

# How to Bust the Office Bully

*Eight Tactics for Explaining Workplace Abuse to Decision-Makers*

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The Project for Wellness and Work-Life (PWWL) is a consortium of scholars who examine the intersections of work, domestic life, and wellness. Research foci include workplace bullying, emotion labor, burnout, conflict, gender and work-life negotiation. PWWL holds a use-inspired research approach, developing projects that increase theoretical knowledge while simultaneously impacting policy and improving the everyday lives of women and men. PWWL is a strategic initiative of The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University. For more information, please visit our website: [www.asu.edu/clas/communication/about/wellness/](http://www.asu.edu/clas/communication/about/wellness/). For correspondence, please contact [Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu](mailto:Sarah.Tracy@asu.edu).

## Executive Summary

If being bullied at the office were not bad enough, researchers from The Project for Wellness and Work-Life (PWWL) at Arizona State University have found that employees targeted with workplace abuse face just as big a challenge when they try to explain their plight to others.

As part of a two-year study of workplace bullying, Professors Sarah J. Tracy and Jess K. Alberts, in conjunction with past student and current University of New Mexico Professor Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik, have found that nearly one-fourth of American employees will experience office bullying at some point in their work history (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, In Press). The researchers' pioneering work on this issue in the United States suggests that bullying can come in a variety of forms, including exclusion and isolation, nitpicking, criticism, humiliation and even hitting and slapping (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006).

What marks this behavior as bullying, rather than simple conflict, is that the abuse is persistent and targets of abuse find it difficult if not impossible to defend themselves (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). Bullying also focuses on attacking the *person* rather than constructively critiquing the *task* or *work* of the employee. Targets of bullying feel as though they are caught in a fixed fight and liken the experience to torture and a nightmare from which they cannot awake.

Targets who tell their story often face disbelief from coworkers, bosses and human resources managers. Others often assume that the abuse is petty or that the target is just a "problem employee." When trying to tell their stories and promote change, some targets actually are blamed for their situations and become further victimized. Unfortunately, a story of abuse that is not deemed credible is unlikely to motivate those in power to step in and stop the bullying. This not only damages the target of abuse, it also is costly for witnessing coworkers and the organization as a whole.

In response to this dilemma, this article provides eight tactics to help bullying targets best tell their stories so that other people listen and find them credible. These tactics include: 1.) Be rational, 2.) Express emotions appropriately, 3.) Provide consistent details, 4.) Offer a plausible story, 5.) Be relevant, 6.) Emphasize your own competence, 7.) Show consideration for others' perspectives, and 8.) Be specific.

## Background

The ability to tell a credible story about bullying that promotes change is important because of the considerable costs of workplace abuse, not simply for the individual worker, but also for the employee's family and friends and the organization's productivity (Einarsen, 1999). Workplace bullying not only impedes effective work completion but causes serious psychological, physiological, and occupational harm to targets, including feelings of isolation and stigmatization, suicide and posttraumatic stress disorder (Einarsen & Mikkelsen, 2003; Djurkovic, McCormack, & Casimir, 2004).

*Victims feel imprisoned, powerless, heartbroken and confused.*

The feelings associated with workplace bullying are not unlike those of an abused spouse or child. Victims feel imprisoned, powerless, heartbroken and confused (Tracy, et al, 2006). And, unfortunately, when some of them feel strong enough to speak out, they are further victimized when they tell others about the abuse.

The inability to tell stories about victimization and tragedy is not unique to workplace bullying targets. However, because the phenomenon of workplace bullying itself is misunderstood and largely unknown, understanding the struggles that targets have in telling their stories is especially important and may help explain the negative consequences bully targets face. That is, targets frequently experience not only harassment but also a relative lack of support from coworkers and supervisors, as well as friends and family members, as they try to ameliorate or change their predicament.

### *Why it's difficult to tell victim stories*

Stories of suffering are not popular in the United States. People like to hear about heroes rather than victims. And when stories of neglect or poverty are told, Americans prefer a Horatio Alger-type happy ending, in which the downtrodden "pull themselves up by the bootstraps." In addition, appropriate workplace behavior usually is seen as calm and rational rather than agitated or emotional. Because being angry, sad, or fearful simply is "not allowed" at work, it is quite understandable why stories of victimization are rare. Societal and organizational preferences limit the types of stories that can be told and, in many ways, this works against targets of bullying.

People with power are able to define the meanings of ideas, words, or experiences for others. By defining abused employees' experiences at work negatively and blaming them for the mistreatment, organizational leaders are able to retain and expand their own power while keeping other voices from being taken seriously. For instance, the comment, "She's

*The stories of bully victims often are not allowed to be told...*

just a disgruntled employee," diminishes the voice of any worker who complains of mistreatment. Individuals take it for granted that some people (e.g., managers, supervisors, lawmakers, and human recourse personnel) are better equipped based on specialization, professional, or expert status to make decisions or speak what is considered "the truth." Additionally, the negative effects of social institutions are often wrongly personalized. An example of this can

be summed up in the question, "Well, if it's so bad where you work, why don't you just leave?" Questions like this place responsibility for bullying on the individual and diminish organizational or social responsibility for abuse in the workplace.

Americans therefore more easily accept stories from organizational power holders about "problem employees" than believe targets' stories about abuse. The stories of bully victims often are not allowed to be told, and unsurprisingly, even when researchers explicitly ask bully targets to discuss their situation, many have difficulty doing so. Similar to domestic violence victims, individuals blame themselves for the bullying activity, and they have trouble creating coherent story lines that persuasively express their abuse.

Of course, it is also difficult to tell a story that potentially lessens one's own credibility. Similar to the experience of Anita Hill during the Clarence Thomas Supreme

*...workers face risk when they tell stories about negative attention*

Court hearings, certain stories are silenced. If they *are* told, the effect is often to lessen the credibility of the teller more than to do damage to the abuser. Analysts suggest that a primary reason why Anita Hill's credibility fell so much during the Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings is that by admitting Thomas's harrassment, Hill presented herself as unattractive and worthy of abuse (Eisenhart & Lawrence, 1994). Being a victim carries cultural

ideas of deservedness; rape victims are asked what they were wearing, and targets of workplace abuse are questioned about their behavior and efforts to (or lack thereof) to

protect themselves. In Anita Hill's case, people wondered how a sophisticated lawyer and expert on workplace laws could have "allowed herself" to be harassed by Clarence Thomas for so many years (Hart, 1994).

It is no wonder that targets of workplace bullying, most of whom have none of the status and educational benefits held by Hill, face disdain when they try to tell their stories. Indeed, as long as workers' level of status and worth depends on the positive attention they receive from their bosses and other powerful organizational members, workers face risk when they tell stories about negative attention.

### *Therapeutic Stories vs. Stories to Promote Change*

Despite the difficulty of telling a story about abuse, there are good reasons for targets of bullying to discuss their situations. First, past research on trauma suggests that talking through distressing incidents can be important for individuals' recovery (Liebermann, 1991). People better handle their emotions and illnesses associated with trauma when they are able to disclose their experiences to supportive audiences. Confronting personal and emotional issues, either through writing or talking about them, can help promote physical, spiritual and mental well-being (Pennebaker, 1997). Therefore, from a therapeutic point of view, it is important that targets express their emotion, devastation, and pain. As such, bully targets should consider journaling about these feelings and sharing them with loved ones or therapists.

While telling emotional and devastating stories can be healing, it is crucial that the bully target differentiate between the therapeutic story, which can be meandering and emotional, and the story constructed for decision-makers in order to promote change. In short, while sharing deeply emotional and disturbing events may help in the target's recovery, doing so is less likely to catalyze political action (Shuman & Bohmer, 2004)

*Targets often have very limited windows of opportunity to tell their story...so it is crucial that they make the most of their time.*

Targets usually have very limited windows of opportunity to tell their story to supervisors or human resource personnel. For instance, they may only be able to discuss the abuse during a short grievance hearing, a job review, or a special meeting with a supervisor. If targets want to change their bullying situation, it is crucial that they make the most of their limited time with organizational decision-makers, and tell a story that is heard as competent and credible.

## **Eight Tactics for Explaining Workplace Abuse to Decision-Makers**

Past examinations of trauma narratives coupled with The Project for Wellness and Work-Life research suggest that targets of workplace bullying are considered most credible when their explanations are marked by rationality and linearity, relevance, detail, consistency, and plausibility. Furthermore, targets should attempt to talk *about* rather than personally *display* the emotional pain of abuse. Here are eight tactics designed to help bully targets tell convincing stories to decision-makers.

### ***1) Be rational***

For better or worse, the appearance of rationality is a central feature of credibility in organizational settings. People like to hear the reasons *why* events occur. More specifically, PWWL researchers found that targets who displayed rationality through linear storytelling and provided concrete reasons for why the situation occurred were viewed as more rational.

#### **Tips**

- ❖ Write out the story ahead of time, before meeting with supervisors.
- ❖ The story should pinpoint 3-5 critical incidents.
- ❖ Practice telling the story to someone else.
- ❖ Make an outline and take it to the meeting.

Therefore, a key part of being rational is telling the story in a linear fashion. Targets who tell credible stories are able to explain the background of their relationships with the bully and why the relationships unfolded in a destructive way. This can be difficult, especially if bully targets are in the middle of the trauma.

However, given that many targets have few opportunities to explain their situations to a boss or human resources manager, it is important that they plan their narrative so that it presents a linear story line. In stories evaluated as most credible, for instance, bully targets pinpointed a critical incident that marked the beginning of the bullying, then went on to vividly specify various incidents of bullying, their responses to the abuse and, finally, how they attempted resolution. Since workplace abuse can *seem* unbelievable, it is especially important for targets to provide a clear and logical storyline that is easy for the listener/reader to follow.

## 2) *Express emotions appropriately*

The most credible narratives are those in which targets capture and communicate the emotionality of the bullying experience without displaying the emotions described. Stories are more convincing when they detail precisely the targets' emotional experience and reactions, and when they use vivid metaphors that are evocative as well as clear to the listener. At the same time, targets are thought most credible when their body and voice project an aura of calm and reason. For instance, in the following excerpts, targets "tell" about the emotional devastation of the bullying, yet they maintain a calm voice and demeanor:

### **Tips**

- ❖ To help manage emotions, envision yourself as a journalist talking about another person.
- ❖ Create a vivid verbal image of the abuse, but avoid becoming distraught or inconsolable.
- ❖ Practice telling the story multiple times using a calm voice and a confident body language.
- ❖ While telling the story, if necessary, pause and take a breath to manage emotions.

- *"I feel like I have "Kick Me" tattooed on my forehead."*
- *"It (the bullying) pushed me into the role of being a child. That I was being scolded for doing something so horrible and the emptiness and that blackness that I felt because automatically I took on the role of 'Oh my God. I did something wrong'."*
- *"I was getting to the point where I was not emotionally equipped to handle dealing with my family. I was no longer happy. I couldn't deal with anything and I turned my back on my family. . . . I was either online, reading a book, watching TV, I didn't care. Just whatever I could do to be alone. It was just an emotional nightmare."*

In these excerpts, the targets clearly discuss the emotional costs of workplace bullying. However, in doing so, they do not cry, shake, or raise their voice while discussing the issue.

PWWL researchers found that the least believable targets, in contrast, *displayed* the negative emotions associated with bullying. This came in the form of soft, often inaudible voices that painted the teller as distraught, and perhaps unstable or hysterical. One target,

for example, explained in a wavering voice, “*Sometimes I cry on my way there. . . . Sometimes I scream because I don’t want to go there. I don’t want to go. . . I’m in a terrible depression. They keep raising my medications.*”

Particularly with naïve audiences who are unfamiliar with the costly effects of bullying, these statements can easily hook into a belief system that depressed employees are crazy, and reinforce the idea that the targets’ emotional problems may be the cause, rather than a result, of the bullying experiences.

As discussed, there is a time and place for embodying the emotional devastation of workplace bullying. However, if the goal of the story is to enlist the help of a supervisor or human resource personnel, the target should realize that a calm demeanor will better enable the listener to respond by focusing on the bully’s behavior (rather than being overwhelmed by the target’s emotions and devastation.).

### ***3) Provide consistent details***

Credible narratives are detailed and consistent. Specifically, an abundance of detail typically is read as a sign of authenticity, and, over time, the consistency of the telling (and retelling) of those details is interpreted as further evidence of a truthful story.

#### **Tips**

- ❖ To the extent possible, document the details of abuse as it occurs.
- ❖ If no record exists, sit down with a calendar and piece together memories with as much detail of each incident as possible.
- ❖ Utilize the memories of co-workers who have witnessed the bullying.
- ❖ To help ensure consistency, write down what you report to supervisors and refer back to this when making future reports.

Contrarily, remembering details after the original narration or forgetting details across retellings of the story is seen as a sign of deception—whether or not this is actually the case. PWWL researchers found that targets who provided a number of specific, clearly articulated and memorable details regarding their experiences with the bully and their own perceptions and reactions were deemed most credible. For instance, in the following story, the target is able to articulate past interactions with a high amount of detail:

*“And she come after me and just started screaming and the finger was out and she was in my face and I kept backing up*

*because I was sitting there thinking ‘This woman is going to hit me.’ I just remember her screaming ‘don’t you ever EVER blind side me again. You EVER blind side me again in a meeting . . .’ And just the look on her face. . .”*

The target relates his interactions with such precision and vividness that the reader/listener begins to believe that the “quotes” are, in fact, exact replications of the conversations.

#### **4) Offer a plausible story**

Trauma narratives are believable to the extent they are “plausible.” Because workplace bullying is largely an invisible and unknown issue, many decision-makers

need to be convinced that bullying is in fact a “real” phenomenon. Therefore, when explaining the problem, targets should consider referencing or actually providing published literature about workplace bullying (such as this article or other sources listed in the bibliography). Published reports scientifically verify the existence and costs of workplace bullying and make it less likely that managers will dismiss the abuse as imaginary (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006).

#### **Tips**

- ❖ Reference published reports that verify the workplace bullying phenomenon.
- ❖ Use familiar metaphors to describe experiences.
- ❖ Keep your stories as simple as possible.
- ❖ Don’t dwell on outrageous events that others are not likely to believe.

Furthermore, accounts of the activities associated with one’s trauma need to be believable and familiar to decision-makers. Behavior that falls outside of the listener’s experience or the range of what they generally perceive as “normal” is likely to be read as implausible and incredible (even if it is, in fact, true).

Targets deemed as most credible described behavior that was familiar to most adults, and the metaphors used (for example, being scolded like a child) were images that align with familiar societal myths.

#### **5) Be relevant**

In addition, believable stories are relevant and to the point. Because bullying causes such personal harm, both physically and emotionally, many targets’ first instinct is to fill

their stories with discussion of the injustice of the abuse and how it's caused them trauma, sadness and injury. However, from a legal/rational viewpoint, the only *relevant* details are those pertaining to the bully's bad behavior and, to a lesser extent, the target/victim's behavior. More specifically, credible stories of bullying focus primarily on the bully's behavior and reactions. As such, significant talk time should discuss the bully and his/her actions, rather than focusing only on the targets' own feelings about the situation.

### **Tips**

- ❖ Focus on the bully's actions that were inappropriate.
- ❖ Do not include extraneous or exaggerated details or events.
- ❖ Discuss your case with other abused employees first and provide a "united front" to the supervisor.
- ❖ Encourage supervisors to talk to other employees who have been targets of bullying.

Targets also should make it known if other employees in the organization were targeted by the bully. This emphasizes the larger harm of the abuse because it affects more than one employee. As one target revealed, "*I'm like number fourteen in people of who she has tried to get rid of.*"

Indeed, collective resistance can be much more effective than resisting alone. In a study of bullied employees conducted by Pamela Lutgen-Sandvik (2006), none of the employees who collectively resisted were fired, while 20% of those who resisted on their own were fired. Through detailing the ways that others in the organization are bullied, targets can increase their own credibility by countering any belief/argument that the target is solely at fault. Rather, since many others also are targeted, the

fault is more firmly placed on the bully.

### **6) *Emphasize your own competence***

Targets also can increase their standing by describing the ways that they are competent and strong employees. Doing so helps establish the fact that the bullying is not a result of poor performance on the job and reinforces that target employees are not simply "problem employees." When telling their stories, it is helpful for targets to remind listeners that they are professional and highly regarded by others. This, in turn, supports the overall claim that *they* are not responsible for the bullying.

Targets who are viewed as most competent depict themselves as proactive and strong people. Targets should make it clear that they did not passively accept the bully's behavior but tried a variety of strategies (in addition to working harder) to deal with the issue. For instance, if Targets have stood up to the bully, they should frame themselves as someone who is brave and willing to defend themselves. By doing so, targets suggest that they are not victims, but fighters and survivors.

### **Tips**

- ❖ Highlight career successes and excellent reviews.
- ❖ Detail efforts made to end the abuse.
- ❖ Explain how workplace performance is hindered by the bully's behavior.
- ❖ Do not agree with the bully's negative characterizations.

Targets should avoid framing themselves as passively accepting their bullying experiences. The least credible narratives were void of any discussion of the target's proactive effort to resolve the problems at work. When targets present themselves as victims, it is easy for others to assume that they deserved their fate.

Also, targets should not inadvertently take ownership of their supposed bad behavior. PWWL researchers found that some targets were so beaten down by the bullying that when relaying their stories, they said things such as, "*I am a bad employee.*"

When targets present themselves so negatively, it is tempting for the listener to believe that the treatment is not bullying, but rather is appropriate feedback given their poor performance. Some targets filled their stories with negative self-representations worded in ways that suggested that the target accepted them as truth. As such, the effect of these representations is to create a picture of the target the problem.

### ***7) Show consideration for others' perspectives***

Targets should show consideration for others' perspectives. Targets who were deemed most credible demonstrated recognition in their stories that outsiders are likely to perceive them as "whiners" or that others might think the situation sounds "crazy." Believable targets also demonstrated that they had attempted to understand the bully's behavior and even tried to have sympathy for their abuser. One target explained that

when the bully verbally attacked him that she may not have realized how hostile she was being. Such conversational moves show the target to be empathic and likeable.

Perspective taking also increases the audience's faith in targets as reliable storytellers by their efforts to show concern not just for themselves but for coworkers and the organization as a whole. One target explained:

### **Tips**

- ❖ Acknowledge that the bully may not realize the effect his/her actions have on you and the organization.
- ❖ Indicate that you realize the events you are reporting may be hard to believe.
- ❖ Explain the negative effects of the bullying on others and the organization.

*It's like I used to give 120 percent all the time. I felt like it was my job to lead an example. Come in early, do that job, get it done, get it done right. And was getting beat up because my projects were successful, my work was successful. Now I do C+ work which grates against my nature to fly under the radar. I don't want to be noticed. . . And it's just that I'm not gonna give them more than I have to. I will do what I have to to keep my job, to get my paycheck, and get my retirement. . . And that's your taxes hard at work right there.*

Conversational moves such as these suggest that targets are concerned about the bullying not only because of a negative impact on themselves, but because of the negative impact on peers and the organizational bottom line.

## **8) Be specific**

Effective communicators use concrete, specific language that renders their explanations clear and easily understood. The least credible stories are vague and use indefinite pronouns such as “they” and “she,” to refer to multiple parties, and listeners have considerable difficulty following such stories. For example, one target in the study offered the following “explanation” of the bullying experience:

*“These supervisors were giving me evaluations but were not getting any input from the faculty, which they're supposed to do because that's who we work for. And that's what they're going on is what they're writing themselves which meant that I didn't get a raise because they had gotten input from faculty last fall but they somehow have not put that together yet.”*

## Tips

- ❖ Use specific, concrete language.
- ❖ Identify the bully and explain his/her problematic behavior clearly.
- ❖ Offer specific dates, locations, times, and names.
- ❖ Ask if the listener has questions or requires clarification.

The multiple references to “they” likely refer back to the target’s supervisors, though the audience never knows how many supervisors are being discussed nor the target’s relationship with them. Also, it is not clear who “we” is, and the statement “and what they’re going on is what they’re writing themselves” is difficult to interpret. Such unclear language makes it all but impossible for a supervisor or human resources manager, for instance, to take action in response to the story. The story does not provide a clear villain or bully to blame.

## Summary and Conclusion

Once workplace bullying becomes a normal part of organizational interaction, it is difficult to address, manage and change. This situation is especially challenging for targets who attempt to create a credible story of abuse. The fact that Americans do not like to hear or believe victim stories may be neither fair nor just, yet is a reality that must be addressed when bully targets tell their stories and attempt to effect change.

*It is in the best interest of the employee and the organization to help stop workplace bullying.*

Therefore, researchers from the Project for Wellness and Work-Life believe that it is important to help bully targets understand how their stories of abuse might best be constructed and told, in the hopes that targets can persuade decision-makers to intervene.

Providing targets with tips about how best to work within the current system may reinforce inappropriate assumptions about what type of stories can and cannot be told in organizations. Nevertheless, it is a risk worth taking. Targets of bullies face a wide range of negative effects that impact the organization’s bottom line, ranging from psychosomatic illness, to depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and suicide or suicidal ideation. It is therefore in the best interest of both the individual being targeted by abuse, as well the organization as a whole, to try to find and use strategies that help to stop workplace bullying.

These tips were developed so that targets might tell stories about their abuse that potentially will promote transformation and change. Certainly, these tactics are easier to list than to enact, especially for those who find themselves in the midst of tragedy.

### ***Tell a story...***

*...with a clear beginning, middle, and end.*

*...that clearly identifies the bully.*

*...that focuses on the bad behavior of the bully, not the target.*

*...with specific details about the bullying experiences, not other smaller complaints.*

*...that can anticipate and meet potential objections by acknowledging the perspectives of others.*

*...that vividly conveys the cost of the abuse, yet is not so emotional that the listener must console rather than work toward solving the problem.*

*...that is consistent, with details of quotations, times, places, and people.*

*...that uses metaphors or examples that others may find familiar.*

*...that includes references to other people who have been bullied.*

*...that provides details about the negative effects of bullying on peers and workplace productivity.*

*...that paints the target as a survivor, not a victim.*

However, being aware of these issues may be a first important step for targets as they try to promote change, whether that be as they tell the story to colleagues, a boss or to human resource employees.

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