

How to Overcome a Bully

By Dr. Steve Long-Nguyen Robbins, Society for Human Resource Management

When I was in elementary school, a bully picked on many of us. He was bigger and meaner than all of the neighborhood kids. Every once in a while the bully would get in some type of trouble then take out his anger on one of us. It was not a pretty sight.

Many of us did not know what to do. We did not want to tell any adults because we would be seen as crybabies. However, we eventually told our teacher what was happening. Her "solution" did not quite make sense to us. She told us to confront the bully and tell him what was bothering us and why we did not like it. As she said this I thought, "This is a good plan. Let us go tell the person who is beating us up that we do not like it when he beats us up. And maybe he'll stop beating us up." Even at that young age, I knew bad strategy when I heard it.

Being older now, I have a little better understanding of what the teacher was trying to say. In addition, in many situations, her suggestion would work. However, not in the case of the bully, and likely not in some cases of workplace problems.

Many organizations have a procedure for making complaints, for raising workplace issues. Often, the first step is to bring up the issue with one's immediate supervisor. This seemed logical. But what if the immediate supervisor is directly or indirectly part of the problem? If the problem is of a truly sensitive matter (like many harassment and diversity issues) then going to the supervisor might not be a viable option. Even going to the supervisor's boss might not be an option if the two are close.

In these cases, it might be smart to do what SBC Ameritech does. According to Deborah Ingram, Director of Workforce Diversity/Affirmative Action for SBC Ameritech, her organization has contracted with an outside vendor to serve as the first point of contact for complaints that employees feel they cannot bring to their supervisor. After the vendor receives the complaint, it is passed on to appropriate channels for review and action.

Ingram says this makes it easier for those who have sensitive issues to gain much needed assistance. Having this type of system to address sensitive issues has helped SBC Ameritech more quickly address problems that have the potential to "blow up."

Your organization may want to review its procedures for handling employee issues and complaints. While your current procedures may work for most problems, look closely to see if some issues, especially discrimination issues, might warrant a different set of procedures.

Your organization might consider setting up something like a "diversity ombudsperson," someone who investigates diversity issues/complaints and tries to mediate solutions. The ombudsperson could be internal or external to the organization, but should be well versed in issues of diversity and conflict resolution.

Having a diversity ombudsperson or group could go a long way in putting out sparks before they become full-blown fires. Addressing employees' concerns and issues around diversity and inclusion quickly and with issue-appropriate procedures, will help in preventing potentially expensive activities later, like multimillion-dollar lawsuits.