

# Administrative Assistant's



UPDATE

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR CANADA'S OFFICE SUPPORT STAFF

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## The office bully

### ***Victims include employees, morale and corporate profits***

Dear AAU:

*I am a receptionist working in a large corporation. I really enjoy my job – except for the bullies. One bully has been with the company many years. She even retains the help of other bullies to make sure that they give me a hard time. They look for any and every little thing that I could do wrong. My boss won't act because he's not good with confrontation. Is there a way to deal with these people and still keep your job and do it well?*

– Bullied

Dear Bullied,

You describe a very typical example of workplace bullying. It demonstrates how certain people can make other people's lives miserable and make them feel powerless to make things better for themselves. The reason bullying is not addressed in corporations is because of some underlying myths about bullying that prevent managers dealing with it promptly and appropriately. If not dealt with, bullying will not only harm you and future receptionists, but as indicated in your situation, it will create a culture in which bullying is accepted. As a result, the workplace becomes toxic, people lose their motivation, turnover increases and morale plummets.

### **There are only two ways to deal with bullies**

In my experience, there are only two ways to deal with bullying – remove the bully or liberate the bully. But first you must be sure that the situation is truly one of bullying. (I will assume that the person is not acting intentionally, and that the situation does not involve a *serial bully* or *sociopath*.)

1. Diagnose the situation to determine whether it is a true case of *bullying*. Gather information about specific events and facts. Speak to other employees about the situation, not about the bully. When speaking to the bully, stick to the facts and do not get emotional or sucker-punched by the bully's tactics. Educate yourself and others about bullying and the cost of bullying to individuals and the organization. Understand what bullying is. If it is intentional, it will not go away without being directly addressed.
2. Liberate the bully. The best way to *out* a bully is to let the bully know that everyone is aware of what is going on. Because bullies typically lack empathy, most will not understand the impact of their behaviour until confronted with it face-to-face. If others show the bully how it

feels, the bully (unless he or she is a sociopath) will begin to understand and then will begin to think before behaving badly. One of the best ways to do this is by having a safe and candid group conversation that I call a *corporate circle* (based on my upcoming book, *Corporate Circles*). All of the people who are affected (not just the bully and the bullied) should be involved in the conversation.

3. Remove the bully. If the bully's actions and attitudes do not change, the bully should be removed from the workplace. Although some psychologists may suggest counselling, I am not sure about its effectiveness.

The bottom line is that every employer must protect employees from psychological harm and provide a workplace that supports a sense of dignity and emotional well-being. Bullies harm people and workplaces and must not be tolerated. AAU

*Maureen Fitzgerald, PhD, is a lawyer and an expert in conflict and collaboration. She is the author of six books including Corporate Circles. Her company, Center-Point-Conflict & Collaboration Inc. is dedicated to resolving conflict and building trusting teams through seminars, books and presentations. Maureen can be reached at [www.Center-PointInc.com](http://www.Center-PointInc.com).*