

# Concerns about Bullying at Work

©2007, Mary Rowe and Toni Robinson, MIT Ombuds Office  
Adapted and extended from a presentation by Lydia Cummings, Ombudsman, Harvard University

Bullies may be supervisors or supervisees, co-workers, colleagues in other companies, vendors, customers, professional consultants and so on.

## **An (Alleged) Bully may appear to be**

- Unreasonably controlling, aggressive, impatient, volatile, temperamental, arbitrary, capricious
- Constantly criticizing, in a way that appears harsh and unprofessional
- Behaving disrespectfully, humiliating and demeaning others

## **An (Alleged) Bully may**

- Not recognize his or her behavior and be unwilling to hear how others see him or her
- Express anger or irritation, in an unprofessional fashion, on an unpredictable basis—intimidating and threatening, verbally or physically
- Fly into tirades, slam doors, stand too close, raise a fist or throw an object or papers
- Publicly or privately disparage the target's intelligence, creativity, expertise and experience—mocking contemptuously
- Ask for ideas and opinions and then punish the target for speaking up
- Distort information so that communications are poor
- Unreasonably exclude the target from sources of information, unreasonably forbid the target to talk to other staff, give too little information about the tasks at hand for the work to be done
- Give the target so much work that the work cannot reasonably be done on time—give assignments at the last minute or structure assignments that cannot be performed
- Ignore statements that the workload is impossible—shout that the target doesn't work hard enough
- Resent the target's successful relationships (work and personal) and challenge relationships, refuse time off to eat or sleep, require personal work from the target or the target's spouse
- Make inappropriate comments about the target's personal, religious, or cultural life, refuse reasonable time for religious observance
- Share—or demand—detailed personal information, in an inappropriate way, invading the privacy and dignity of others
- Show preferential treatment and favoritism toward some people
- Ask supervisees to ignore certain laws and regulations

## Some (Alleged) Targets

- Feel challenged, intimidated, afraid of losing relationships
- Feel anxious about “the next outburst”
- Feel isolated from colleagues and other support (faculty, senior managers, GSO, DSL, Medical, Human Resources, Deans and VP’s, Chaplains, Personal Assistance Program, Ombuds Office)
- Suffer stress, emotional problems and loss of self-confidence
- Have difficulty communicating and defending boundaries
- Rationalize and forgive the bully’s behavior

## Experiences Reported by (Alleged) Targets

- I am afraid to go into her office. I try to avoid contact with her—I work at night.
- I don’t know what will set her off. I no longer feel safe speaking in lab meeting.
- There is always something wrong—I cannot please my PI. He comes into my cubicle and challenges me and I feel defenseless.
- I can’t concentrate—it is affecting my performance. I am worried he will withdraw my financial support.
- I am beginning to question all my abilities—I do not belong here.
- I am isolated—I don’t dare talk to anyone about it. If I ask for help they will tell my supervisor.
- Many people know this is going on and haven’t done anything.
- I am so angry I am afraid I may lose control.
- I have trouble sleeping, have migraines, and get sick before going to work. I now take medication for depression.
- I can’t stop thinking and talking about this with my family—they are tired of hearing me complain. They wonder if this situation is my fault.

## Possible Goals for the Peer, Bystander and Supervisor

- Discuss—and post—rules and standards that should be supported
- Set and affirm boundaries regarding verbal and non-verbal behavior, tone and content of interactions, personal space
- Interrupt or stop or report unacceptable behavior
- Coach individuals to act effectively on their own or come forward
- Work together with faculty, senior managers, GSO, DSL, Medical, Human Resources, Deans and VP’s, Chaplains, Personal Assistance Program, Ombuds Office, **to create a culture—in every department—that affirms professional behavior and does not tolerate unacceptable behavior**