



# Beyond Bad Apples

Resolving the triggers behind workplace bullying

# What is bullying?

## Putting a finger on it

You might think back to school and the bully who took people's lunch money. Or think of someone being excluded from group activities or being subject to gossip and rumours. You may even think about a tense workplace where stress is high, voices are raised, and ideas are shot down. These experiences can bring a knot to the stomach, raise stress levels, and bring out frustration.

## Under the radar

But what "counts" as bullying? Are some forms of bullying flying under the radar because we have a narrow idea of what it looks like? Are more of us slipping into a bullying mindset without even realising? There is no one-size-fits-all definition of bullying, which makes it especially hard to recognise and treat the symptoms before it becomes a bigger problem.

## To the roots beyond stereotypes

It's time we started addressing the root of the issue, for the sake of our wellbeing, productivity, and to create a healthier environment for everyone. This guide will help break down the stereotypes and highlight how to spot and reduce bullying behaviours in all its forms. We're going straight to the source of the workplace cultural triggers that encourage these behaviours, and how to change them.

## Just how common is bullying at work?

Even if it's something you would expect to see in a school playground, you might be surprised at just how widespread bullying is in the workplace. People face it daily from colleagues or supervisors, or even management. This kind of behaviour can create a toxic environment, affecting not just the targeted individuals but the overall team morale and productivity.

- 71% have experienced some form of bullying at work
- 77% of men have experienced bullying compared to women at 66%
- 40-59 year olds were most at risk of being bullied (34%)
- 72% of victims reported their managers to be the source of bullying
- 64% have left their job due to bullying

(Trades Union Congress, 2015)



Despite its prevalence, workplace bullying often goes unreported because victims fear retaliation or doubt they'll be taken seriously. It's a significant issue that needs more awareness and proactive management to ensure a healthy and respectful work environment for people, teams, and leaders. In 2023, only 58% of employees reported the poor behaviours they experienced or witnessed, meaning that 42% of inappropriate workplace behaviours were not reported. (HR Acuity, 2023). This begs the question, just how often are bullying behaviours being swept under the carpet?

## Bullying is the kryptonite of success and innovation

The effects of bullying spread through the workplace like a toxic spill in a river, contaminating everything downstream. The impact on teams is huge. **46% of people believe that bullying has an adverse impact on their performance at work, and a negative effect on their mental health.** On top of that, **28% are affected physically.** Even more concerning, **22% have to take time off work as a result of being bullied** (Trades Union Congress, 2015).



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But it's not just victims who suffer. Even witnesses of bullying can suffer similar emotional responses as the victims, including anxiety, depression, trouble sleeping (Emdad, Alipour, Hagberg, and Jensen, 2012). Bullying creates a toxic atmosphere that affects everyone, leading to a culture of fear and distrust.

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**Bullying-related absenteeism, turnover and lost productivity costs the UK economy an eye-watering, £18 billion every single year**

It hurts people, and it hurts an organisation's bottom line too. In fact, bullying-related absenteeism, turnover and lost productivity costs the UK economy an eye-watering, £18 billion every single year (Acas, 2015). What else does bullying cause? Well take a look below:

- Financial loss from legal costs or bullying investigations
- Loss of employee trust and loyalty
- Decreased productivity and morale
- Increased employee absences
- Higher staff turnover rates (having a reputation for a negative working environment will make it harder to attract new talent, too)
- Lower quality customer service
- Poor team dynamics
- A toxic working environment

## What fuels the bullying fire in the workplace?

When bullying happens in the workplace, it's a red flag that indicates a dysfunctional organisational culture, perhaps one that is overly tough or competitive, or too unforgiving. It's where the clash of personalities isn't just a disagreement but a spark that can ignite a wildfire of conflict.

Bullying can rear its ugly head in response to organisational changes, due to the stress of restructuring, the anxiety of downsizing, the ramping up of workloads, or confusion over roles. Bullying can be a worst-case response to insecurity and a lack of effective communication.

When new employees step into the fray, they might unwittingly find themselves in a cycle of bullying that's become part of the company's fabric. It's a cycle that's as self-perpetuating as it is destructive. In a distressing twist, victims who see no way out might even adopt bullying behaviours themselves, keeping the cycle going.

<p><b>Organisational Volatility</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Poorly managed restructuring</li> <li>Unrealistic increases in workload</li> <li>Role ambiguity</li> </ul>	<p><b>Leadership Style</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Authoritarian</li> <li>Laissez Faire</li> <li>Abuse of processes</li> </ul>
<p><b>Unregulated/Rigid Hierarchy</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use of power to control</li> <li>Exploiting sense of no control</li> <li>To maintain order</li> <li>To reinforce power dynamics</li> </ul>	<p><b>Perpetuation via Culture</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New hires brought into bullying culture</li> <li>Victims become bullies</li> <li>Unable to change, so joining in</li> </ul>

(Johnson S.L., 2009)

## Looking beyond the stereotypes

Bullying can be elusive and often lurks behind subtle actions and behaviours that don't necessarily fit the usual stereotypes. So, what does it look like?

Have a think about what all the different forms of bullying might look like to you in the workplace. It might be the colleague who undermines another, the manager who uses intimidation, or the team member who habitually interrupts others. But bullying can come in all shapes and sizes, some more obvious than others. It doesn't always announce itself loudly; sometimes, it's the silence that does the damage. It can quietly slip under the radar and chip away at the team, bit by bit.

There are three domains of bullying that can all happen in the workplace. The direct, in your face and obvious type, like openly making fun of someone in front of others. Then, there are the more subtle, indirect forms, like deliberately excluding someone from activities or conversations. Lastly, there are workplace-specific types of bullying that are unique to the professional environment. (Bartlett & Bartlett, 2011)

Direct	Indirect	Professional Environment
Harassment	Ignoring	Work overload
Humiliation	Excluding	Removing responsibility
Persistent criticism	Gossip	Delegation of menial tasks
Manipulation	False accusations	Unrealistic goals
Threats	Undermining	Excessive monitoring

## The warning signs

When bullying is at play, victims might not feel like they can speak up. It's important to look beyond the tell-tale signs. You're not typically looking for scuffed clothes or a bloody nose when you're dealing with grown-ups in a workplace. You've got to pay attention to your gut feelings and look for other giveaways. Some of the warning signs that someone is a victim of bullying include:



Increased absence or lateness



Drop in work quality or missed deadlines



Top performer's decline: lost self-esteem, drive, and interest



Seeming scared, anxious, stressed, and unhappy at work



Social isolation

Getting familiar with the signs can help tackle bullying at the root before it becomes a wider issue.

# What does the research show?

Unfortunately, a lot of studies point fingers and claim certain aspects of personality can make someone more likely to be a bully. What they fail to consider however, is the distinction between our Everyday traits and our Overextended traits. In our own research on the subject, using Lumina Spark, we have found that the causes of bullying go much deeper than just your 'personality traits'.

Lumina Spark breaks down the Big Five personality traits into high and low ends, creating 8 different Aspects. When we used Lumina Spark to assess leaders' personalities, we didn't find a one-size-fits-all bully profile. Instead, any personality trait, when pushed too far and Overextended, could lead to going overboard and bullying behaviour. This means bullying isn't linked to specific traits but can come from any trait when it's taken to the extreme.

On the bright side we did find that any traits, when used effectively in leaders, can mean less bullying. Almost all effective aspects of a leader's personality, were linked to less bullying. The strongest traits cutting down on bullying were being people-focused and reward-oriented. Leaders who are empathetic, collaborative, optimistic, resilient, even-tempered, and confident tend to create environments with less bullying.

## Are we all sometimes guilty of bullying?

“

**Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.**

”

Leo Tolstoy - (Adapted to more inclusive language)

There aren't any specific traits that lead to bullying, so let's go over how all behaviours can be perceived as bullying when Overextended. Having a framework for everyone to understand the difference between their intentions vs the perception of others, goes a long way. A culture of self-awareness in how we come across, means we can all avoid crossing that line more often.

## Three crucial elements to the personality lens on bullying

Overextensions – Overplaying a strength to the point of being dysfunctional

Frequency – How often you are doing it

Targeting – If it is used on one person or team on that frequent basis

Let's dive in.



### Your intention:

**Adaptable**

Works towards an overall vision with emerging goals

**Flexible**

Easy-going and informal

**Spontaneous**

Makes gut-feel decisions

**Overextended Inspiration Driven individuals might become too adaptable, lenient with deadlines, and quick to act without planning:**

**Unfocused**

**Chaotic**

**Impulsive**

### This can be perceived as bullying through:

**Lack of direction:** Frequently changing goals and priorities can create confusion and instability, making it difficult for colleagues to keep up.

**Missed deadlines:** Being too lenient with deadlines can cause delays and additional work for others, leading to frustration and resentment.

**Impulsiveness:** Acting quickly without proper planning can result in mistakes and unnecessary risks, impacting the team's overall performance and morale.



### Your intention:

#### Purposeful

Sets ambitious goals and then works diligently towards them

#### Structured

An organised planner

#### Reliable

Disciplined and meets commitments

**When the Discipline Driven Aspect is Overextended, individuals might become overly methodical, inflexible, and obsessed with time management:**

#### Goal Fixated

#### Rigid Planning

#### Hesitant

### This can be perceived as bullying through:

**Perfectionism:** Obsessive focus on details and perfection can lead to unrealistic expectations and undue pressure on colleagues.

**Rigidity:** Insisting on strict adherence to plans and schedules can stifle flexibility and creativity, causing frustration among team members.

**Inflexibility:** Being unable to adapt to last-minute changes can create stress and resentment among team members who may need more adaptability.



### Your intention:

#### Conceptual

An abstract thinker comfortable with complexity and ambiguity

#### Imaginative

A source of new ideas

#### Radical

Drives change and is willing to challenge tradition

**When the Big Picture Thinking Aspect is Overextended, people might produce unrealistic ideas and take discussions off on tangents.**

#### Unfeasible

#### Fantast

#### Change for the Sake of Change

### This can be perceived as bullying through:

**Disregarding practical constraints:** Constantly pushing for grandiose changes without considering practical limitations can overwhelm colleagues, making them feel undervalued or ignored. This can create a hostile environment where others feel pressured to accept unfeasible ideas.

**Isolation:** Their tendency to “live in their head” can make collaboration difficult, potentially ostracising team members who feel sidelined or dismissed.

**Inducing unnecessary change:** If someone is seen as introducing changes for the sake of change, it can disrupt workflows and stability, causing stress and resentment among team members.



### Your intention:

#### Practical

Adopts a realistic and common-sense approach

#### Evidence-Based

Focused on observable facts and attentive to details

#### Cautious

Prefers to stick with tried-and-tested methods

**Overextended Down to Earth might come across as resistant to change, narrow-minded, and overly methodical:**

#### Narrow-Sighted

#### Lost in the Details

#### Change-Resistant

### This can be perceived as bullying through:

**Dismissiveness:** Consistently dismissing new or creative ideas can demoralise team members who feel their contributions are not valued.

**Micromanagement:** Focusing excessively on details and perfectionism can lead to micromanagement, which can be perceived as controlling and belittling.

**Inflexibility:** Being overly methodical and resistant to change can stifle innovation and make others feel constrained and undervalued.



### Your intention:

#### Sociable

Energised by interacting with others

#### Demonstrative

Enthusiastic and expresses positive emotions

#### Takes Charge

Takes the lead in a group and is drawn towards authority positions

**When the Extraverted Aspect is Overextended, individuals might dominate conversations, split attention across multiple discussions, and struggle with independent work:**

#### Can't be Alone

#### Overbearing

#### Controlling

### This can be perceived as bullying through:

**Lack of attention:** Being a “social butterfly” can make colleagues feel undervalued and ignored if they cannot get their full attention.

**Dominating conversations:** Talking over others and ignoring quieter team members can create an environment where only certain voices are heard, leading to feelings of exclusion and resentment.

**Overbearing:** Being overly demonstrative and controlling in group settings can intimidate and overshadow others, making it hard for them to contribute effectively.



### Your intention:

#### Observing

Private and likes to think before they speak

#### Measured

Serious-minded and contains positive emotions

#### Intimate

Listens first and gravitates towards one-on-one conversations

**Overextended Introverted individuals might be seen as reserved, withdrawn, and overly serious:**

#### Detached and Aloof

#### Serious and Withdrawn

#### Passive

### This can be perceived as bullying through:

**Unapproachability:** Being unapproachable and serious can make colleagues feel intimidated or unwelcome, leading to a sense of isolation.

**Lack of input:** Failing to voice opinions can lead to an imbalance in decision-making, where only a few voices are heard, potentially marginalizing others.

**Overcommunication in writing:** Preferring written communication to verbal can be seen as impersonal or evasive, leading to misunderstandings and feelings of being ignored.



### Your intention:

#### Tough

Comfortable with conflict, and courageous enough to tackle difficult conversations

#### Competitive

Strong-willed and wants to win

#### Logical

Objective and rigorously applies reason

**Overextended Outcome Focused individuals might become overly driven, argumentative, and dismissive of others' opinions:**

#### Seeks Conflict

#### Win at All Costs

#### Argumentative

### This can be perceived as bullying through:

**Dismissiveness:** Ignoring others' ideas and feelings to push their own agenda can demoralise and alienate colleagues.

**Undermining confidence:** Being overly logical and critical can undermine the confidence of team members, making them feel inadequate and undervalued.

**Argumentative behaviour:** Constantly arguing and being sceptical can create a hostile and combative work environment.



### Your intention:

#### Accommodating

Strives for harmony and is willing to adjust their stance in a conflict

#### Collaborative

Team player with a win-win mindset

#### Empathetic

Considerate and in touch with other people's feelings

**When the People Focused Aspect is Overextended, individuals might struggle to provide negative feedback, overly accommodate others, and avoid conflict:**

#### Acquiescing

#### Consensus-Obsessed

#### Emotionally Stretched

### This can be perceived as bullying through:

**Avoiding conflict:** Failing to address issues or provide constructive criticism can lead to unresolved conflicts, creating a passive-aggressive atmosphere.

**Overaccommodation:** Constantly bending to others' wishes can result in an imbalance where some team members' needs are consistently prioritised over others, leading to resentment.

**Neglecting own needs:** Focusing too much on others can lead to neglect of one's own responsibilities, creating additional work and stress for colleagues.

# Breaking the bullying cycle

Tackling bullying at work is about creating a culture where everyone feels comfortable to speak up. It's about fostering an environment of trust and support, where open communication is encouraged, and everyone's voice is valued. By promoting respect and understanding, we can disrupt the cycle of bullying and build a workplace where everyone has the opportunity to excel in a positive atmosphere.

But it's also important to understand that it doesn't take leadership to make the change. Sometimes it can be just one voice among the crowd that speaks up and breaks the cycle. So how can one person make a change?



## Supporting colleagues

Even if it's just lending an ear and validating their experiences. Stand up for them if you see bullying behaviours happening, let them know they're not facing these challenges alone.



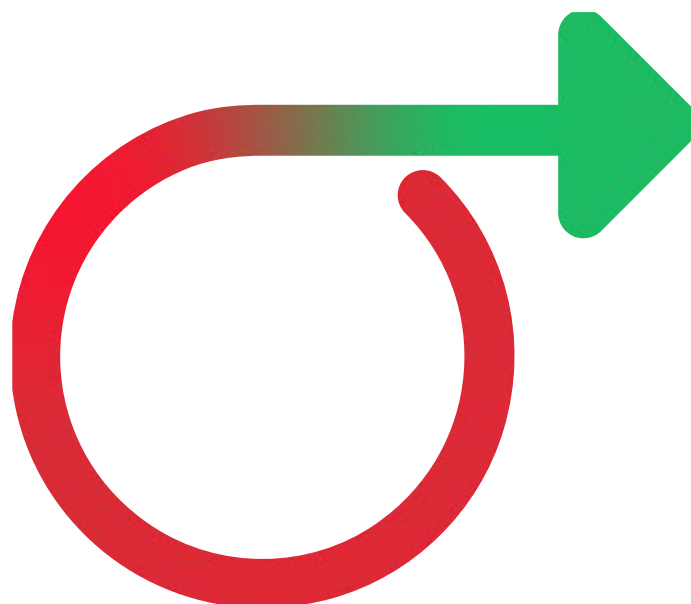
## Promote a positive atmosphere

Be friendly, helpful and inclusive towards your team members. Small acts of kindness and encouragement can contribute to a safer workplace culture.



## Leading by example

Even without a leadership title, your actions and attitudes can influence others. By consistently demonstrating respect and professionalism, you set a positive example for others to follow.



# The apple doesn't fall far from the tree

The apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Bullies who get away with it, do so because their organisation's culture lets them. Advising victims to 'brush it off' or encouraging bullies to 'treat people as they'd like to be treated themselves' isn't enough.



## Setting the culture

Psychological safety is key. **49% of people who experienced bullying behaviour weren't comfortable reporting the issue.** (HR Acuity, 2023) So, it's important that organisations demonstrate their commitment to reducing bullying through clear communication about processes and outcomes.

- Address bullying as it happens. Having conversations that are unique and personal to those involved, with all the facts to hand, can steer the conversation and be the steps to keep the victim safe.
- Provide anonymous reporting. When anonymous reporting was provided, the reports went up 21% (HR Acuity, 2023)
- Be clear, honest and open. 41% reported that they would feel more confident reporting if they knew how similar situations were handled in the past. (HR Acuity, 2023) This creates an environment of trust.

Not everyone understands the impact of their behaviour on others, or how it can be misunderstood. So, it's important for organisations to be clear about what's expected of all people, teams and leaders, what's acceptable, and what's not. So that everyone knows how to help others and shut down inappropriate behaviour.

## Aftercare

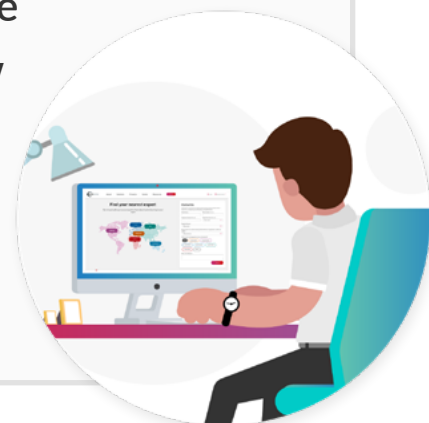
You wouldn't finish a workout without stretching, that's a recipe for disaster. It's the same once a bullying issue has been addressed. A good aftercare routine can help employees move on from workplace issues and investigations, but without it, unresolved emotional problems can linger and harm employee engagement, productivity, morale, and retention. Without clear and consistent aftercare processes, managers might not be able to properly support affected employees. Organisations need to set up consistent aftercare routines to help employees move on after investigations, build trust in the process, prevent retaliation, and make sure issues are properly resolved.

# Discover the psychometric revolution for working better together.



All your individuality. All your talent. All your potential. Creating more self-aware organisations who have the clarity and confidence to adapt their behaviour so they can perform at their best, is what our psychometrics are all about.

Get to know why organisations are switching to Lumina Spark for smarter, behavioural change with a precise and practical perspective on how their people, teams and leaders connect.



Just fancy exploring more of the trending behavioural challenges influencing outcomes right now? Take a look at what people are gathering for at our free community events.



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