

"Are you part-time now?"

"We were all wondering if you were pregnant"

"Ssh... The grown-ups are talking"

*Bullying doesn't have to mean Malcolm Tucker-style bawling: subtle digs are just as devastating. The fightback starts here...*

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Six weeks after taking on a new job, Katie should have still been finding her feet as an HR manager in a pharmaceuticals business. Instead she was busily looking for a new position, driven out by a ruthless finance director who made her working life a living hell.

"I was terrified of going into work. I would get there in the morning and literally shake," she says. "He would lean against my office door staring at me, punching his palm with his fist. There was even one incident where he was following me as I was walking down the stairs to go to the toilet and he leaned over my shoulder and asked:

'Does your husband beat you?'" Forced to work 12-hour days to keep up with his professional demands, Katie (not her real name) was a nervous wreck. She dreaded the director being in the office and regularly went home in tears. "It was intimidation," she says. "I later heard he was dismissed for doing it to someone else."

Katie's experience fits with the traditional notion of the workplace bully – male, holding a position of power, well aware of his actions – but it is far from the norm. With more men holding senior positions, they may be more likely to be the aggressor, but bullies can be female, they are

not always in management positions and they come in many forms, from the outright aggressor or the power-wielding manipulator to those who constantly criticise or slyly talk behind people's backs.

"Power is a common factor but relatively junior members of staff can wreak havoc too," says Leatham Green, assistant director of personnel and training at East Sussex County Council. "And it's not gender-specific. You have got more men than women in leadership so it's probably quite easy to say more men do it but I've seen some horrible traits in female leaders."

If there's one thing most bullies have in common, it's that they often have absolutely no idea of the destructive effect of their actions – and can be devastated when they find out. Psychologists say at least half of all miscreants are entirely unaware they are bullies. Even the most overtly aggressive among them may simply lack the emotional intelligence required to gauge the response of others to their behaviour.

"I've found some people who are really not as self-aware as they need to be and people manage around it," says Green. "I don't think I've come across a case where the individual has said 'Yes, I'm a bully'. People have a range of negative emotions [when they find out], because it's not a nice label to have."

Intentional or not, there's a lot of bullying – and few organisations seem to have got to grips with how to tackle it. A CIPD study found 15 per cent of employees had experienced bullying or harassment in the preceding two years, with another 33 per cent saying they had witnessed it. And a survey of Unison members revealed one in three female workers aged 18 to 30 said they were regularly bullied, with

black employees twice as likely to be on the receiving end as white colleagues.

Both the human and organisational costs can be enormous. The CIPD estimates that victims take an average of seven days' more sick leave a year. And it can have tragic consequences, whatever the intent. In 2010, a nurse at Royal Bolton Hospital committed suicide, leaving a note in which she detailed the unpleasant names she claimed she was called by other staff. A hospital investigation found no wrongdoing.

"I have worked with people who have been through armed raids but bullying can be worse and it's very personal," says psychologist Noreen Tehrani, author of a CIPD guide *Bullying at work: beyond policies to a culture of respect*. "In the worst cases, people can't work, they can't leave the house, they can't sleep.

I've seen people who just can't string words together. It's incredible what impact it can have."

It's not only reduced productivity or engagement that hurts organisations. Although there is no specific legislation for bullying, the Equality Act 2010 covers harassment and there are numerous other legal principles that can be invoked, such as breach of contract, health and safety, human rights and personal injury.

In 2006, for instance, City worker Helen Green brought a claim – mainly for personal injury but also under the Protection from Harassment Act 1997 – against Deutsche Bank, alleging she was targeted by four women and had suffered a nervous breakdown. The firm denied any bullying or harassment but a High Court judge said Green had suffered a "relentless campaign of mean and spiteful behaviour by colleagues" and awarded her more than £800,000.

The problem for HR leaders, says Susannah Clements, CIPD deputy

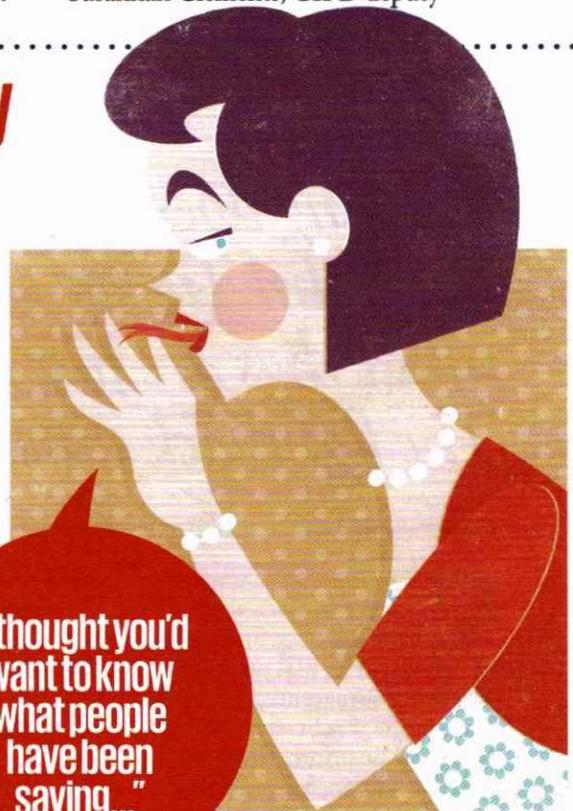
**"He would lean against my office door staring at me and punching his palm with his fist"**

## Know your bully

### #1 The Snake

On the outside, this sly customer will appear to be your friend but they'll happily stab you in the back. Gossipy and liable to spread rumours, they may use personal information against you, make false allegations and work in tandem with others to bully as a group.

You're unlikely to catch The Snake in action but when you do hear about their activities, try to nip them in the bud by publicly revealing what you've heard – it could turn the tables on them. "Speaking out might alter the cost-benefit calculation in someone's head," says Charlotte Rayner, professor of HRM at Portsmouth Business School. And take consolation: it won't be too long before everyone works out who can't be trusted.



chief executive, is that bullying is a complex and often subtle behaviour made harder to deal with by the fact that our perception of our actions can be very different from those on the receiving end.

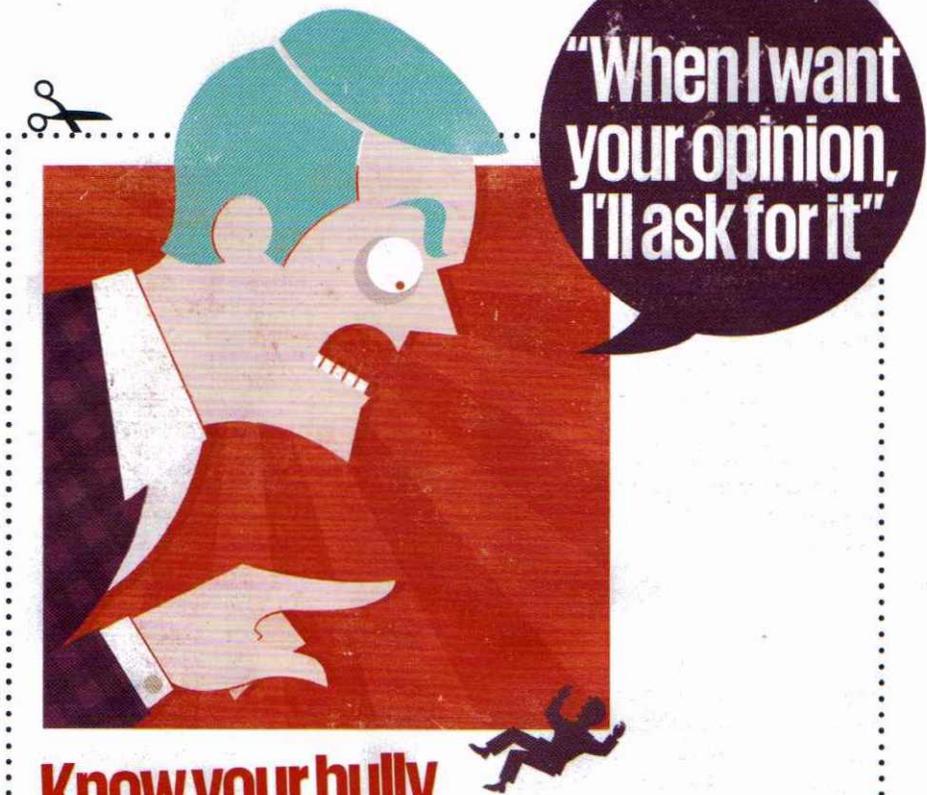
"One person's bullying can be another person's strong performance management," she says. "People can overcompensate on the 'I'm being tough' front.

"The cases where it is cut and dried are actually few and far between. Subtle undermining, a bit of denigration and people being jokey can be just as detrimental to the individual and their self-confidence. You can say the same thing to two people and one will laugh and one will be mortally wounded."

The increasing popularity of mediation as a salve for bullying is one light at the end of the tunnel for victims. East Sussex County Council introduced it in a bid to cut down on both the length of time it can take to go through a formal procedure and the "unacceptable emotional impact". Working with trade union colleagues, the council launched an internal mediation service, which draws on appreciative inquiry techniques to focus on the future, rather than dwell on what has gone wrong.

The service, which is available to other public and third sector organisations, has certainly had an impact. "In every case where the parties have used the language of bullying, this has solved it for them," says Green. "It is the most effective intervention I have experienced in my career. On a human level you are seeing someone so fundamentally destroyed by your actions that there is nowhere to go with it."

Leisure operator Rank Group went down a similar route when it teamed up with specialist Consensio a couple of years ago to train a number of HR staff and general managers in mediation techniques. Group HR director Sue Waldock points out that one of the reasons mediation works so well is that, in many workplace



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### #2 The Old-School Bully

They may not be as common as they once were, but it just takes one stereotypical swaggering bully to create a toxic working environment. Dominant and aggressive, they may be prone to shouting and swearing as well as ridiculing others and setting unreasonable tasks. There may be clues to spot them, such as a high turnover of staff in their division.

It's possible to tackle this kind of bully, say psychologist Noreen Tehrani, but first try to find out if they know what they're doing. If they're "scattergun" in their approach, it's likely they're in the dark and may well respond to a direct challenge. But be wary of individuals who pick on different

people at different times – they're much more aware and may collect allies around them. Gather evidence and your own support if you want to take action.

The Old-School Bully's behaviour, says Tehrani, may be perfectly acceptable in their own mind. Because they don't have ordinary relationships at work, they might simply not know how to conduct themselves. Finally, she warns, steer clear of those who display sociopathic tendencies, including a lack of conscience. You can't beat them, she says, so "the only option is to get a lot of people together and go to the boss". Assuming, of course, they're not the boss...

disputes, it is not easy to establish what has happened. "Typically, people take entrenched positions and then look for reasons to reinforce why it is going wrong rather than how to resolve it," she says. "Often in HR you are being asked to make a judgment about who you believe but it can be very difficult to get to the bottom of it."

But while mediation can work wonders for the individuals concerned, it's also essential, says Waldock, to make sure employees know you won't

tolerate bad behaviour – something Rank achieves through being open in describing what it thinks bullying is and putting all staff through an online Respect at Work course.

"I'm sure that we have pockets of bullying, like any organisation with 10,000-plus people," she says. "What I don't think happens a lot is bullying for the sake of bullying. Our teams on the ground are pretty quick to spot it and ask for help if they think they need it. We have also taken some firm action in

the past. It doesn't matter how senior you are or how long you have been with us. We will take action."

That's a lesson that both the BBC and NHS watchdog the Care Quality Commission (CQC) would do well to heed. In recent months, both have hit the headlines for the amount of bullying that goes on behind their doors. A BBC inquiry set up in the wake of the Jimmy Savile scandal highlighted evidence of bullying and other forms of inappropriate behaviour, which often appeared to go unchallenged by senior managers, with some individuals seen as "untouchable". The problem was not

endemic but was "visible, frequent and consistent enough to be a very real concern". An independent report into the CQC found "worrying levels of perceived bullying", with more than 90 per cent of staff interviewed saying they had been subjected to bullying behaviour.

But Charlotte Rayner, professor of HRM at Portsmouth Business School, warns others not to be complacent, pointing out that in her experience it is hard to find exemplar organisations where staff truly are treated with care and dignity. It's a situation exacerbated by the fact that as people move up the hierarchy

## Know your bully

### #3 The Underminer

"It would probably be quicker if I did it myself"



Dealing with this power bully is a tricky business and ultimately it's a battle you may well lose. Usually in a more senior position, their underhand tactics can involve making people work below their level of competence, removing areas of responsibility and freezing people out of the communication loop. Try to deal with them in public and they could counter with doubts about your capability.

The reality, says Noreen Tehrani, is that these people may want you to

leave. It may be possible to confront them if you have enough evidence and it's certainly worth talking to a manager, but you may need to accept it's time to move on – either out of the organisation or into another team. "The most difficult thing is realising that there may be no place for you," she says.

# Are you a bully?

*Put your work demeanour to the test in our quiz*

**1. You need to call a team meeting but it's nearly 5pm and some staff have children. Do you?**

- A** Tell parents they don't have to go but it would be a good idea if they did attend
- B** Expect everyone to turn up. Their childcare needs are not your concern
- C** Promise to brief those who can't attend the following day

**2. You've made a politically incorrect joke in the office that was taken badly. Do you?**

- A** Not worry about it as everyone knows what you're like
- B** Apologise immediately for any offence caused
- C** Do nothing. People shouldn't bring their emotions to work

**3. You hear a piece of juicy gossip about a colleague's personal life. Do you?**

- A** Share it with other colleagues. You could all do with a laugh
- B** Point out to the gossip that their behaviour is not acceptable
- C** Keep it to yourself – but do nothing about it

**4. You've given a piece of work to someone but you're not happy with progress. Do you?**

- A** Sit them down to talk about how it's going and then take appropriate action
- B** Take it away and give it to someone else
- C** Leave it with them but monitor their progress 3-4 times a day

**5. Your colleague is already stressed but you really need their help to meet a deadline. Do you?**

- A** Give them the work to do. You're stressed too
- B** Enlist their help but promise them a day off in exchange
- C** Ask for an extension or see if someone else can help

**6. You find a colleague annoying. Do you?**

- A** Take time to talk to them about what would make the relationship easier
- B** Demand they stop doing whatever is irritating you
- C** Try to avoid them as much as possible

*Turn over to find out*

they get “less and less feedback on the negative side of their performance”.

“We have all heard the horror stories; take a good look at your own organisation and think about how others would judge you. With situations like the BBC inquiry, how would you stand up in those circumstances?” she says. “All of us are often in very time-pressured situations and do things with people that we regret.”

Essex County Council is working hard to ensure it doesn't fall into that trap. Two years ago, as part of a refresh of its diversity strategy, it decided to make tackling bullying a priority. “We have run an employee survey for a number of years and each time we have done the analysis around whether people think they have been bullied over the past year, it has come out at around 11 per cent. That's broadly in line with the local government benchmark but it still doesn't sit comfortably with us,” says people relations consultant Liz Fowler.

With the help of the East of England Local Government Association and

Unison, Essex trained up a group of peer listeners or “anti bullying links”. Currently there are 13 people whose role is to listen, help staff think through whether they are being bullied and offer advice on what course of action they can take.

The authority has also held workshops for HR professionals to increase confidence in dealing with the issue, allocated money to a mediation budget and beefed up an external whistleblowing helpline to include bullying.

“We are trying to create a culture that feels safe,” says employee engagement manager Lisa Sibley, adding that if you want to know what's going on in your business, it's essential to talk to staff: “You can't be purely reliant on annual staff surveys as your temperature check. We draw heavily on employee forums and ensure senior leaders take part.”

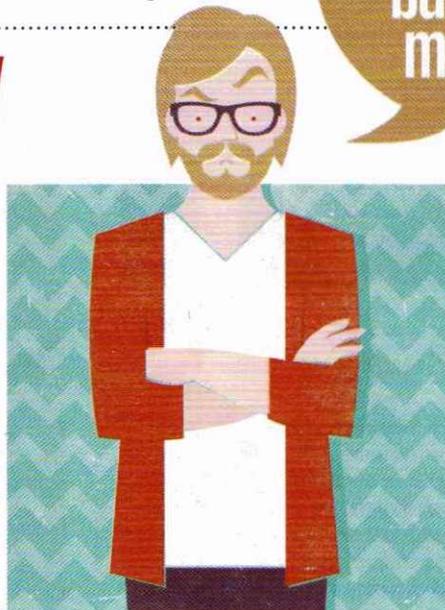
That's something that chimes with the CIPD's Clements, who adds that if organisations

**“You can say the same thing to two people and one will laugh and one will be mortally wounded”**

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### #4 The Critic

Resistant to change, prone to highlighting others' errors and constantly focusing on the negative, The Critic can wear you down, according to Charlotte Rayner of Portsmouth Business School. “Most of the people I've known like this have a passion for their job or organisation that they've taken too far,” she says. Tackling them may involve roping in management, she adds, but alternatively you could try buddying up and letting them see the impact of their actions “from a position of closeness”.



## So are you a bully?

Check your answers below

1 A (2 points); B (3); C (1)

2 A (2); B (1); C (3)

3 A (3); B (1); C (2)

4 A (1); B (3); C (2)

5 A (3); B (2); C (1)

6 A (1); B (3); C (2)

**If you scored 6-9**

On the whole you're an angel, but watch out for the occasional lapse. We can all be bullies when we fail to take other people's feelings into consideration.

**If you scored 10 - 15**

It may be wise to take a closer look at your behaviour as some of it is borderline and could be perceived as bullying.

**If you scored 16-18**

Whether you know it or not, it looks like you are a bully. Don't agree? Take a long hard look at your actions and if you still don't see the problem ask a trusted colleague for an honest second opinion.

really want to stamp out bullying, they need to create a values-driven culture where difference is appreciated and bad behaviour is simply not socially acceptable.

And there need to be clear policies, practices and procedures, which are backed up by action – even if the perpetrators are doing a good job or occupy senior positions.

“I've seen cultures that are very open and supportive and bullies are almost frozen out – but I've also seen organisations where people have been under a huge amount of pressure and more dysfunctional behaviours have become acceptable,” she says. “When there are very senior bullies and everyone colludes with them, that sets the tone in the organisation and no one will take your values or your bullying policy seriously.” **PM**

\* How to handle a bully. Visit [peoplemanagement.co.uk](http://peoplemanagement.co.uk) \*  
Bullying at work: beyond policies to a culture of respect [bit.ly/bullyCIPD](http://bit.ly/bullyCIPD) \* CIPD Code of Professional Conduct [bit.ly/CIPDCoC](http://bit.ly/CIPDCoC) \* Cardiff University's guide to Managing Conflict at Work [bit.ly/ConflictCIPD](http://bit.ly/ConflictCIPD)