

# Mean People Suck...

## Resources, time, money, energy and company morale

Part of the **Like Nobody's Business™** e-book series

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### Introduction



#### “What gives?!”

You may be wondering what happened to your most-recent hire. You brought them in with great hopes for how their skill set and high-levels of past performance would positively affect your company’s bottom line. But as time went on, you found yourself dealing with a puzzling series of nebulous complaints about this worker, who was getting more and more estranged and unproductive.

You may be the person who came into a company or department excited and enthusiastic, only to find yourself being ground down and struggling to make it in to work and back from lunch on time only to face increasing derision and exclusion.

As we continue to move into a more knowledge and service-based society, our organizations are being called on to change – in some cases dramatically. Small, homey businesses are trying to gain more market share in the less-homey internet marketplace while balancing their long-terms personal business relationships; new technologies and staff reductions are causing larger companies to reconsider how people are being used and a host of other innovations being tried are messy, frightening and, unfortunately, less effective than we’d like. All of this is impacting workplace relationships, which are suffering from the strain.

Interestingly, we’re three times as likely to experience bullying in the workplace as illegal discrimination and 1600 times as likely to be bullied as to become the victim of



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violence at work.<sup>1</sup> However, little attention is placed on bullying – until after it's escalated into something very dangerous.

Bullying costs you. Talented people leave. Your company becomes known for bad workplace culture, making it more difficult to find good people. Your company pays more in health-related costs like medical insurance and Worker's Compensation. Productivity plummets as the Target becomes less inclined to be there (coming in late and leaving early), performs poorly or requires more and more supervision, while Bullies stir-up other workers into back-room conversations about the Target that take valuable time away from productive work. As bullying continues, bullying costs companies in legal fees they can ill afford.

This whitepaper will help you understand how bullying can manifest itself in your organization and some steps to take when it does.

### What is bullying and mobbing?

Legally, bullying has been described as “status-blind harassment” because it can be decidedly non-sexual or non-racial in tone. Mostly this is because workers have been taught that racial or sexual harassment will cost jobs, but not that whimsically abusive behaviors that intimidate and freeze people out for any reason cannot be tolerated. Still, bullying can include racial and other types of protected-class harassment. Some examples of this can be seen in instances where Middle-Eastern or Muslim workers (or people confused as such) were targeted with bullying after the events of 11 September.

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<sup>1</sup> 1:10,000 will be a victim of workplace violence  
1:6 will become a target of workplace bullying



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In bullying, individuals or groups use aggressive or unreasonable behavior (also called “relational aggression”) to achieve their aims. In many cases, this type of behavior is within company rules and policies.

The Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute defines bullying as<sup>2</sup>:

- Repeated, health-impairing mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) that is
- Driven by the perpetrators' need to control the targeted individual or group.
- It is initiated by bullies who choose targets, timing, place and methods but escalates as others participate, voluntarily or as coerced and
- Undermines legitimate business interests when bullies' personal agendas dominate; bullying prevents work from getting done.

The law is now looking at the net negative effect of bullying which can include health consequences (like high blood pressure, heart conditions and PTSD, particularly when the bullying is surprising to the target) as well as the fact that subsequent performance problems can be attributed to bullying (like tardiness, excessive sick leave and other issues). At this time, New York has become the 9<sup>th</sup> state that has proposed legislation against bullying in the workplace, though many others have enacted laws that prevent the formation of “hostile work environments.”

The net negative effect of this behavior is that it chills workplace relationships at a broad level. Without access to social and informational networks, success becomes limited and advancement can be permanently derailed. The mistaken view from the outside is that

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bullyinginstitute.org/bbstudies/def.html>



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“where there’s smoke, there’s fire” and other departments become unwilling to take on the Target for fear of transferring another department’s problem child into their own.

Mobbing happens when two or more people gang-up on one person (co-worker, subordinate or superior) with the intention of driving them out or away. Usually, they employ rumor and innuendo, sabotage, meanness, intimidation, isolation, discrediting, humiliation and even lying.

**Important to know here is that bullying and mobbing is not the province of large Fortune 1000® companies. Individual and group bullying can occur in companies as small as two or three people.**

### Who is at risk for bullying and mobbing?

People at risk for bullying and mobbing tend to be those who are already socially isolated in the organization. They may be new to the company, department or even new to the city or region. They may have experienced a life change, causing them to keep to themselves. They may be first-generation in that kind of role with few mentors to call in to help them learn the ropes. Also, they may be “too” dynamic, creative or qualified and draw the ire of one of more fellow workers who fear this new hire signals a change in expectations they can’t meet or that will take more time to fulfill.

Studies have shown that 80% of all Targets are women. Bullying, however, is not the exclusive territory of men: 58% of bullies are women and half of bullying is woman-on-woman. Organizational power is an indicator in bullying with over 70% of bullies being bosses<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bullyinginstitute.org/bbstudies/def.html>



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### What motivates bullying and mobbing?

Some workers may be lazy and use bullying to cover up their own lack of performance. They force the Target to fill-in their contribution to an assignment and, because the Target is doing other work, the Target's overall performance drops.

Employees may feel that certain work is beneath them and more appropriate for the likes of another employee, creating a combination of less desirable assignments and mistreatment. Conversely, they may feel that some of their own assigned work is more appropriate for a higher-level employee. In a large book manufacturing plant, several secretaries banded together to insist that a new high-level professional HR staffer "take her turn at the switchboard." Oddly, those same secretaries didn't feel it was appropriate for the other men (all of whom were at or below the Target's salary-grade level) to be asked to do the same.

A worker who is fearful of being outperformed may resort to obstruction, withholding information or resources, withholding training and mentoring. Furthermore, the Bully may be found sharply and constantly criticizing the work of a generally competent performer.

Finally, some employees are motivated by power and authority and use bullying to demonstrate their authority, assigning meaningless, unrewarding, harassing work to others to prove they're in charge. At times, they use a double standard to show that they're above the rules. For example, one store clerk complained that, while she had been written up for failing to lock the store doors on time, the boss had mistakenly left the store unlocked for the entirety of a three-day weekend with no repercussions. Also, as an earlier example shows, groups of lower-level employees may band together against a higher grade-level staffer, seemingly, with more power.



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### What should I look for as common bully tactics?

Constant criticisms and nitpicking: The bully uses this to help prove their case of the Target's incompetence and to divert attention away from their own performance. Commonly, the criticisms turn to the social and personal. One worker, a salon stylist, informed me that her boss would make highly-charged, personal comments about her boyfriend – that she'd heard it through the grapevine that he was seen with another woman, for example. Constantly off-balance and increasingly angry, the stylist asked me how she should respond when she felt her intimate relationships were involved.

Isolation: This tactics seeks to separate the Target from sources of help and success like social and informational networks at work. Many careers are made and broken from access to these types of resource networks, which can answer such questions as "where do I go to get this answer" and "what openings are you hearing about?" Frozen out of the social and information networks, the Target's career can languish and their potential for contribution never realized.

The Bully can become positioned in the "cat-bird seat" and monopolize information and supplies, demanding the Target to accede to their domination to get what they need for a project. Many times, the Target will avoid the Bully's resources, seeking information elsewhere – even outside of the workplace – spending their valuable personal time or even money to get what they need. One company had an office supply clerk who used her control of access to supplies to bully other secretaries, several of whom purchased office supplies with their own money during their lunch periods in order to avoid her.

Gossip can also become a key tool-of-choice in bullying. Generally, the Bully starts a rumor and casually spreads it. The Target finds themselves under a great deal of suspicion (again, the "Smoke and Fire" metaphor). Co-workers, instead of getting to know the



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Target directly, get their information from the Bully, forming their opinions based on the Bully's sentiments. In this instance, the Target may find himself Mobbed.

False documentation can be another individual bullying or mobbing tactic. The Bully submits a complaint (commonly referred to a "ghost gripe") with false, misdocumented or made-up information about another worker.

In once case, a group of late-shift nurses, angry that a relative new pharmacist had caused a poorly performing pharmacy tech to lose her job (after several attempts at positive corrective counseling) vowed "we'll get her for you." They mounted an escalating set of complaints about the pharmacist, another woman and finally provided a write-up that was stunning in terms of its depth and citations. Trouble was it was fabricated by one or two nurses, who had the entire shift of nurses sign-off on it. The pharmacist spent hours combing through that shift's trash and was able to prove that none of the things she was accused of actually happened. Her concern? That her reputation was as sullied as her evidence. Luckily, the department head supported her, but only after months of believing that all of those people couldn't have been complaining if it weren't true. The pharmacist had been mobbed, but so had her department, the HR department and everyone in the ever-widening circle of relational aggressing she was the target of.

Credit-stealing: particularly if the Target didn't or can't document their contributions. This can occur when there was a looming deadline and little time for documentation.

Verbal abuse: At times, though the Bully knows that racial and gender-based slurs tend not to be tolerated; rough verbal treatment can be dished out. This can include use of profanity, shouting and disrespectful nicknames. One ad exec shared her story about being brought into her boss's office and yelled at for nebulous complaints about her



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performance. She explained that the effort to maintain his tone of voice caused him to be red-faced and winded and that she could never really get to what his complaints about her were – “What,” she asked, “can I do to make this right when I don’t even know what the ‘this’ is I’m trying to fix?”

At times, Bullies can resort to passive aggression, shutting out or shunning the Target. This can include not answering the Target’s questions, putting the Target’s work at the bottom of the pile (as some clerical workers have done), getting the Target his or her messages late and other petty slights.

Finally, Bullies can resort to physical threats or acts of physical violence. Quite easily these threats can escalate from “You’re so stupid, I could just slap you!” to actual physical assault.

### What are the common mistakes made by managers/owners?

Ignoring the problem. Targets will come to managers or even HR staffers with vague complaints of petty treatment. Telling them to just go back to work, grow up or ignore it does nothing to stop bullying. In fact, bullying is characterized by its escalating nature. Ignore it and it will get worse. In some cases, bosses, HR staffers and others who can make a difference don’t. We’re not taught how to recognize and deal with conflict and many people “ostrich,” avoiding conflict at all costs.

Appeasing the Bully: Again, we’re not trained in conflict resolution and just want the complaints to go away. By giving in, we hope that the complainant will be satisfied and drop it. However, this only reinforces the behavior, training the Bully to get their way through complaining.



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Blaming both parties: This one's cheap and easy – but ineffective. We blame the Bully for being inappropriate and blame the Target for not getting along. The Bully, angered, now resumes their attacks with renewed force.

Blaming the Target: In cases where an employee is mobbed, it becomes too easy to side with the side with the highest numbers ([the Abilene Paradox](#)) even when the group may be lying or coerced to side with one or more key Bullies. In individual cases, the Bully's complaints may be the most strident and unpleasant, causing you to want to make the Bully stop by giving in.

At times, management can find themselves stereotyping. Believing that women are weaker and kinder, for example, they refuse to believe men who say that a woman is bullying them, for example.

Non-retaliation policies can hinder a manager's ability to get to the root of a problem, particularly if policies allow employees to file complaints anonymously. Also, bullying is found to be most virulent in Employment-at-Will states, which require a lesser burden of proof before termination. This can lead to a more rapid dismissal of the Target. Companies located in states that do not have Employment-at-Will laws find themselves more subject to "ghost gripes." Innumerable Targets have been dismissed due to complaints that are entirely made up.

### What can you do?

Be sure you have complaint-response-remedy-review procedures in place, no matter how small your organization is.

Create policies that work. Most policies only cover the blatantly illegal, omitting 75% of behaviors that can result in a hostile work environment. Clearly and consistently



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communicate your expectations for cooperation and problem solving. Let your people know that you expect them to be proactive in resolving issues and that you want them to involve you where they are having trouble resolving matters. Some companies are instituting zero-tolerance gossip policies or a three-strikes policy to stem malicious talk in the workplace.

Consider instituting a new employee mentoring program, allowing high potential employees to be shown the ropes by more senior staffers. This gives the new employee an opportunity to be introduced into the company networks by another, credible employee and gives the more senior employee an opportunity to gain managerial skill and some prestige.

Train yourself and your people in conflict resolution techniques. Know that, where an HR department may exist, few HR staffers are trained in Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and strangely, in most companies, ADR training is not a prerequisite for HR employment.

Review complaints for themes and watch out for repetition or long-term impact on the parties. This means you should have a system for capturing key information on complaints. Be sure you know what's at-issue for the complainants and what they would like as a remedy. This information can be very telling (a Bully may only be satisfied with punitive action taken against a Target and the Target may just want to know what they did wrong or how to make it stop).

Review resolutions: By this, I mean check back after a week, after 30 days and then after 3 months to make sure things are going well and that your resolution isn't in need of "tweaking." This will also communicate to people that you will be watching long after the dust has settled.



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Be willing to get help. Mediators are available in every state and can meet with the parties to determine the facts and help outline a fair resolution. Business and executive coaches can help teams and managers shift the ways they interact with each other and help teach them ways to resolve inevitable conflicts.

### Summary

Consider, carefully, how to deal with interpersonal relationships at work. However, take action quickly to stem the possibility of escalation of relational aggression between workers, getting help where needed. Your people are your key resource for your company's effectiveness. Waiting, hoping, blanket cures or ignoring the problem with only cost you in reduced effectiveness – or in payments to your attorney.

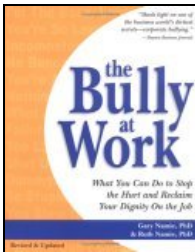
## Resources

[Total Team Solutions](#) Trained in mediation and coaching, Total Team Solutions can provide many resources for effectively shifting company culture and resolving conflicts, focusing workers on more productive workplace matters.

[The Workplace Bullying and Trauma Institute](#)

[Wikipedia.com Article on Relational Aggression](#)

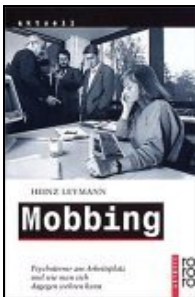
[The Arbitrator.com](#) – a great resource for mediation training and for locating a mediator in your area who can help you resolve a dispute between workers.



[The Bully at Work: What You Can Do to Stop the Hurt and Reclaim Your Dignity on the Job](#)

Author: Namie, Gary and Namie, Ruth

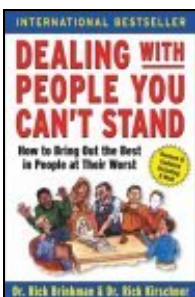
*This little book is valuable for helping to understand bullying from the Target*



[Mobbing](#)

Author: Leymann, Heinz

*This book can help you understand what happens that causes groups of otherwise good people to turn on one worker*



[Dealing with People You Can't Stand: How to Bring Out the Best in People at Their Worst](#)

Authors: Brinkman, Rick and Kirchner, Rick

*Want to run and hide from hard-to-deal with employees? Train yourself in getting to root issues and keep from being sucked in*



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### About Lalita Amos and Total Team Solutions, LLC



Lalita Amos is the founder and CEO of Total Team Solutions, LLC, a groundbreaking business development firm that brings together coaching, project management, strategic planning and training with collaborative business development and group process-based strategic thinking. She is routinely quoted in *Indianapolis Woman* magazine and other national publications. In addition to this e-book series, she is finishing an e-book format independent study course on business by referral (working title “The Buzz Academy”), as a companion to the 90 Day Challenge, a course which helps business owners dramatically increase their business using relationship marketing.

Lalita’s a long-time business coach with over a decade of experience and several professional coaching certifications. She also hones her coaching skills by researching and writing about key aspects of coaching; the process of change, how projects work (and don’t), overcoming resistance and by training coaches for such notable organizations as New York University.

Before leaving to start her own business, Lalita was an internal management consultant for the world’s largest commercial printing company and also had high level HR responsibilities.

Lalita’s podcast can be found by copying <http://lamos.audioacrobat.com/rss/like-nobodys-business.xml> into your reader. 

Lalita’s website can be found at <http://www.totalteamsolutions.com>

Lalita, her husband, Garland, and her very distinguished gray streak can be found in Indianapolis, Indiana.