workplace bullies uniquely suited to climb the corporate ladder.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS

Bullies, especially those in positions of power, can have a tremendous impact on the workforce.

Hogan asked more than 1,000 individuals about the qualities of their all-time worst boss. The qualities respondents most frequently chose - arrogance, manipulation, and passive aggressive behavior - indicated that many of their worst bosses were office bullies.



A study by molecular biologist John Medina showed that workers stressed by bullying performed 50% worse on cognitive tests. Furthermore, the quality of organizational leadership directly impacts employee engagement. Just as good managers can boost employee engagement, a bully can decimate it. That's bad news for employers. Disengaged employees have higher rates of turnover, take more sick days, and, according to Gallup, cause an estimated \$300 billion in lost productivity every year.

Bullies aren't just bad for productivity. Swedish researchers at the Stress Institute in Stockholm recently published a study of more than 3,100 men over a 10-year period. They found that employees who had managers who were incompetent, inconsiderate, secretive, or uncommunicative were 60% more likely to suffer a heart attack or other cardiac condition.

FIGHTING BACK

What can companies do to keep bullies from infiltrating their ranks? First, most companies will need to adopt a new definition of leadership. In most organizations, leadership is defined in terms of a person's status in the organization. A more useful way to define leadership is in terms of a person's ability to build and maintain a high-performing team.

Performance appraisals typically reflect how much supervisors like their subordinates. Consequently, the managers who move up are often more skilled at office politics than actual leadership. If organizations want a true assessment of leaders' abilities, they should ask their subordinates and look at the performance of their teams. Employees who have been abused tend to fight back in the form of disengagement and lowered productivity.

Second, companies should select leaders using valid assessment tools. Workplace bullies are experts at manipulating others' opinions of them, which means they perform well in interviews.

Psychometric assessments can identify character flaws and predict candidates' likelihood of bullying their subordinates. Hogan measures reputation along two dimensions. *Bright-side* personality characteristics reflect people's strengths and weaknesses when they are on their best behavior – during a job interview, for instance, or when interacting with their superiors. *Dark-side* personality characteristics refer to people's behavior when they are less concerned about how they are perceived – like when they are dealing with subordinates.

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THE BOTTOM LINE

Nearly half of all workers report that they have been affected by workplace bullying, either being a target themselves or having witnessed abusive behavior against a coworker. However, 81% of employers are doing nothing to address this serious problem. By understanding the nature of workplace bullies, how they can screen for them, and how they affect the workforce, companies can take steps to reduce instances of workplace bullying.

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ABOUT HOGAN

Founded in 1987, Hogan Assessments pioneered the use of personality assessment to improve workplace performance. Twenty-five years later, we are committed to continuing the same spirit of innovation and attention to science.

Hogan's assessment solutions help businesses reduce turnover and increase productivity by hiring the right people, developing key talent, and evaluating leadership potential.

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