

8 steps to dealing with an office bully

In spite of 90% of British employees using messaging apps to communicate with colleagues, a fifth of employees have been bullied via these very same messaging apps, revealed a [survey in 2018 by Totaljobs](#). Helene Vermaak, business director of corporate cultural experts The Human Edge, says that this statistic does not surprise her. "Bullying in the workplace is rife and something that employees in South Africa deal with constantly."



© Sergey Nvens – [123RF.com](#)

Vermaak says that researchers underestimate the extent of bullying that is taking place in the workplace. The Human Edge's US partner, VitalSmarts conducted research with 2,283 employees and found that 27% of respondents work with someone who badgers, threatens or intimidates others, with 4% working with someone who physically intimidates or assaults others.

Predictably, the VitalSmarts study revealed that emotional bullying is far more common and showed that 51% of respondents work with someone who is overly controlling or autocratic. 45% of respondents work with someone who excludes or gives colleagues the silent treatment. With 46% working with an individual that is sarcastic, cutting, demeaning or offensive and 41% with a colleague who gossips, spreads rumours or other misinformation.

"It is time that organisations addressed the situation," says Vermaak, "if not for the sake of their employees, then for the alarmingly high financial cost." One in five of the respondents said that coping with a bully cost them seven or more hours per week in extra work. This translates into approximately \$8,800 (R123,807) in lost productivity a year. And even more frightening, the average bully disrupts the work of five or more colleagues."

Despite there not being several local research studies, the [SA Board for People Practices](#) has identified bullying in the workplace as a significant issue in South Africa.

Vermaak provides eight skills that we can all adopt to confront the workplace bully:

1. **Document the facts** – keep a record of all incidents, the times, places, circumstances, witnesses, actions and impact and try to avoid generalisations.
2. **Ensure your safety** – speaking up always involves some risk, but don't ever put yourself in physical danger. However, at the same time don't let your fears prevent you from acting. Do a realistic assessment of the worst-case scenarios if you do speak up and if you don't speak up. You may then decide to speak directly to the bully, talk to a manager or HR professional, or talk to the bully with a third-party present.
3. **Decide what you really want** – ask yourself what long-term success would look like. If the bully stopped their behaviour, would that be enough? Or, do you need to see some formal sanction against the bully?
4. **Have the right conversation** – the term “bullying” implies a pattern of abuse, not a single incident. Make sure you talk about the pattern, instead of arguing about individual incidents. The bully may not see the pattern, but only the incidents and they are likely to try and justify their behaviour. Make sure you have the facts related to enough incidents to make the pattern clear.
5. **Start with facts** – begin by describing two or three incidents you've documented. Highlight incidents that show the pattern and use verbatim quotes whenever possible. Avoid “hot” words, labels, or accusations and stick closely to the facts. Facts have more credibility than your opinions.
6. **Tell your story** – explain how the incidents fit together. Your stories are the judgments, conclusions and explanations you have about the facts. This is the point in the conversation where you make the pattern clear. This is also where reasonable people may disagree. You need to have enough facts to justify your story. At the same time, be open to the idea that others may see a different story in the same set of facts.
7. **Explain the consequences** – describe the impact the bullying behaviour is having on your and others' performance. Again, try to be as specific as possible. Emphasise business, rather than personal impacts. You're not trying to become friends; you just want a positive, productive workplace.
8. **Get a commitment** – get a specific commitment from the bully. This commitment should include what they will stop or start doing and how you will follow up. Understand that patterns of bad behaviour are difficult to change. The bully will struggle and will slip up. These slip-ups will test whether the commitment is real. Talk about the likelihood of slip-ups in advance and discuss how to deal with them.

Vermaak says that we all tend to avoid confrontation and even more so in the workplace. Rather than addressing a bully's behaviour we use avoidance tactics, such as venting to others, trying to avoid the bully or even leaving the organisation. “Bullying can be tackled and even solved in companies who create a psychologically safe environment, in which employees are encouraged and enabled to hold one another's behaviour accountable.”