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MICHAEL BLANN/GETTY IMAGES

When a colleague is mean to you, it can be hard to know how to respond. Some people are tempted to let aggressive behavior slide in the hopes that the person will stop. Others find themselves fighting back. When you're being treated poorly by a coworker how can you change the dynamic? And if the behavior persists or worsens, how do you know when you're dealing with a true bully?

What the Experts Say

"When it comes to bad behavior at work, there's a broad spectrum," with outright bullies on one end and people who are simply rude on the other, says Michele Woodward, an executive coach and host

of HBR's recent webinar: "[Bullies, Jerks, and Other Annoyances: Identify and Defuse the Difficult People at Work](#)." You may not know which end of the spectrum you're dealing with until you actually address the behavior. If it's a bully, it can be difficult — if not impossible — to get the person to change, says Gary Namie, the founder of the Workplace Bullying Institute and author of *The Bully at Work*. But in most cases, you can — and should — take action. "Know that you have a solution, you're not powerless," says Woodward. Here are some tactics to consider when dealing with an aggressive colleague.

Understand why

The first step is to understand what's causing the behavior. [Research](#) from Nathanael Fast, an assistant professor at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business, proves a commonly held idea: People act out when their [ego is threatened](#). "We often see powerful people behave aggressively toward less powerful people when their competence is questioned," he says. Namie agrees: "People who are skilled and well-liked are the most frequent targets precisely because they pose a threat." So it may help to stroke the aggressor's ego. Fast explains: "In our [study](#), we saw that if the subordinate offered gratitude to the boss, it wiped out the effect," he says. Even a small gesture, such as ending an email with "Thanks so much for your help" or complimenting the person on something you genuinely admire, can help.

Look at what you're doing

These situations also require introspection. "It's very easy to say, 'Oh, that person is a jerk,'" Woodward says. But perhaps you work in a highly competitive culture or one that doesn't prioritize politeness. Consider whether you might be misinterpreting the behavior or overreacting to it or whether you've unknowingly contributed to the problem. Have you in any way caused the person to feel threatened or to see you as disloyal? Self-evaluation can be tough so get a second opinion from [someone you trust](#), who will tell you the truth, not just what you want to hear. Don't put too much of the blame on yourself, however. "It's important to balance not being threatening with not being a doormat, which just invites more aggression," Fast says. Namie agrees: "Targets regularly assume it's their fault," when it's not.

Stand up for yourself

Don't be afraid to call out the bad behavior when it happens. "I believe very strongly in making immediate corrections," says Woodward. "If someone calls you 'Honey' in a meeting, say right then: 'I don't like being called that. Please use my name,'" she says. If you're uncomfortable with an immediate, public response, Woodward advises saying something as soon as you're able. After the meeting, you could say, "I didn't like being called 'Honey.' It demeans me." Show that there is no reward for treating you that way. "The message should be: don't mess with me, it won't be worth your effort," Namie says.

Enlist help

"Everybody should have alliances at work — peers and people above and below, who can be your advocates and champions," says Woodward. Talk to those supporters and see what they can do to

help, whether it's simply confirming your perspective or speaking on your behalf. Of course, you may need to escalate the situation to someone more senior or to HR. But before that, "you owe it to the relationship to try to solve it informally," says Woodward.

Demonstrate the cost to the business

If you do need to take formal action, start with your boss (assuming he isn't the aggressor). But you may need to take the issue higher up the hierarchy. When you have someone's ear, Namie recommends, focusing the conversation on how the person's behavior is hurting the business. "Talk about how it's affecting morale and performance," says Fast. Personal pleas rarely work and too often degenerate into he said-she said type arguments. "Don't tell a story of emotional wounds," Namie advises. "Make an argument that the person is costing the organization money."

Know the limitations

When none of the above works you have to consider: Is this uncivil, mean behavior or am I being bullied? If you are in an abusive situation (not just a tough one), Namie and Woodward agree that chances of change are low. "The only time I've seen a bully change is when they are publicly fired. The sanctions don't work," says Woodward. Instead, you need to take action to protect yourself. Of course, in an ideal world, senior leaders would immediately fire people who are toxic to a workplace. But both Namie and Woodward agree that rarely happens. "Even though the statistics are clear on the impact on morale, retention, performance, it's very hard for organizations to take action," Woodward says. If you're in an abusive situation at work, the most tenable solution may be to leave — if that's a possibility. The Workplace Bullying Institute has done [online surveys](#) that show more people stay in a bullying situation because of pride (40% of respondents) than because of economics (38%). If you're worried about letting the bully win, Namie says, you're better off worrying about your own wellbeing.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Know that most people act aggressively at work because they feel threatened
- Ask yourself whether you're being overly sensitive or misinterpreting the situation
- Call out the inappropriate behavior in the moment

Don't:

- Take the blame — many bullies pick targets that are highly skilled and well-liked.
- Escalate the situation until you've tried to solve it informally and with the help of your allies
- Suffer unnecessarily — if the situation persists and you can leave, do it

Case study #1: Don't stay and suffer

Eleven years ago Heather Reynolds* took a new position at a veterinary clinic owned by another

veterinarian named Adam* with the intention of buying into the practice. At first, Adam was thrilled about Heather coming to work with him. “He was positive, supportive, and encouraging. He was over the moon about me joining,” she says. After several months, she bought half of the firm and became Adam’s business partner.

Things continued to go well until a year later when, after what seemed like a minor disagreement, Adam stopped speaking to Heather for six weeks. When she confronted him, he told her he was considering dropping her as a partner. Heather was shocked. She had taken out a loan to buy into the firm and felt stuck.

Eventually, they got back on track but Heather soon learned this was a pattern of behavior. Any time there was conflict, Adam reacted the same way. “If I disagreed, he would ice me out. If I confronted him, he iced me out longer,” she says. She eventually figured out that stroking his ego was more effective. “You could flatter him, tell him how great he was, how he did well in a case, and he’d be back on your side. I learned to do this sort of dance in order to survive.”

But Adam’s harsh behavior took its toll on Heather. Last year, things got so bad that he didn’t speak to her for three months. Heather sought the help of a professional coach, who helped her see that Adam was a narcissist and a bully, who was threatened by her skills. Late last year, she told him she was looking for someone to buy out her part of the business and he offered to do it. “It was the best thing I could’ve done,” she says. “I wished I left when he first showed me who he truly was.”

Case study #2: Call out the bad behavior

Christine Johnson* was excited about her new role as deputy editor at a San Francisco-based media company. The position had just been created so she would be managing a team of existing staff, and everyone welcomed her except for one person, Terry*. “What I didn’t know and I learned later was that he wanted the role and was angry that he didn’t get it,” she says.

During her first weeks on the job, Terry was aggressive. “I was constantly fending off little attacks from him,” she says. He kept asking her how she wanted to supervise their work, what processes she wanted to put in place, how he should interact with her about his projects. Looking back, Heather realizes these were all questions designed to make her look unprepared and incompetent. “And I was too green to say I didn’t know yet,” she says.

Terry started sending Christine 50 emails with return receipt before 9:00am. When she hadn’t responded by 11:00am, he would start emailing to ask if she’d seen his emails. “He was constantly badgering me. I actually considered quitting. I didn’t feel like I had any allies and wasn’t sure this was the job I wanted,” she says. After five weeks of this abuse, Christine stood up to Terry in a staff meeting. “He kept asking me questions over and over and I just lost my cool,” she says. She snapped at Terry and said, “I’m sick of you asking me so many unnecessary questions. Can you please stop?” Terry backed down.

Christine was embarrassed by her behavior but later, when she was in her office, people began stopping by to thank her for standing up to Terry. “Once I had a small amount of reinforcement from my peers, I knew I could take him on,” she says. And once he saw that she wasn’t willing to take his abuse, he stood down. “It got better and we were cordial but it was an awful start,” she says.

*names and some details have been changed

Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review and the author of the [HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict](#). She [writes and speaks](#) about workplace dynamics. Watch her [TEDx talk on conflict](#) and follow her on Twitter at [@amyegallo](#).
