

RECOGNIZE. RESIST. RISE.

TOOLS TO
PROTECT
YOUR MIND.
YOUR VOICE.
YOUR FUTURE.

RESILIENT STANDOUT SYSTEM

— Decode Their Games. Disrupt Their Control. —
Stand Firm Without Losing Yourself.



GEAN VAN HORN



RECOGNIZE
THE PATTERNS



BREAK THE
NARRATIVE



STAY STANDING.
LEAD YOUR LIFE.

RESILIENT STANDOUT SYSTEM

**Decode Their Games. Disrupt Their Control.
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GEAN VAN HORN

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Resilient Standout System

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Some names and identifying details in the stories have been changed to protect privacy.

THE FIRST PRINCIPLE

“Protect the person you are becoming more than you try to defeat the person attacking you.”

That principle is the heart of this guide.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: YOU WERE EXTREMELY TRUSTING

Because you have chosen to read this ByeBully Guide, I have a strong suspicion that, at some point in your life, you were extremely trusting.

You may not describe yourself that way today.

Being manipulated, undermined, or betrayed can fundamentally change the way we view trust. After you have been burned by someone who deliberately took advantage of your openness, trusting people can begin to look less like good people and more like vulnerable people.

But before the attack, you probably didn't spend much time protecting yourself from exploitation.

Maybe you allowed your emotions to overrule your intuition.

Maybe you noticed that something seemed strange at work but dismissed the feeling because, overall, everything appeared to be fine.

Maybe you saw small signs of undermining but convinced yourself they were insignificant.

Things weren't fine.

You simply didn't know that yet.

And because you didn't address the behavior while it was still small, it eventually became too difficult to ignore.

Then you got damaged.

Trust Is a Strength

Trusting people are a gift to this world.

They lead with hope. They don't automatically assume bad intentions. They don't overanalyze every interaction. Even when they are somewhat reserved, they often bring a quiet sense of warmth, wonder, and possibility into a room.

Those are beautiful qualities.

But openness can also create vulnerability.

A person with hidden motives may not see a trusting person as admirable. They may see that person as exploitable.

And if that trusting person also possesses qualities that make them valuable and respected at work, the danger can increase.

Workplace bullies are often threatened by people who:

- naturally build goodwill with others;
- possess several standout strengths;
- are approachable and easy to work with;
- contribute positively to the workplace culture; and
- become respected without aggressively seeking attention.

This is one of the uncomfortable realities we need to understand:

You don't necessarily have to do anything wrong to become a target of workplace bullying.

Sometimes simply being good at what you do, well-liked by others, or naturally respected can trigger insecurity in someone who feels threatened by your presence.

A LinkedIn poll conducted by ByeBully found that 50% of respondents believed workplace bullies are driven to target another person because of an envy or threat response. Other respondents identified power and control (35%), emotional dysfunction (10%), and career competition (5%) as primary motivations.

These results come from polling within our community and should not be interpreted as a scientific measurement of workplace bullying as a whole. But they reflect something I have repeatedly observed while studying this behavior:

A person can become a target because of what they represent to the bully. Being attacked does not mean they did anything to deserve the harassment.

The Standout Becomes the Target

Over time, a kind, capable, and trusting employee can become increasingly valuable to an organization without ever intending to stand out.

They simply desire to help people.

They solve problems.

They build relationships.

They make the workplace better simply by bringing more humanity into it.

Most people appreciate these qualities.

But someone who feels envious, insecure, or threatened may experience that positive influence very differently.

Instead of thinking:

"This person is making our workplace better,"

they think:

"This person is becoming too important."

That perception can become the motivation for a bullying campaign.

Throughout this guide, I will refer to people who are attacked by workplace bullies as **targets**.

I will never use the word *victim* to describe them.

Why?

Because being targeted does not make you a victim.

You were attacked.

You were subjected to someone else's wayward behavior.

And you aren't permanently defined by what someone did to you.

I will also keep the word *bully* lowercase throughout this book.

They don't deserve a capital letter.

They aren't the important ones in this story.

YOU are.

Bullies Don't Usually Announce Their Intentions

When a bully feels threatened, their behavior can become increasingly strategic.

They don't simply experience discomfort, walk away, and stop thinking about it. Instead, they may begin trying to eliminate the source of their discomfort.

This is where workplace bullying can become particularly difficult to recognize.

The person may construct a plan around the outcome they want. They may imagine where they want the situation to end and then work backward to determine how to get there.

Perhaps they want you discredited.

Perhaps they want your reputation damaged.

Perhaps they want you removed from a position.

Perhaps they simply want you weakened enough that you no longer pose a threat to them.

But there is a problem for the bully.

They cannot openly announce:

"I am trying to destroy this person's reputation because I feel threatened by them."

That would expose the real motive.

So the behavior often has to be disguised.

The bully may resort to **manufacturing uncertainty**.

They may distort events.

They may provoke emotional reactions and then use those reactions against you. That is a favorite move.

They may create seemingly legitimate concerns about your performance, attitude, communication, or character without real evidence.

They may try to make you look like the problem while positioning themselves as the calm, reasonable person merely responding to it.

As we move through this guide, you will see why understanding the bully's **endgame** is often more useful than trying to understand each individual incident as though it happened in isolation.

Then Trust Changes

Yes.

You used to be extremely trusting.

After experiencing a full-scale bullying attack, that trust often doesn't survive in its original form.

You begin replaying what happened.

You analyze conversations.

You reconsider people's motives.

You remember odd moments you previously dismissed as unimportant.

And eventually, the questions begin:

"If I hadn't been so trusting..."

"If only I had seen it sooner..."

"I should have protected myself better."

"I could have said or done X when I was attacked about Y."

The mind keeps returning to the same events, searching for the moment when you could have changed the outcome.

But you can't change it.

And that may be one of the worst parts of having been targeted by a workplace bully:

The attack can seem to continue in your mind long after the bully is gone and the experience is over.

You can become imprisoned by the past.

You Don't Have to Stay There

If you have experienced workplace bullying, you know what I mean.

The pain is real.

The anger is real.

The embarrassment can be real.

The confusion is real.

And the desire to understand "*Why did this happen to me?*" can feel overwhelming.

But there comes a point when understanding the past must give way to building the future.

My hope is that after reading this guide and reflecting deeply, you will feel less compelled to relive what happened to you.

I want you to become **FREE**.

Not because what happened didn't matter.

It mattered.

Not because the bully was right.

They weren't.

And not because you should simply "get over it."

You shouldn't.

You should learn from it without remaining imprisoned by it.

Imagine that the bully locked you inside a mental cell.

The cell is built from regret.

The bars are made of *what ifs*.

The lock is made from self-blame.

You can spend years sitting inside that cell trying to figure out how you should have escaped.

Or you can learn how to unlock the lock of self-blame.

This guide is about opening that prison cell door.

The Problem Is Real

In another ByeBully LinkedIn poll, 69% of respondents answered "Yes" when asked whether they had been bullied at work.

My LinkedIn community is not a scientific sample of the entire working population. It is, however, a dynamic international community of professionals, many of whom tell me they have experienced workplace bullying.

That tells me something important.

Abuse from bullies at work is not merely an occasional annoyance. For many people, workplace bullying is a deeply damaging experience.

It's **REAL** - not some hypothetical scenario found only in the most obvious places.

It is far more common than many people want to admit.

Being targeted by a bully can hurt deeply.

It would be wonderful if this behavior didn't exist.

But it does.

People who bully others are everywhere.

It's time to become prepared.

You Can Trust Again

You were very trusting.

I feel confident saying that about you.

Maybe you lost much of that trust.

Maybe you became more guarded.

Maybe you started questioning people you once would have accepted at face value.

That's understandable.

But here's what I don't want you to do:

Don't allow someone else's bad behavior to destroy the best parts of you.

You don't have to become cold to become wise.

You don't have to become suspicious to become observant.

You don't have to become aggressive to become strong.

And you don't have to stop being the person who naturally builds goodwill with others.

The goal of the **ByeBully Resilient Standout System Guide** is not to turn you into someone else.

It's to help you protect the person you are inside - and the wonderful person you are becoming.

You can become more discerning without losing your warmth.

More observant without losing your trust.

More prepared without becoming paranoid.

More resilient without becoming hardened.

You can stand out without becoming easy to exploit.

And you can protect yourself without losing yourself.

You were extremely trusting.

Now you can become something even more powerful:

A trusting person who knows how to recognize when trust is being exploited.

I will help you get there.

CHAPTER 2

THE PLAYBOOK OF THE bully: JOE AND IRA

There is something I eventually learned about workplace bullies that I wish I had understood much earlier:

They often don't improvise. They follow patterns.

Some have learned these behaviors through experience. Others may be encouraged or coached by people around them. The individuals may change. The circumstances may change. But the tactics can look remarkably similar.

In my forties, I experienced a situation that demonstrated this to me in a way I would never forget.

Two tactics that eventually became part of my list of fourteen intentional bullying situations appeared in this experience. You can find the complete list in Appendix A.

The people involved were Joe and Ira. Those are the names I will use for purposes of this true story.

At first, I didn't realize I might be watching something larger develop around me.

Eventually, I did.

Joe Was Supposed to Be a Resource

Part of Joe's assigned job was to work with me.

I led a department that was doing well. I was experienced. By that point, I had accumulated more than eighteen years of training and experience in my field.

Joe was a new regional supervisor. His responsibility from headquarters was to assist local supervisors in departments like mine.

In other words, he was supposed to be a source of support and a useful resource.

During his first few months, Joe seemed impressive.

He was young. He was ambitious. He appeared confident.

He also seemed to be trying a little too hard.

I didn't think much of that initially. People who are fairly new to an important position and want to perform well sometimes overdo things in the beginning. You hope that eventually they will settle into the role and become more consistent.

That was my initial perception of Joe.

It was about to change.

Ira, a new and very ambitious manager in my department, began cultivating a friendship with Joe behind the scenes. They appeared to have a substantial amount of private communication that wasn't visible to the other managers.

Not long afterward, strange dynamics began appearing around me.

At first, they were subtle.

Then they became unmistakable.

The Narrative Begins

Ira had problems.

He was headstrong and impatient in meetings. He wasn't merely confident. He often seemed determined to have things his way without giving sufficient consideration to the reasoning of others.

Sometimes it was excessive.

Ira was in his early thirties, so initially I wondered whether some of his attitude could simply be attributed to youth or inexperience.

Then I saw something that changed my assessment.

During one important meeting, Ira was presented with evidence showing that his judgment on a particular matter needed to be corrected. He had been very vocal about the issue and had even persuaded another manager to support his position.

But he was wrong.

The clarification came from our branch office.

Instead of reconsidering his position after seeing the evidence, Ira stood up, refused to comment, and simply walked out of the meeting.

His behavior struck me as remarkably prideful.

Then another problem surfaced.

Ira appeared to be on a mission.

He began promoting a narrative that I was holding back people who were trying to advance.

The accusation made little sense to me.

My eighteen-year track record suggested almost the opposite. I had spent years helping people develop and progress.

But that history didn't appear to matter to Ira.

He had worked with me for approximately twelve months and now seemed prepared to position himself as an authority on my motives.

This taught me something important:

A false narrative doesn't have to fit the facts to be useful to someone who wants to influence how other people perceive you.

Ira also appeared to believe that he deserved more authority.

And now he had something else working in his favor.

Remember Joe?

I began seeing indications that Ira was influencing the way Joe viewed me.

I say that because Joe eventually began making insinuations during meetings with our team that sounded suspiciously similar to the narrative Ira had been promoting.

Joe wouldn't come directly to me and say:

"I believe you're controlling people."

Instead, he talked around the issue.

No specific facts.

No direct accusation.

Just insinuations.

He would make comments that seemed clearly aimed in my direction while avoiding an accusation that could be directly challenged.

I had already dealt with enough difficult personalities over the years to recognize that something unusual was happening.

But I purposely didn't confront Joe.

I was 48 years old.

Frankly, I thought the foolishness was juvenile.

What I didn't yet realize was that Joe's indirect comments were becoming part of something much larger.

Then Came the Trap

Several months before Joe's behavior toward me reached its most intense stage, something happened that changed the way I viewed the relationship between Joe and Ira.

Joe was scheduled to visit our department for an entire week as part of his regional responsibilities.

I was responsible for organizing a midweek program during his visit.

The program included teaching presentations that would be delivered in front of Joe for detailed review.

It was routine.

I assigned Ira a fifteen-minute presentation.

There was nothing unusual about the assignment. Ira was supposed to select a qualified participant to assist him.

But Ira selected someone who was clearly not qualified.

This was not a minor technicality.

The person he selected had been deemed ineligible by the company because of numerous infractions that had seriously damaged both his reputation and the company's confidence in him.

He was not a manager.

He was under restrictions.

And Ira knew it.

Months earlier, Ira had been formally briefed on this individual's status during meetings involving multiple managers. There was no reasonable way for him to have been unaware that the person's participation would present a serious problem.

Yet Ira selected him anyway.

What happened next made the situation even stranger.

I didn't discover the selection through a formal report from Ira.

Ira said nothing to me.

Instead, I learned about it through a casual communication mix-up with the participant himself.

He was surprised and delighted that Ira had selected him, and he called me to say how excited he was.

I was shocked.

As the manager and chairman responsible for the special program, I immediately knew the participant had to be replaced.

I tried to soften his disappointment, but I had to be direct:

"I'm sorry, but Ira made a mistake. You cannot participate in that presentation."

Then I called Ira.

That conversation has stayed with me.

I expected embarrassment.

I expected an explanation.

At minimum, I expected some concern that he had made a serious decision that could have gone badly.

Instead, Ira said very little.

No audible remorse.

No apparent embarrassment.

No urgency.

That bothered me.

A lot.

But I still didn't escalate the matter within the company.

I believed I had corrected the problem.

As far as I was concerned, the breach had been sealed.

Or so I thought.

Joe Arrives

Joe arrived for his week-long visit a few days later.

As the regional supervisor, he was supposedly there to observe, assist, and provide guidance.

I pulled him aside privately on his first day.

I told him what Ira had done.

There was concern in my voice.

The problem wasn't simply that Ira had made a poor choice.

If the individual Ira selected had been used in a formal capacity during that week, it could have sent the message that his serious previous transgressions - some of which involved harming other people - had been resolved and that he was now considered to be in good standing.

He wasn't.

As I explained the situation to Joe, I watched his reaction.

I wasn't intentionally analyzing him at first, but something about his response immediately struck me as wrong.

He appeared concerned...

Superficially.

But it didn't feel genuine.

When I described what had happened and explained the potential consequences, Joe looked down and away from me.

He barely responded.

That was strange.

If someone had told me that a responsible manager had knowingly selected a seriously disqualified individual for a public-facing company program, I would have wanted details.

I would have wanted to know what happened.

I would have wanted to understand why.

Joe showed almost none of that curiosity.

Instead, he seemed nervous and reluctant to discuss the matter.

His reaction gave me the impression that he might already know more about the situation than he was telling me.

I cannot tell you exactly what Joe and Ira had discussed privately before that conversation.

I wasn't there.

I won't pretend that I know.

But I can tell you what I observed.

And what I observed made me suspicious that there was more happening beneath the surface.

Then something else happened.

I asked Joe to accompany me when I spoke with Ira about the lapse in judgment.

It wasn't a power move.

I wanted Ira to understand the seriousness of what had happened and the need to exercise better judgment going forward.

Joe refused.

That made the situation even stranger to me.

The Moment I Began Connecting the Dots

Later, as I thought through the entire scenario, another possibility occurred to me.

What if Ira's selection had not simply been a careless mistake?

What if the choice had been intended to provoke me?

I couldn't prove that.

But I began considering the possibility.

Suppose Ira chose someone he knew would concern me.

Suppose I reacted strongly.

My reaction could then be separated from the circumstances that caused it and presented as evidence supporting the narrative that had already begun forming around me:

There he is again.

He's controlling.

He can't handle people making their own decisions.

He's the problem.

That was the potential trap I began to see.

If that was the intention, however, the plan had a major flaw.

I didn't take the bait.

And Ira's selection was so obviously inappropriate that correcting it was not evidence of control.

It was simply my responsibility.

I Almost Let Them Get Caught

There is another part of this story that matters.

When I first discovered what Ira had done, for a few seconds I considered doing nothing.

I was angry.

I thought Ira needed a lesson.

For a moment, I thought:

Let him do it.

Let him use this person.

Let headquarters discover what happened.

Let Ira explain himself.

Part of me thought he deserved to be caught inside the mess he had created.

But I discarded that thought almost immediately.

Why?

Because allowing the presentation to proceed would not merely punish Ira.

It could create a domino effect throughout our department.

A disqualified individual appearing in an important company program could create problems for people who had nothing whatsoever to do with Ira's decision.

It could damage the organization.

It could create consequences far beyond Ira.

So I stopped thinking about what Ira deserved and started thinking about what my responsibility required.

I corrected the situation.

That decision mattered.

Because one of the lessons I eventually learned from experiences like this is:

Don't allow your desire to expose a bully to cause you to neglect your own responsibilities.

Protect your organization.

Protect innocent people.

Protect yourself.

And document what happened.

Don't foolishly sacrifice everyone else simply for the satisfaction of watching a bully fall into his own trap.

Joe Was the Bigger Disappointment

Looking back, Ira's behavior didn't surprise me as much as Joe's did.

Ira had already demonstrated that he could be impulsive, prideful, and willing to exercise questionable judgment.

Joe was different.

Joe was supposed to be the regional leader.

He was supposed to provide oversight.

He was supposed to provide insight.

Instead, I increasingly came to believe that Joe was contributing to the unhealthy dynamics while Ira gave those dynamics another avenue through which to operate.

That possibility taught me something else about workplace bullying:

The person causing trouble may not operate alone.

Bullies can recruit helpers.

Sometimes that person is ambitious.

Sometimes that person wants approval.

Sometimes that person sees an opportunity to gain influence by aligning with someone above them.

And sometimes another person becomes involved because they begin to view the target as an obstacle to their own advancement.

Whatever Ira's personal motivation was, the practical result was the same:

Joe appeared to have an ally.

And a narrative about me was developing before I had been given a fair opportunity to challenge it.

Why Bullies Prefer Narratives Over Facts

This is where the lesson becomes larger than Joe and Ira.

A bully doesn't necessarily need to prove that you are guilty of something.

Sometimes they only need to make other people **wonder** whether you are.

That is a very different strategy.

If someone tells a supervisor:

"He's a control freak,"

the supervisor may not immediately believe it.

But suppose circumstances are then created in which the target appears controlling.

Suddenly the accusation seems to have evidence behind it.

That is the danger.

The bully can interpret - or even manipulate - circumstances and then point to those circumstances as proof of the narrative they were promoting all along.

The pattern can look like this:

Create the narrative.

Create the situation.

Provoke the target.

Capture the reaction.

Use the reaction to reinforce the narrative.

And if the target doesn't recognize what is happening, the trap can work remarkably well.

The Part They Don't Want You to See

People who operate this way may also protect themselves through denial.

If confronted, they may say there was a misunderstanding.

They may claim they were only trying to help.

They may insist that the target is overreacting or imagining things.

Most importantly, they may highlight the target's reaction while ignoring everything that happened before it.

That is why these situations can be so difficult to explain afterward.

Each individual act may seem small enough to dismiss.

But when the incidents are placed beside one another, a pattern may emerge.

And patterns matter.

I later reported Joe to our HR department because my concerns about his behavior went far beyond this one incident.

Over time, I observed additional conduct that I believed was self-serving and unhealthy for the organization.

I also saw what appeared to me to be an increasingly political workplace dynamic built around relationships and alliances.

That kind of environment can become dangerous.

Unethical favors become easier.

Backstabbing becomes easier.

Distorted stories become easier to spread.

People can begin learning that alliances matter more than doing the right thing.

Once that happens, workplace culture begins to rot.

What Joe and Ira Taught Me

Looking back, the Joe and Ira experience demonstrated two important tactics that eventually became part of what I call the bully's playbook.

First: Manufacture Uncertainty About the Target

You don't always need a direct accusation to damage someone.

Drop hints.

Make insinuations.

Talk around the person.

Raise questions.

Let other people begin wondering whether there is something wrong with the target.

Uncertainty itself can be damaging.

Second: Create Circumstances That Appear to Validate the Narrative

Suppose someone has already suggested that you are controlling.

Then a situation appears in which you legitimately need to intervene.

Now that necessary intervention can be portrayed as:

controlling.

meddling.

overbearing.

That's the trap.

And there is something else I want every reader of this guide to understand.

When you are the target, you may initially think the problem is the individual event.

Often, it isn't.

The event may be only one move in a larger game.

That is why I want you to learn to recognize patterns.

Once you begin recognizing the playbook, you stop asking only:

"Why are they doing this to me?"

You begin asking better questions:

"What are they trying to make me look like?"

"Who are they talking to?"

"What situation is being created around me?"

"What reaction are they hoping to provoke?"

And most importantly:

"How do I respond without becoming the person they are trying to portray me as?"

Sometimes another question is equally powerful:

"Should I simply refuse the bait?"

You can see from this story how easily a target can become consumed trying to defeat every move made by a bully and the people around them.

That cannot become your life.

Your objective is not to become obsessed with defeating the bully.

Your objective is to **protect yourself**.

Protect your judgment.

Protect your reputation.

Protect your responsibilities.

Protect your peace.

And protect the person you are becoming years from now.

The better you become at recognizing the playbook, the less power every individual move has over you.

Let's continue.

CHAPTER 3

A WORKPLACE bully IS TRIGGERED

When I was in my early twenties and much more naive, I met my first real workplace bully.

The events I am about to describe happened nearly twenty years before Joe played the mischievous games described in the previous chapter.

At the time, I was still hopeful that experienced adults generally had other people's best interests in mind. I didn't have a name for what I was experiencing at the hands of a low-key tyrant.

I just knew something was wrong.

The first person who ever seriously harassed me in a workplace setting thought he was a big deal.

And, actually, he was a big deal.

But he was going to make absolutely certain that everyone knew it.

He had experience.

He had authority.

He had connections.

And he misused all three.

Upper management continued to support him despite the destructive effect his behavior was having.

I will call him Harold.

Harold Arrives

Harold prided himself on looking stoic.

He rarely smiled.

He tried to be intimidating.

He wore thick, black-framed glasses and seemed to squint constantly. He slicked his hair back and reminded me somewhat of a meaner version of 1950s singer Roy Orbison.

Harold rarely commended people who genuinely deserved praise.

But he lavished approval on people who appeared to cower before him.

His favorites were often people doing little more than the minimum required, yet their unquestioning obedience impressed Harold.

That distinction would become important.

Harold was transferred into the department where I worked.

I had already been there for three years and had built a solid reputation.

Then I began noticing something about his arrival - and about what had happened shortly before it.

The previous supervisor had departed.

At first, the transition appeared smooth.

But as the months passed, it became obvious to me that his departure had not been as problem-free as it initially appeared.

In a sense, he had been run out.

After he was gone, I overheard people in positions of authority making snide remarks about him. Experienced adults who should have behaved more maturely mocked him in his absence.

That struck me because he was one of the most humble people I had ever met.

He was also extremely skilled.

And over the following decades, I would see variations of the same pattern repeatedly:

Phase 1: A capable person gains envious or threatened enemies.

Phase 2: The environment becomes increasingly toxic.

Phase 3: The capable person becomes isolated or mobbed, often behind closed doors while negative stories begin circulating.

Phase 4: The organization loses the very person it should have been trying to keep.

Sometimes that person leaves quietly.

Sometimes they are pushed out.

Sometimes they are treated with contempt on the way out.

It is ugly to watch.

A Haughty Hurricane

Harold arrived aggressively.

Like a haughty hurricane.

He was overly demanding and behaved as though he had been sent to rescue a department that desperately needed saving.

It didn't.

There was nothing that needed rescuing.

From my perspective, Harold had simply been handed a great deal of authority, and he enjoyed exercising it.

Eventually, he made his way to me.

He couldn't completely hide his contempt.

I had been something of a protégé of the supervisor who had departed. That man had helped me develop considerably, although he never told me much about the difficulties he himself was facing.

In retrospect, I wish he had.

He might have helped me recognize what was coming.

I wasn't even twenty-five yet.

Harold was in his late forties.

Yet his behavior toward me often felt petty and juvenile.

Like a teenager trying to establish dominance.

He seemed intent on building a kingdom of his own.

It was an unsettling time.

After the sneering came the ignoring.

Then came the restrictions.

My opportunities began shrinking.

At the same time, Harold increasingly elevated low-performing people who were highly compliant with him.

The department gradually became worse.

People who performed well became less important.

People who satisfied Harold's personal preferences became more important.

I didn't have the vocabulary for it then, but I now believe I was watching a bully build a more controllable team around himself.

There wasn't much I could do about it.

So for approximately six months, I watched the situation unfold and wondered where it would lead.

Eventually, I made a decision.

I was going to leave.

Harold Accelerated My Timetable

I already had additional goals I wanted to pursue.

A year earlier, I had assumed I would make that transition several years down the road.

Harold accelerated my timetable simply by being who he was.

I didn't like it.

But by then, almost anything seemed better than remaining inside that environment.

About a year after Harold arrived, I announced my departure.

Harold had created the type of team he appeared to want.

I was ready to go.

Then, unexpectedly, he called a meeting.

It was for me.

And it was about me.

I approached it rather nonchalantly because, mentally, I had already checked out. I didn't think Harold could interfere with me anymore.

Soon I would be physically gone as well.

Harold brought another manager into the meeting.

I will call him Ralph.

What Happened to Ralph?

Ralph had helped me develop professionally during the previous four years.

I respected him.

He had been less engaged than the supervisor who departed, but he had still tried to contribute something positive.

I appreciated that.

But after Harold arrived, something changed in Ralph.

He became distant.

Quiet.

Muted.

Ralph was sixty-five years old.

I watched a man who had once seemed strong become neutral and bland within a matter of weeks.

That taught me something else about controlling environments.

A bully does not always need to intimidate every person directly.

Sometimes the atmosphere itself does the work.

People begin noticing what happens to those who resist.

They learn that disagreement has consequences.

They begin shrinking themselves.

Their individuality fades.

Their enthusiasm fades.

Eventually, compliance becomes easier than resistance.

That was the Ralph sitting across from me during the meeting.

And I was about to see how far he had retreated.

Then Harold Threatened Me

Harold got directly to the point.

He threatened me.

He told me that if I left the department, he could make certain that I never reached my career objectives.

Those were his words.

I responded out loud:

"What?"

I was a young man trying to do my best.

And in that moment, I felt instantly crushed.

I had assumed that leaving would provide a clean break.

I had even imagined that my departure might make things easier for Harold because the strange stalemate between us would finally end.

I didn't yet understand the level of pettiness I was dealing with.

Harold emphasized that he had connections.

He told me he could use those connections to interfere with my progress even if I went somewhere else.

And Ralph?

Ralph sat beside him.

His shoulders were rounded.

His head was down.

He said nothing.

Zero.

Nada.

I remember lowering my own head.

There were tears in my eyes.

My forehead rested in my right hand.

I was beyond stunned.

The company had always presented itself as having a culture that was better than what I was now witnessing firsthand.

But this time, I was the person behind the closed door.

I was seeing the ugly underbelly.

Days later, I left anyway.

But I carried something with me that I didn't fully understand at the time.

Insecurity.

What Triggered Harold?

For years afterward, I wondered what had triggered Harold's behavior toward me.

Was it my race?

Was it my abilities?

Was it something else?

I still cannot say with certainty.

But after more than three decades of reflection, I believe control was a major part of it.

Harold appeared to need control.

Of everything.

And everyone.

If someone was doing well before he arrived, that person represented success he had not created.

If someone already had a strong reputation, that reputation existed independently of him.

If someone was self-directed, that independence reduced his influence.

People like that were harder to mold.

Harder to dominate.

Harder to absorb into his system.

I don't think Harold necessarily needed me to fail.

He needed me to be controllable.

That is an important distinction.

Workplace Bullies Usually Have a Trigger

When a workplace bully begins targeting someone, the behavior may seem random to the target.

Often, it isn't.

Something about your competence, independence, reputation, relationships, position, boundaries, or unwillingness to submit to improper treatment may interfere with the way the bully wants the environment to operate.

The exact trigger will vary.

But recognizing that a trigger may exist helps you stop assuming that every attack is evidence that something is wrong with you.

I had watched Harold's behavior developing for months.

He wanted to be seen as the person transforming the department.

Everything that existed before him appeared, in his mind, to be inferior.

And people associated with what came before could become obstacles.

That included me.

I simply didn't understand it yet.

Your First bully Can Change the Way You See Work

Much of my motivation for writing this guide comes from remembering that twenty-something-year-old version of myself and thinking about what he needed during those moments.

I was overwhelmed by the experience.

I didn't have the language to understand what was happening.

Today, more than three decades later, I can calmly describe those events.

But if you had asked me to explain them while I was living through them, I doubt I could have done it coherently.

That's one of the things workplace bullying can do to a trusting person.

You don't merely experience bad behavior.

You begin questioning your own understanding of reality.

You wonder:

Why is this happening?

What did I do?

Why would he care if I leave?

Why would a manager threaten me over a personal career decision that isn't wrong?

Why isn't anyone saying anything to support me?

Am I really the problem?

Those questions can destroy a person's sense of security.

That is why I want you to pay attention to Harold.

He wasn't some criminal mastermind.

He wasn't running an elaborate psychological operation.

These were junior-varsity tactics.

But junior-varsity tactics can be devastating when they are used against someone who has never encountered them before.

The inexperienced target doesn't realize a game is being played.

The bully may already understand certain tactics and may have practiced them repeatedly.

That difference matters.

Harold had authority.

Experience.

Connections.

I had trust.

He understood power.

I still believed competence, professionalism, and good intentions would be enough to protect me.

They weren't.

The Lesson I Learned

That experience taught me one of the hardest lessons of my career:

Being a good employee does not make you immune to a bad manager.

And being innocent does not make you immune to manipulation.

Sometimes your greatest vulnerability is simply this:

You cannot imagine another person behaving the way they are behaving.

That is where trusting people often become disoriented.

They keep searching for a reasonable explanation for unreasonable behavior.

They keep trying to repair relationships that may not be repairable.

They work harder.

They become more accommodating.

They continue giving the bully the benefit of the doubt.

Meanwhile, the bully may be building a system of control.

Look again at Harold.

He arrived.

He discredited what came before him.

He marginalized capable people.

He rewarded obedience.

He restricted opportunities.

He built a compliant team.

And when I refused to remain inside his system, he tried to frighten me into submission.

That is a pattern.

And patterns, once recognized, are much easier to defend against than mysteries you cannot understand.

You Will Meet a Harold

At some point in your career, you may encounter your own version of Harold.

It may be a man.

It may be a woman.

The personality may be different.

The tactics may be more sophisticated.

But the underlying drive for control may look remarkably familiar.

My advice is simple:

Don't waste years of precious emotional energy trying to convince an unreasonable bully to become reasonable.

Recognize the pattern early.

Protect yourself.

Document what matters.

Keep your options open.

Don't surrender your confidence.

And if the environment cannot be changed - and no one with sufficient authority is willing to step forward and help - consider leaving as soon as you reasonably can.

One of the main reasons I compiled this guide is because I want you to recognize these patterns much sooner than I did.

I want you to see what is happening while you still have options.

And I want you to understand something that the twenty-something-year-old version of me did not yet know:

A bully being triggered does not mean you did something wrong.

Sometimes what triggered them was simply something about you they could not control.

CHAPTER 4

KNOW WHO HAS YOUR BACK

No one enters a new workplace planning - or wanting - to get bullied.

We usually begin a new endeavor with hope and maybe a little nervousness. We want to succeed. We want to prove ourselves. We may even give ourselves that familiar pep talk:

You can do this.

Some of us may even say a prayer, hoping for a smooth path.

I think most of us can identify with that feeling.

And that is exactly why I placed this chapter so early in this ten-chapter guide.

Before the storm comes, build your social infrastructure. Build a shelter.

You will need a few people in your life who know you well enough to help you remain strong and resilient when things become difficult.

It is easy to feel tough when everything is going well.

You may think:

No bully is going to make me stumble.

I can stand up to anyone.

Perhaps you can.

But what happens when one crafty predator - or a group of them - begins targeting you?

You will have a much stronger sense of yourself if you are not isolated.

Isolation changes everything.

When bullies begin picking away at you, you can become disoriented. Suddenly, you may feel an urgent need for an empathetic ear.

You need someone who knows the real you.

And it can be painful to discover, in the middle of a crisis, that no one really does.

You may eventually find someone to confide in, but it is difficult when your first meaningful conversation with that person is suddenly filled with workplace drama, accusations, lies, and stress.

They may look at you with surprise.

You may feel as though you have to explain everything at once.

It can be uncomfortable for both of you.

That is why your support system should exist **before** the crisis.

Build While the Sky Is Blue

Do you remember the story of the three little pigs and the wolf?

The wise little pig built his house with bricks long before the wolf arrived.

He was prepared before the test came.

Your personal support network works the same way.

A strong support system is not simply a collection of people who say nice things to you.

It should include people who have demonstrated that they are present when the temperature rises - when the kitchen gets hot.

Don't wait for the hurricane to discover that you don't have reliable support.

Build while the sky is blue.

You may only need one, two, or perhaps three people who have had enough time to truly know you and genuinely care about you.

And something interesting often happens.

Good people, with no hidden motive, sometimes try to connect with us long before we ever need their help.

But we overlook them.

We're busy.

We're distracted.

We assume there will always be more time to build meaningful friendships.

Then nothing develops.

So pay attention to the good people who lean in.

Pay attention to those who:

- respected your work before anyone questioned it;
- noticed how you treated other people;
- spoke well of you when they had nothing to gain;
- encouraged you along the way; and
- were genuinely happy to see you succeed.

They didn't suddenly appear during the crisis.

They were there before it.

Thank those people.

Invest in them.

Stay connected.

Because when the workplace turns into a storm, these are the people who can become your anchors while everything around you feels unstable.

They Already Know You

When you tell a trusted person what a bully is doing and explain the stories being spread about you, you should not have to spend hours proving your character.

They already know you.

They know how you normally behave.

They know your values.

They know the patterns of your personality.

And they can often recognize when something being said about you simply doesn't sound right.

That doesn't mean they automatically agree with everything you say.

A real friend doesn't do that.

A real friend can tell you when you're wrong without trying to humiliate you.

But that same person can also listen with a heavy heart when you are carrying something serious.

You can unburden yourself without feeling as though you are presenting a case before a jury.

That matters.

Because during a bullying crisis, you may already spend enough of your time explaining yourself.

Your support system should not feel like another courtroom.

A Crisis Can Reveal Your Relationships

A bullying crisis can teach you something else:

It can reveal who the people around you really are.

It is almost like a relationship litmus test.

Someone you thought was *ride or die* may turn out to be little more than a fair-weather associate.

I've experienced that.

Maybe you have too.

You tell someone what is happening, and the response is:

"Well, that's too bad. I hope things improve for you."

Before the crisis, you believed that person cared deeply about you.

Then the storm came.

Their response told you otherwise.

That discovery can hurt.

But it can also be useful.

Sometimes a crisis exposes relationships that were never as strong as we imagined.

When that happens, don't spend enormous emotional energy trying to convince someone to care.

Adjust the relationship.

Move it farther from your inner circle.

Reserve your deepest trust for people who have demonstrated that they can carry some weight.

A crisis reveals the load-bearing relationships in your life.

Don't Count Relationships - Evaluate Them

During periods of calm, take a serious look at your relationships.

Don't merely count how many people you know.

Ask better questions:

Who listens to me without immediately dismissing what I'm experiencing?

Who knows me well enough to recognize when something is genuinely out of character for me?

Who can tell me when I'm wrong without humiliating me?

Who is happy about my success rather than threatened by it?

Who has demonstrated concern for my welfare when there was nothing in it for them?

Who could I call without hesitation if I were under serious pressure?

Then ask another important question:

Am I investing in those people too?

Support cannot be entirely one-directional.

Are you strengthening those relationships?

Are you showing up for them?

Are you listening when they are under pressure?

Or are you expecting deep loyalty from people you rarely support yourself?

That matters.

Who Would You Call Tomorrow?

Here is perhaps the most important question in this chapter:

If I discovered tomorrow that I was being targeted at work, who are the one or two people I would trust enough to call?

If your answer is *nobody*, that isn't necessarily a reason for shame.

It is information.

It is a signal.

It is a wake-up call.

Start building now.

Build while the sky is blue.

Build before the storm clouds appear.

This guide will consistently talk about strength, discernment, and wisdom.

But strength does not mean becoming so independent that you refuse the support of good people.

When a bully is trying to make you doubt yourself, remain who you are.

Stand firm.

And lean on the people who truly know you.

You don't have to face workplace bullying alone.

But you should know who has your back before you ever need them.

And when the difficult moment comes, don't be too proud to let them help you.

Open the door and let them in.

CHAPTER 5

THE MOB: GAMES, LIES, THEIR FUTURE AND YOURS

I ran a ByeBully poll on LinkedIn and asked people whether they would remain friends with a coworker who had participated in a bullying mob against them.

94% said, “No.”

I can relate to that response.

When someone who knows you - someone who may have worked beside you for years - voluntarily joins a group that means you harm, how do you trust that person again?

It can feel like having your head held beneath the water by someone you never believed you had reason to fear.

You thought they were simply in the pool enjoying the water, just like you.

Then suddenly, they are helping hold you under.

I have experienced this kind of workplace drama three times over the past thirty-five years.

Each experience was disturbing.

I was targeted.

Peers were recruited.

Empathy disappeared.

Eyes that had once looked at me warmly seemed to turn cold almost overnight.

On each occasion, people with long-standing relationships with me were influenced by someone who had decided I was a problem.

Somehow, one person managed to persuade others to view me as dangerous, difficult, or deserving of attack.

If I had not witnessed it myself, I might have struggled to believe how quickly it could happen.

Especially the lying.

People who join a mob can begin saying things about someone they previously knew well that seem completely disconnected from reality.

Can Anything Positive Come From Mobbing?

A LinkedIn member once commented on content I posted about workplace mobbing.

He wrote:

"Amazing you are positively propagating the message of embracing [the challenge of mobbing]."

His comment captures an important point of this chapter.

Being mobbed is not something I would ever recommend experiencing.

But I have learned that it is possible to endure the experience, learn from it, and eventually become stronger without allowing the bitterness of the mob to define your future.

That connects directly to the previous chapter.

Strong relationships matter.

Knowing who truly has your back matters.

And when the crowd turns against you, that social foundation may become one of the things that helps you remain grounded.

Let me explain.

How the Mob Gets Started

Mobbing often begins with someone who has influence.

It may be a coworker.

A manager.

A director.

Someone who possesses enough authority, social influence, or organizational credibility to shape how others perceive the target.

The person develops a serious problem with you.

Not simple indifference.

Something stronger.

Resentment.

Hostility.

A sense of threat.

A desire to control the narrative surrounding you.

And then something powerful happens:

They recruit.

Why?

Because one person's complaint can sound personal.

Five people's complaints can begin to sound like evidence.

An outsider may hear several people repeating similar accusations and think:

"How could all these people be wrong?"

That is part of what makes mobbing so dangerous.

Multiple voices can create the appearance of independent confirmation even when those voices originated from the same distorted narrative.

The crowd creates credibility.

Or at least the appearance of it.

Marcus and the Four

One of the worst mobbing experiences of my career involved four people.

Three of them were not close friends, but I had meaningful and positive histories with each of them.

The fourth was different.

I will call the four men John, Ted, Michael, and Robert.

John

A few years earlier, John had experienced serious financial problems.

The stress weighed heavily on him.

We were friends at work, and eventually I asked him what was happening.

He told me.

I later helped his wife find employment, and their financial situation gradually improved.

The family felt more secure.

I was genuinely happy for them.

Ted

Ted was newer to our department.

He was struggling to find his footing.

The work was challenging for him, but he had a reputation for working hard.

I took the lead in helping him adjust and making sure he felt included.

Over time, he progressed.

He became less overwhelmed.

He began feeling like he belonged.

Michael

Michael was older and adapting to some of the limitations that came with age.

But he still had value.

Our team tried to place him in situations where he could succeed and continue feeling useful.

We celebrated his wins.

Robert

Robert was different.

Robert and I had almost no history.

He was private, somewhat cold, efficient, and abrasive.

He didn't appear interested in transparency or deeper relationships.

At thirty-four years old, I didn't feel any need to obsess over his personality.

I figured:

Whatever.

Then Robert developed a close connection with a regional supervisor I will call Marcus.

Robert seemed to mirror the qualities Marcus valued.

He became Marcus's enthusiastic supporter despite showing relatively little warmth toward anyone else.

You know the person who constantly tries to remain in the boss's good graces?

That was how Robert appeared around Marcus.

Over time, Marcus and Robert became the nucleus of what developed into a mob against me.

Marcus Decides I Am a Problem

Marcus and I had interacted for approximately two years.

I treated him respectfully, but I didn't automatically agree with everything he wanted to do.

Some of his proposed actions concerned me.

I questioned them.

I didn't join his fan club.

Eventually, I appeared to become a problem in his mind.

For more than a year, Marcus undermined my reputation through rumors and accusations that I believed were false.

It became mentally, emotionally, and physically exhausting.

And then the others changed.

I couldn't believe John was participating.

Ted acted as though he didn't understand what was happening.

Michael distanced himself from me and behaved as though none of it was his responsibility.

Robert seemed to enjoy watching the situation unfold.

The group dynamic was real.

And I refused to allow serious accusations to become accepted as fact simply because several people repeated them.

When an accusation suggests unethical behavior, ignoring it completely can allow the story to grow.

Sometimes you have to challenge it.

You have to document.

You have to respond.

But there is another lesson I learned much more slowly.

I Had Become My Job

Leaving immediately wasn't simple for me.

At that stage of my life, I possessed a strong sense of loyalty that, more than twenty years later, I now believe had become misplaced.

I believed my responsibilities to the people around me were more important than my own well-being.

Then I called an older mentor.

He worked for the same company but was outside my department.

He was one of those shelter-like people I described in the previous chapter.

I could speak freely with him.

During one phone call, I told him how trapped I felt.

I was distressed by the things being said about me.

The group appeared to be trying to have me formally censured over allegations that I believed originated largely from Marcus's personal conflict with me.

My voice was filled with anguish.

"They're saying this."

"They're saying that."

My mentor listened.

Then he calmly and firmly said:

"Don't even think about those people. People can say whatever they want."

That stopped me.

It was almost a revelation.

He wasn't telling me to ignore legitimate threats to my reputation.

In fact, he later helped me understand how to present my case to headquarters if the accusations became serious enough to require formal intervention.

But he was teaching me something emotionally important:

I did not have to internalize every accusation simply because someone chose to make it.

That realization forced me to confront another problem.

Why was I allowing manipulative people to occupy so much space inside my head?

Then I recognized something about myself that humbled me.

I was no longer simply performing the responsibilities associated with my job title.

I had become my job title.

I could barely separate my identity from the role I had worked so hard to fulfill.

And that made attacks on my professional reputation feel like attacks on my entire identity.

Marcus may have recognized how deeply I cared about that role.

The accusations struck exactly where I was most emotionally invested.

Meanwhile, much of the support I once received from peers had evaporated.

The isolation made everything worse.

I was supposed to feel broken.

Alone.

Uncertain.

Fortunately, before I reached the point of feeling completely worthless, someone who truly knew me gave me the wake-up call I needed.

You Can Challenge Lies Without Living Inside Them

That conversation changed my thinking.

I realized that I could challenge serious misconduct administratively, professionally, or legally if necessary without emotionally reacting to every insult, rumor, or accusation.

Those are two different things.

You can defend yourself.

And still protect your peace.

I stopped allowing every ignorant or disloyal statement to rent space in my head.

That is what I mean when I say I eventually found something positive inside the experience of mobbing.

I became calmer.

I stopped reacting emotionally to every move.

And once I did that, I could think more clearly.

I could study what was happening rather than simply suffering through it.

When “I” Becomes “We”

One thing I began noticing was how dramatically people can change when they become part of a group.

Psychologists have long studied processes such as **deindividuation** - situations in which people become less focused on their individual identity and more absorbed into the behavior or expectations of a group.

That does not mean every person in a group loses all judgment.

But under certain conditions, people may become more willing to behave in ways they would hesitate to behave alone.

Instead of asking:

"Is this right?"

they may begin asking:

"What are the rest of us doing?"

The group's emotions and assumptions begin influencing personal judgment.

That can become dangerous very quickly.

Nobody Feels Fully Responsible

Another group process is sometimes called **diffusion of responsibility**.

When many people participate in harmful behavior, each individual may feel less personally accountable.

The thinking can become:

"I'm not the only one."

"Someone else must know the whole story."

"If this were really wrong, surely everyone wouldn't be participating."

Responsibility gets spread across the crowd.

And when responsibility is spread everywhere, no one feels as though it rests completely on them.

That is one reason ordinary people can participate in behavior they might later struggle to explain.

The transformation doesn't necessarily happen overnight.

Independent judgment can be surrendered one small step at a time.

That is one of the greatest dangers of mobbing.

It does not merely harm the target.

It can also degrade the judgment and character of the people participating in it.

In my case, I believed Marcus and Robert drove much of the hostility.

John, Ted, and Michael went along with it.

I continued resisting.

Eventually, headquarters agreed to my request for a formal internal investigation.

Separate the Mob

An independent investigator was assigned.

What he did next impressed me.

He interviewed the people involved **individually**.

Marcus was not present to influence what anyone said.

The group was separated.

And once that happened, the stories began to fall apart.

The investigator concluded that the allegations against me were unfounded.

The individuals involved were required to retract their accusations in writing.

I believed some of them deserved stronger consequences.

But that decision wasn't mine to make.

By that point, I was exhausted by the entire ordeal.

After the investigation, the investigator privately told me something I never forgot.

He believed envy had played an important role.

He pointed to the reputation I had developed over the years for connecting well with people and suggested that this had contributed to the resentment directed toward me.

You might expect that moment to have felt triumphant.

It didn't.

I wasn't jubilant.

I was tired.

Nearly burned out.

That evening, I remember thinking about how much of the previous year I had spent stressed because a small group of people resented me while others simply followed along.

Yes, my reputation had been defended.

But I had paid an enormous emotional price.

Winning Is Not Always Staying

That experience taught me something I now share frequently through ByeBully:

Sometimes people at work don't attack you because you are creating problems. They may resent the solutions you bring, the trust you have earned, or the influence you have developed.

So if you become the target of workplace bullying, defend yourself when necessary.

Document the facts.

Challenge serious lies.

Protect your reputation.

But don't turn yourself into a martyr for workplace dysfunction.

Looking back, I wish I had moved on sooner once I had done what was necessary to protect my name.

I stayed too long.

And staying longer did not mean I won more.

That distinction matters.

If the culture remains toxic, look for another opportunity.

Find a healthier place to invest your talent.

Winning a prolonged battle may feel satisfying.

But reclaiming your peace sooner can be far more valuable.

I left that environment approximately three months after the investigation ended.

Add those months to more than a year of enduring the mob.

Looking back, I still believe I stayed too long.

Protect Your Name - Then Protect Your Future

Do you understand the distinction?

Defend your integrity.

But don't sacrifice your health trying to survive indefinitely inside a toxic environment.

Eventually, you may reach a point where you have done everything reasonably available to you.

You have documented.

You have answered the allegations.

You have explained your actions.

You have challenged the most damaging lies.

You have protected your reputation as well as circumstances allow.

Then another responsibility begins:

Protecting your future.

If the environment remains unhealthy and you have a reasonable opportunity to leave, seriously consider taking it.

Afterward, resist the temptation to build your life around what the mob did to you.

Think about the people who remained loyal.

Remember the people who encouraged you.

Focus on the work that still excites you.

Invest in relationships that strengthen you.

Build somewhere healthier.

You still have a life to live.

The mob has its future.

You have yours.

Maintain your peace.

CHAPTER 6

BUILD YOUR RECORD

It never ceases to amaze me how often outsiders minimize the stealthy movements of a workplace bully.

You mention to a casual friend that something at work is making you uncomfortable, and they chastise you for overreacting.

"I think it's all in your head."

"You're acting really paranoid."

Of course, not everyone will respond this way. But these are common reactions when you let your guard down and talk to people who don't understand you - or the complexities of workplace bullying.

Sometimes their responses are even accompanied by generic advice like:

"You should just see the good in everyone."

There comes a time, however, when you need to pay attention to your intuition and to what you are actually seeing and hearing.

Stop seeking reassurance from people who simply don't understand how workplace abuse can unfold.

If it appears that someone is taking steps to get you labeled as a problem, cause you to have an emotional breakdown, or saddle you with blame for things you did not cause, pay close attention.

Focus like a laser.

When that intuitive alarm goes off, that is the moment to start documenting what you see, what you hear, what you say, and what you do.

Don't wait to record the details.

Do it before the situation becomes a full-blown crisis.

Detailed notes about what is happening in your workplace can become an enormous form of protection. They are a proactive investment that may pay dividends days, weeks, months, or, in some cases, years later.

If the mistreatment continues, your notes can help you identify patterns that would otherwise be difficult to remember or explain much later.

Don't rely on your memory. Write it down.

And don't assume your notes are worthless simply because you are unsure whether your organization will believe you.

I know some of you are thinking:

"I'm not so sure my notes will help me prove anything. I tried this before, and nothing was done to improve my situation. It just got worse."

Someone else may be thinking:

"The person I reported this to simply downplayed my concerns AND my evidence. I was never told what happened after they said they would help me. I don't know whether the bully faced any consequences. It felt like they took the bully's side and discounted everything I reported."

I understand those feelings.

Not every company has a formal process for reporting abusive behavior.

Some have formal processes that are ineffective.

Not every process is impartial.

Not every person assigned to investigate a complaint will handle it professionally or discreetly.

Your notes are still valuable.

You need to buy into the discipline of recording patterns of behavior used against you by workplace bullies.

It is a crucial practice.

I have reported various bullies throughout my career. Without my notes, it would have been extremely difficult to clearly articulate the patterns in their behavior.

My notes allowed me to cut through the skepticism of others with facts.

If someone doesn't want to believe me, I cannot control that.

But I can make sure my account is supported by factual information I recorded while the events were actually happening.

That matters.

A LOT.

My Two Rules for Reporting a Bully

I follow a strict two-step rule when I report workplace bullying to HR or an independent ethics investigator.

Rule #1: I state only what I can prove.

My report doesn't include: *"I think..."* or *"I feel..."*

I avoid speculation.

Rule #2: I only reference witnesses who will hold up under pressure.

I don't quote people simply because they like me.

I don't automatically include people who tell me they agree with what I say happened.

I look for people with a track record of integrity.

I look for the kind of people who don't bend when things become uncomfortable.

Those are my two rules when I report a bully.

Over more than 25 years, I have had to file grievances like this five times. Each time, I was able to protect my reputation because I had facts.

I didn't have to reconstruct from memory what occurred at the exact moment I needed to expose it.

What happened was already in my notes.

Here is why documentation matters.

A bully - or even a coordinated mob - can argue with your feelings and speculation all day long.

They can minimize your allegations. Twist them. Question them. Even weaponize them against you.

But documented, verifiable facts are much harder to dismantle.

And when you can support those facts with credible witnesses, your position becomes even stronger.

If you bring emotion, they can bring doubt.**If you bring proof, you give those who wish to discount you much less room to maneuver.**

Even when you initially encounter disbelief, documentation allows you to steadily chip away at the narrative being constructed against you.

Sometimes the person assigned to review your complaint may even be friendly with the person you are reporting.

That creates another layer of difficulty.

They may not want to see their friend, colleague, or prominent leader viewed negatively. They may resist your argument. They may minimize it.

But credible evidence creates a problem they cannot easily wish away.

Even after you have carefully followed these two rules, you may never receive the closure you hoped for.

You may never be told everything that happened behind closed doors.

But one of the worst positions you can put yourself in is walking into an investigation desperate to be understood or consoled while relying only on your version of events with no evidence to support it.

Your main objective is to present a credible account of what happened and protect your reputation.

That distinction has protected me more than once.

The Screenshot That Waited Eighteen Months

After months of attempts to undermine me and my role within a corporation, a supervisor slipped up and sent me a harassing message through an internal messaging system.

I took a screenshot.

I didn't respond emotionally.

I didn't need to convince anyone at that moment that the supervisor was harassing me.

I simply preserved the evidence.

The message thread demonstrated something important: **I had not provoked him.**

He had chosen to communicate with me in a hostile manner.

It was shameless.

I didn't have to deal with him regularly, and the company was large, so I saved the screenshot and moved on, hoping I would never need to use it.

Well, eighteen months later, that same individual received a promotion.

With his newfound authority, he began seeking me out and bothering me again.

This time, he got in my face.

The very next day, I filed a complaint with an external agency that investigated workplace ethics.

At the center of my complaint was the message he had sent me eighteen months earlier.

I still had the proof.

I didn't have to say: *"I remember that he harassed me eighteen months ago."*

I could show the investigators exactly what he wrote.

The screenshot identified his internal message directly to me.

Facts.

Your notes may span a considerable period before they conclusively demonstrate that a particular individual is engaging in a sustained pattern of abusive behavior against you.

That is why you must be patient.

Protect yourself. Gather evidence. Write things down.

Don't assume that because something isn't useful today, it won't be useful tomorrow.

Victor

Here is another example of a very crafty person who crossed my path.

Victor was the most nefarious workplace bully I ever had to deal with.

Victor was a tyrant.

Behind closed doors, he was verbally abusive. He was also a manager who oversaw numerous other managers.

He consistently blurred the line between following company guidelines and demonstrating personal loyalty to him.

It was sickening.

I watched grown adults lose their self-respect, groveling before Victor and seeking his approval as though they were domestic pets waiting for a pat on the head.

Victor didn't like one particular young manager.

I had met this young man.

He was nice - a little shy, but very competent.

I liked him.

Then one day, I heard that he had suddenly quit.

One day he was there. The next day he was gone.

No warning. No explanation that I knew of.

I heard rumors that Victor had boldly accused him of something without a legitimate basis and had apparently created an environment of fear almost instantly.

The young manager couldn't cope with it.

He abandoned the position and ran.

But as far as I knew, he wasn't guilty.

He was scared.

And, sadly, after he left, rumors began circulating about whether the allegations against him might actually have been true.

I never saw that manager again.

But I continued seeing Victor.

He seemed completely unscathed.

That stayed with me.

It wasn't long before Victor targeted me with an outrageous rumor.

He floated the idea that maybe I was a thief.

He didn't make the accusation dogmatically.

That was the point.

He simply created doubt.

I recognized the tactic immediately because he had done something similar months earlier with the young manager.

I confronted Victor privately and asked him, in a serious tone, what would make him say something so unfounded and damaging about me.

He mockingly told me that an audit would make the truth clear.

I looked him directly in the eyes.

"Yes," I said. **"Let's get an audit. Now."**

I managed accounts that received independent audits every 90 days, so I knew exactly what a forensic audit would examine.

What angered me was not the possibility of the audit.

It was the fact that Victor had purposely created suspicion about my integrity through insinuation.

That was the game he was playing.

The managers who worked with me began acting differently.

Some became suspicious of me for weeks.

One became convinced that Victor was justified in ordering an audit and turned very cold toward me.

He had known me for 12 years.

I told him: *"You all should do whatever you need to do."*

"You're not scared of the outcome?" he asked, giving me a strange look.

"No."

I understood what was happening.

Victor was turning up the pressure.

He was trying to make me doubt myself, just as he had apparently done with the young manager I mentioned earlier.

I could see that he operated through **manufactured doubt**.

He was insidiously good at using that tactic.

Eventually, Victor could not stretch the tension any further.

He scheduled the independent audit.

Two forensic auditors examined the accounts I had supervised for three years.

They found a discrepancy of:

Nine cents.

Nine cents.

Victor immediately stopped talking about the audit and my supposed guilt.

He never gave me the respect I deserved even after the results came back overwhelmingly in my favor.

But I didn't care.

I had documented what had been said and done.

I knew what had happened.

I was solid in my position.

Victor could not run me out through fear, gossip, or insinuation.

Months later, I had to use that information when Victor began making new allegations and harassing me again.

The notes mattered.

The record mattered.

The truth had a history.

Build Your Record Before You Need It

Take your notes. Save your notes. Use your notes. File your formal complaint when the appropriate moment comes.

Don't assume that because someone has friends in upper management, your documentation is worthless.

Bullies can appear extraordinarily bold when they believe people in positions of authority will protect them from complaints.

That can make a target feel powerless.

Don't let it break you. Don't let it immobilize you.

Remember what your documentation does for you **even before anyone else sees it.**

It keeps you articulate.

It helps you separate facts from emotion.

It allows you to reconstruct events accurately.

It prevents important details from disappearing with time.

And it gives you something concrete to work with when you eventually need to speak up about what you recorded.

Those who protect the inappropriate behavior of workplace bullies have much less room to maneuver when allegations are supported by credible evidence.

And sometimes the people who eventually review your evidence will be entirely independent of the bully.

They may be an outside agency, an ethics investigator, a corporate office, or another authority with no personal relationship to the person you are reporting.

At the very least, a bully's ally may eventually have to collaborate with someone who will not participate in favoritism.

That is why your record matters.

Build a Report That Represents You

When you eventually need to make a formal report, answer these questions clearly:

What happened?

When did it happen?

Who was involved?

What documentation supports your account?

What company policies were violated?

What steps have you already taken?

If you are reporting to a central office or outside authority, explain the situation as though the person reading your report knows absolutely nothing about the local environment or the people you will name.

Give them the facts they need to understand what happened.

And don't forget to document your **positive history** with the organization.

Include things such as:

- Awards

- Positive evaluations

- Commendations

- Accomplishments
- Customer or coworker praise
- Successful projects
- Performance metrics
- Promotions
- Increased responsibilities

Why include these details?

Because sometimes the response to your complaint will be an attempt to **rewrite you**.

Suddenly, there may be an effort to portray you as incompetent. Unstable. Dishonest. Difficult. Disruptive.

When that attempt happens, your historical record becomes important.

It shows who you are - and who you were - before the campaign against you began.

That is why documenting your own history can matter just as much as documenting the mistreatment.

Your record helps prevent someone else from rewriting you.

Recording workplace mistreatment from the beginning is one of the most practical forms of self-protection available to you.

You don't have to know exactly where the situation is going.

You don't have to know whether you will eventually file a formal complaint.

You don't even have to know whether anyone will believe you.

Document what is out of order anyway.

In my original draft of this chapter, I wrote: *"You are not creating a weapon."*

I changed that sentence.

You **ARE** creating a weapon.

It is a weapon you hope you will never have to use.

But you very well may have to.

Sorry to tell you that, but it's true.

You are creating a **weapon of self-defense**.

You are preserving your ability to speak accurately when your memory is challenged and your character is questioned.

And when someone attempts to rewrite the story, you won't have to depend on emotion.

You will have a record.

So fight back hard when you are under attack - but do it in a way that is not reckless, vindictive, or obsessed with defeating the person attacking you.

That is not the objective.

Your fighting back is protecting the person you are becoming.

And when lies come - **you will meet them with truth without blinking.**

CHAPTER 7

FROM TARGET TO PROTECTOR

There comes a point in your growth when the lessons you have learned are no longer only about protecting yourself.

You begin to recognize that similar bullying is happening to other people in the workplace.

You notice the pressure. You notice the manipulation. You notice when facts are being ignored and when an innocent person is being pushed into a corner.

And something changes.

You no longer think only: **How do I protect myself?**

You begin to think: **How can I protect this person?**

That, in my opinion, is the beginning of real leadership.

I learned this lesson long before I had developed a framework for understanding workplace bullying.

I once received a referral to contact a business about its needs for our company's products. The account belonged to another representative, but he asked me to assist.

It was a white-collar business, and my team and I had years of experience working with professionals who wanted to carefully evaluate their options. I was often given accounts that were on the fence, and representatives would ask me to help move those prospects toward a decision.

I led a small team, and our practice was simple.

We listened carefully before making recommendations. We tried to understand needs, budget, and risks.

These were best practices, and they created a great deal of satisfaction among our clients.

But something happened with this particular referral that put those principles to the test.

One of the employees accused two members of my team of intentionally placing her into the wrong combination of products. She called the person who had referred my team to the account and demanded that we change her contract.

She claimed that she had told my representatives she wanted something different from what she ultimately received. She said she had been misled.

Something about her story immediately seemed wrong to me.

If she was telling the truth, she had somehow agreed to pay roughly half of what the combination she claimed she originally wanted would have cost.

I spoke with my team members.

They told me that they had carefully reviewed her needs and had strongly recommended the more expensive combination. She resisted. She insisted on the lower-cost configuration, which was still a good option.

Then, a little more than a month later, she experienced an event that required her to use the products she had selected. The products worked, but she likely would have experienced a better outcome if she had chosen the more expensive combination she had previously rejected.

Now she wanted the contract changed after the fact.

And she said my team had intentionally made the mistake.

But they hadn't.

She was experiencing buyer's remorse, and this was not as simple as undoing a contract or saying the representatives were at fault. She wanted us to rewrite a legally binding agreement and accept responsibility for a decision she had made weeks earlier.

I offered to meet with her and her company director.

I did not tell her in advance that what she was asking us to do was something our company would not allow. I went there to establish the facts in person and to formally protect my representatives from an accusation I believed was false.

At the beginning of the meeting, she confidently presented her version of events. Her boss emphasized how serious the situation was.

I listened. I took notes. I did not become defensive. I did not become angry. I did not allow the pressure of the meeting to dictate my response.

When she finished, I calmly walked her and her boss through the facts.

I produced the signed documents. I highlighted the products she had actually purchased. I pointed out the important differences between those products and the ones she had rejected. I showed that she had acknowledged her final decision in writing.

Then I said:

"The signed documentation shows that you purchased the products you intended to purchase with full disclosure and your written acknowledgment."

Silence.

Her boss looked at me incredulously.

"So you're not going to change the contract?"

"No. I'm not. There was no error here."

That was the end of it.

The woman who had authorized the original contract knew she did not have a case. She just didn't seem to care.

I stayed anchored to the facts.

When pressure increases, your commitment to reality must not decrease. It has to increase.

Bullies often expect pressure to accomplish what evidence cannot.

But pressure is not proof. Anger is not proof. Authority is not proof. Confidence is not proof.

Facts matter. Documentation matters.

I never again accepted an assignment to do business with that client or her company.

I have no regrets.

I protected my team.

But I learned something else.

There will be moments when you have a choice. You can join the pressure being placed on an innocent person, or you can become the person who helps stop it.

That choice is a test of character.

DON'T LET AN INNOCENT PERSON BE BULLIED ON YOUR WATCH

Another situation came my way that demonstrated this in a completely different way.

Sometimes workplace bullying involves a qualified person who finally receives an opportunity they earned, only to discover that the people around them still don't believe they belong.

I once watched someone I respected push through that kind of environment.

She had overcome challenges. She had worked hard. She had qualified for a new assignment. Management had approved her credentials.

But when the opportunity finally arrived, the whispers began.

There were side comments. There was subtle undermining by management. There were questions about whether she was really ready.

The message underneath it all was clear:

We approved you...but we still have doubts about you.

At one point, a manager privately expressed concerns to me about her receiving the assignment.

I had given him some of his formative training when he was new. Now, a few years later, he was acting as though he understood nothing of what I had taught him.

Unfortunately, he had later received guidance from people who believed leadership required a heavy hand. He was no longer leading with the kindness and fairness I had encouraged.

I listened to his unfounded concerns.

Then I looked at him and responded calmly:

"She qualified, and everyone knows it. You and your team acknowledged that she fulfilled the prerequisites for the role you are now trying to deny her. You can't have it both ways, Seth."

That conversation stayed with me.

Sometimes an organization will formally approve someone for a role while informally communicating that the person does not really belong.

They give the person the credential but withhold confidence and opportunity. They surround the qualified person with doubt. They say yes on paper while saying no through their behavior.

That contradiction can wear a person down.

Some employees remain silent when they see it happening. I understand why. They don't want conflict. They don't want attention turned toward themselves. They don't want to become the next target.

But silence has a cost too.

Sometimes the most important thing you can do for someone experiencing this is simply stand beside them.

Not dramatically. Not angrily. Not with a desire to destroy anyone.

Just calmly. Consistently. Truthfully.

The woman had told me what she was experiencing, and that is how I became involved.

I supported her. I challenged the contradiction calmly. And I had every right to do so because I would be working with her in the assignment she was being denied.

Eventually, the resistance stopped.

She received the opportunity she had earned.

The ByeBully framework is primarily designed to help you protect yourself.

You are learning to reclaim your agency. You are learning self-protection. You are learning strategic awareness. You are learning healthy boundaries. You are learning social discernment. You are learning how to recognize what is happening without becoming consumed by it.

You are learning to protect the person you are becoming without depleting yourself through misdirected efforts to defeat the person - or people - attacking you.

But if you practice these principles long enough, something remarkable begins to happen.

You become stronger. You become calmer. You become harder to manipulate. You become less dependent on the approval of people who do not have your best interests at heart.

And eventually, you notice something else.

You can lift your eyes and clearly see the games being played against someone else.

You can recognize the signs. You can recognize the isolation. You can recognize attempts to manufacture uncertainty. You can recognize when someone is being pressured to doubt themselves.

And because you have learned how to stand your ground, you can help someone else stand theirs.

THIS IS WHERE LEADERSHIP BEGINS

Leadership is much more than a title or position.

Leadership means being the person in the room who refuses to participate in an injustice.

Leadership means saying: *"That's not what the facts show."*

Leadership means saying: *"She qualified for this opportunity."*

Leadership means sitting beside someone who is being isolated and letting them know they are not alone.

Leadership means stepping forward when everyone else is stepping backward.

You need to remember what it felt like when nobody stood up for you.

Recall those days when you looked around the room and wondered whether anyone understood what was happening.

Don't ever forget what it felt like to wish that just one person would say:

"I see what is happening. I'm with you."

Become that person for someone else.

That is the transformation.

You began this journey as someone trying to understand how to protect yourself.

You can finish it as someone capable of protecting others.

But understand what I am asking you to become.

I'm not asking you to become a vigilante. I'm not asking you to fight every battle that everyone else has. I'm not asking you to confront every person who behaves badly. And I'm certainly not asking you to become consumed with bullies.

The goal is bigger than that.

The goal is to become a person who can recognize injustice without becoming consumed by it, protect others without losing yourself, and use your strength to create safety instead of fear.

There will be moments when you have the opportunity to interrupt a tsunami wave of bullying before it reaches the shore where an innocent person is standing.

When that moment comes, you may be surprised by what happens.

You won't hesitate. You will know what you are seeing. You will know what matters. You will know how to remain calm.

That is what these lessons are ultimately preparing you for.

From target to protector.

From surviving to strengthening.

So learn the ByeBully framework. Practice it. Build your own strength. Know who has your back. Document what matters. Protect your agency. Establish your boundaries. Stay anchored to facts.

And when the opportunity comes to stand beside an innocent person who is being pushed down - **stand beside them.**

Don't let an innocent person be bullied on your watch.

That is leadership.

That is ByeBully.

CHAPTER 8

MASTER THE FIRE BEFORE IT BECOMES AN INFERNO

When I was in my twenties, being bullied in a workplace could leave me completely at a loss.

Part of the reason was that throughout most of my youth, I had assumed adult workplaces were supposed to be safe.

Why would my supervisor want to undermine someone they were supposed to help and guide?

Wouldn't deliberately hurting a colleague eventually hurt the bully too?

I didn't understand back then that everyone does not enter the workplace with the same assumptions about fairness, cooperation, integrity, or the consequences of their own behavior.

That naivety contributed to some of the problems I experienced in my twenties and even into my early thirties.

The other problem was that I simply did not understand the intricacies of the games workplace bullies play.

I feel a strange combination of embarrassment and pride when I admit that.

I am embarrassed that I didn't recognize some of these behaviors sooner.

But I am also proud that certain things bullies do simply never occurred to me.

It never crossed my mind to deliberately overload another person with work until they became emotionally and physically exhausted.

It never crossed my mind to spread rumors accusing a coworker of something I knew for a fact they had not done.

It never crossed my mind to slyly manipulate other people into questioning someone else's character or competence based on false allegations.

The list could go on.

If you need a refresher on some of the most common signs that a target may be experiencing workplace bullying, review the fourteen warning signs in Appendix A at the end of this guide.

Years later, I understand the mechanics of workplace bullying behavior far better than I once did.

Am I an expert on bullies?

I hesitate to answer that with a simple yes.

I don't study these behaviors because I want to become fascinated with bullies. And I don't study them because I want people to view me as an expert.

I study these behaviors because I want to understand enough to neutralize their ability to damage me or someone else.

That distinction is important.

ByeBully is not about becoming better at fighting dangerous people.

It is about becoming better at protecting yourself from them so you can continue to grow.

See the Sparks Early

Think about the beginning of a forest fire.

A fire rarely begins as a massive inferno.

It begins with something small.

Dry twigs. Dry leaves. Brush. Kindling.

Then something provides the spark.

If the fire is discovered early enough, it can sometimes be contained before it spreads uncontrollably through a forest - or even into a neighborhood.

There may still be damage.

But early detection and intervention can prevent total devastation.

That is the mindset I want you to develop about workplace bullying directed at you.

When a workplace bully begins constructing a campaign against you, don't delay taking protective steps.

If you wait too long, your entire professional life can feel as though it is **ON FIRE**.

Look for the first sparks.

And remember: the objective is not to stand in the middle of the forest trying to fight the arsonist's handiwork with your bare hands.

The objective is to recognize what is happening. Protect yourself. Preserve evidence. Make wise decisions. Interrupt the spread of the flames while they are still small.

That is the purpose of the ByeBully framework.

It helps you understand what is happening well enough that another person's campaign does not completely destroy your professional life, your reputation, your confidence, or your future.

This is much more than a traditional anti-bullying guide.

You do **NOT** need to go toe-to-toe with a bully.

In fact, I don't encourage people to fight dangerous people in the same way those people are trying to fight them.

I want targets to use their minds.

Perception. Strategic thinking. Discernment.

Develop the ability to recognize what is happening while there is still time to influence the outcome.

Bullies can be unreasonable. They can be manipulative. They can lie. And some have no intention of playing fairly.

You cannot build your entire strategy around the assumption that they will suddenly become reasonable because you explained yourself well enough.

Instead, build your strategy around what **you** can control.

And I am not talking about an ordinary disagreement over a parking space.

This isn't about someone eating the piece of cake you were saving in the breakroom refrigerator.

Workplace bullying is much more serious than that.

The Meeting I Refused to Walk Into Blindly

I was in my mid-thirties when an older manager from another department approached me with a strange request.

He told me that he and another manager wanted to meet with me about my supposedly meddling in the affairs of their department.

I was stunned.

I had no idea what he was talking about.

The tone of the request was menacing and arrogant.

I asked him what on earth he meant.

He explained that a worker in his department had told him I had encouraged her to complain about the way he supervised his team.

That was **NOT** what happened.

Several weeks earlier, I had encountered that worker completely by coincidence. We weren't even at the workplace. We saw each other on the street.

She was a friend, so we greeted each other and began talking. She told me she was concerned about something happening in her department.

I asked whether her manager knew about it because what she described sounded unusual and troubling.

She said she didn't think he knew.

I encouraged her to tell him.

That was it.

Now, only a few weeks later, I was being summoned to what appeared to be a formal meeting to answer for something I had not done.

I saw a **BIG red flag**.

Instead of walking blindly into that meeting, I reached out to a much more experienced director who had been with the company for decades.

I asked him: *"What's the best response to this?"*

His advice was simple.

"Have them put their request in writing, with details about what the meeting is supposedly about."

So that is exactly what I did.

I formally requested that they put their concerns in writing.

They did.

And that changed everything.

My colleague then advised me to forward their written response to the headquarters of our organization, which oversaw both departments.

I did.

A few weeks later, headquarters responded.

They wrote that the meeting was unnecessary.

That was the end of it.

Those managers stopped trying to pursue the matter with me.

Think about what happened.

I didn't have to win an argument. I didn't have to confront them dramatically. I didn't insult them. I didn't try to expose every motive I suspected was behind the situation.

Most importantly, I did **not** walk into a nonsensical closed-door meeting and simply hope that my ability to reason with unreasonable people would somehow protect me from whatever might happen afterward.

I slowed the situation down.

I asked questions.

I sought wise counsel.

I created a written record.

And then I moved the matter into a forum where the situation could be evaluated by people who functioned much like our HR department.

That was ByeBully in action before I ever had a name for it.

Looking back, I can see the move much more clearly now.

A narrative was being constructed about me brick by brick.

But it had no foundation.

If I had simply walked into that meeting, the two managers who were trying to call me to account would have controlled the environment.

Instead, a wise person told me to make them put the premise for that meeting in writing.

They did.

And their own words became part of the record.

That became my protective advantage.

I later learned that those managers were themselves being influenced by another supervisor with greater authority.

There were additional layers to the situation that I could not see at the beginning.

But I had protected myself.

Because I did not walk blindly into the situation, it never became the wildfire it might otherwise have become.

That is the lesson.

Something smelled wrong.

I paid attention.

And instead of becoming obsessed with defeating anyone, I concentrated on protecting my future.

That distinction is one of the most important lessons in this entire guide.

Protect Yourself Before the Fire Spreads

Many people are eventually forced to deal with workplace situations that have already become devastating.

By the time they fully recognize what is happening, the fire is roaring and out of control.

I don't sit in judgment of those people.

Sometimes circumstances are extraordinarily difficult. Sometimes the bully has tremendous power. Sometimes the target has been deliberately isolated. Sometimes the damage has already been done.

But I also know that there are situations in which earlier recognition of the warning signs could have changed the entire trajectory.

There can be a window of opportunity to short-circuit a bully's campaign.

It may be small. It may be uncomfortable. It may require courage.

But sometimes it exists.

The earlier you recognize the sparks, the more options you may have.

Does that mean anyone who understands workplace bullying is guaranteed to overcome the games of a bully?

Absolutely not.

There are no guarantees.

Understanding the game does not give you control over another person's behavior.

But it can give you greater control over your own response.

And that is what matters.

Remember the forest.

The arsonist may still have a match. You may not be able to control the wind. You may not be able to control the dry conditions. You may not even be able to prevent every spark.

But if you recognize what is happening early enough, you can begin protecting the forest.

You can identify the kindling. You can document the ignition. You can create distance. You can seek help. You can preserve evidence. You can refuse to walk blindly into traps.

That is what I want you to take with you from this guide.

Don't become obsessed with the bully.

Become more aware. Become more observant. Become more strategic. Become harder to manipulate.

Know who has your back. Establish healthy boundaries. Document what matters. Protect your reputation. Protect your agency. Protect your future.

And when you see the first spark - **don't wait for the inferno.**

CHAPTER 9

TRANSFORMATION

You Will Not Remain the Same

You cannot remain exactly as you were if you are going to successfully deal with a bully and their tactics.

I do not say that lightly.

You will have to make changes. You will have to make adjustments.

And I am not saying this because I assume you, the reader, are weak or deficient.

Quite the opposite.

I am saying it because abusive people can force us into situations we were never prepared in advance to face.

When that happens, experience changes us. Knowledge changes us. Awareness changes us.

And if we use those experiences wisely, we can become stronger without becoming bitter.

A picture often comes to my mind.

Imagine the feeling of suddenly losing your balance.

You feel yourself beginning to fall.

Most people instinctively reach out. They quickly look for something stationary to grab. A wall. A railing. A piece of furniture. Maybe even another person standing nearby.

Anything that can stop the fall.

Being targeted by a bully can feel very similar.

Except the feeling of instability does not disappear in a few seconds.

It can continue for weeks. Months. Sometimes much longer.

Something unexpected has happened, and your world suddenly feels upside down.

You don't understand why this person is attacking you. You don't understand why others are willingly participating. You don't understand why the bully is lying, undermining you, manipulating perceptions, or trying to turn people against you.

Suddenly, the ground beneath you no longer feels as stable as it once did.

So instinctively, you reach for something solid.

Anything.

The problem is that when we lack experience with bullies, we often do not know what to reach for.

We may initially trust the wrong people. We may assume fairness has to prevail automatically. We may believe that an authority figure will immediately recognize what is happening if we simply explain it clearly enough. We may find ourselves trying to reason with someone who has no interest in being reasonable.

We reach for something firm - and it feels as though there is nothing there.

So we keep falling.

The suddenness of the attack catches us off guard. The viciousness surprises us. The coordination of the people participating can be shocking. The undermining can even make us question ourselves.

And that is often when we realize something important:

We cannot remain exactly as we are if we are going to get through this.

We have to begin a new journey.

You Are Not Becoming Obsessed With Bullies

If you want to preserve your peace, you cannot become obsessed with bullies.

The goal is not to spend the rest of your life fighting them.

The goal is to make sure workplace bullying does not derail your life.

You may lose smaller battles early on. You may make mistakes. You may misjudge a few well-meaning people. You may feel overwhelmed.

And the bully may continue throwing painful curves at you even after you have confronted what is happening.

But something begins to change as you gain experience - even during the same battle.

You slowly become more determined. More resolute. More aware.

You begin learning what works. You begin recognizing patterns. You start seeing warning signs you once missed. You become better at protecting yourself.

And eventually, there can come a line of demarcation.

A moment when something changes inside you.

You have had enough.

Not in the sense that you give up.

In the sense that you stop being intimidated.

You are not scared anymore.

You may still become tired.

But it is a different kind of tired.

You are no longer exhausted in the way the bully hoped you would become.

You are **NOT** beaten down.

And you are **NOT** surrendering.

Instead, you stop giving their behavior so much power over your emotions.

The campaign of terror the bully and their cronies once waged against you no longer feels overwhelming.

Eventually, it begins to feel more like a nuisance.

Your exasperation starts outweighing your fear.

And one day you may hear yourself say:

"I am sick and tired of this."

That moment can be transformational.

Because fear is no longer controlling your decisions.

The next time someone attempts to bully you, you may not react the way you did the first time.

Instead of instantly feeling frightened, you may internally roll your eyes.

You may even have to stop yourself from saying something sarcastic.

You may think:

"I've been to this rodeo before."

That does not mean you become careless.

It means you are no longer inexperienced.

You recognize the game.

And because you recognize it, you are less likely to become a pawn on somebody else's chessboard.

The Kind of Tired Bullies Want

Bullies want you to become tired.

But they want a very specific kind of tired.

They want the beaten-down kind.

They want you emotionally exhausted. They want you to lose your energy. They want you questioning yourself. They want you to lose your will to continue.

They want you so worn down that you no longer have enough strength to protect yourself, much less challenge what is happening.

But experience can change that.

Even experience gained in the middle of your first serious workplace bullying event can begin changing you.

As you gain experience dealing with strange and destructive behavior, you become less vulnerable to the fatigue the bully is trying to create.

You begin conserving your energy by becoming more strategic and less reactive.

You learn that you do not have to win every argument. You learn that you do not have to convince every person. You learn that you do not need to tell your business to random people who cannot help you.

You begin concentrating your energy where it matters.

And gradually, something remarkable happens.

You are no longer the same person the bully originally targeted.

That transformation may surprise people who knew you during your most difficult period.

They remember the frightened person. The confused person. The inexperienced person.

But now they see someone different.

You have become stronger. More peaceful. More discerning. More difficult to manipulate.

You have developed agency.

You have become more intentional.

The bully may still be the same person.

But you are not.

And that changes everything.

The Battle That Changed Me Again

I experienced another level of this transformation during a long and drawn-out battle with a bully that lasted several years.

I was targeted by a highly manipulative person who lied with impunity.

The situation was serious.

Walking away was not a practical option. And my adversary was not reasonable. A fair negotiation was out of the question.

For quite a while, the person assigned to evaluate the accusations against me appeared to side with my adversary.

By this point in my life, I was already experienced in dealing with bullies. I was determined to stay the course.

But experience did not make the situation easy.

It challenged me.

I did not feel fear.

I felt anger.

And I worked extremely hard to keep that anger under control.

I shared my deepest feelings only with a few close confidants.

I understood that I could not allow my emotions to become another weapon that could be used against me.

During that ordeal, I rose to a higher level of strength.

But I also discovered something about myself.

There was still an area where I needed to grow.

I was still somewhat susceptible to taunting.

That experience taught me another lesson.

A bully can be lying, but if supposedly independent evaluators fail to uncover those lies immediately, the bully may become even more confident.

They repeat a fictional story. Then they add to it. Then they modify it.

And if the situation continues long enough, something interesting begins to happen.

The lies become harder to remember.

People who invent stories have to keep track of details that never actually happened.

Over time, inconsistencies begin to emerge.

Details change. Current claims contradict earlier claims. Someone who once claimed to know very little may later reveal information they supposedly did not know months earlier. Someone who portrayed themselves as helpless may begin displaying an extraordinary level of aggression.

And gradually, time begins doing something important.

It makes patterns more visible.

Even to bystanders.

That is one reason your transformation into someone who remains calm and stays the course can be so powerful.

When a situation drags on, truth gets more opportunities to reveal itself.

The bully may have successfully portrayed themselves as the victim for months.

But over time, people may begin noticing cracks in the story.

People who once accepted the bully's narrative without reservation begin asking questions.

People assigned to reach official conclusions begin noticing inconsistencies.

While the bully becomes trapped in the web of their own games, you continue moving forward.

Your close associates may even begin telling you that you seem unaffected.

And perhaps that is because you truly are becoming less affected.

You have reached a point where you understand something:

Your life is bigger than the bully's campaign against you.

You are no longer allowing their behavior to determine the direction of your life.

Become Stronger Without Becoming Like Them

Embrace that transformation.

You are becoming someone who can recognize the game without being controlled by it.

Someone who can protect themselves without losing their humanity.

Someone who can understand manipulation without becoming manipulative.

Someone who can experience conflict without allowing conflict to consume their identity.

Eventually, bullies may begin to feel less like powerful monsters and more like nuisance insects.

Annoying? Yes.

Potentially harmful? Absolutely.

Something you should ignore? No.

But they are no longer giants.

They are no longer controlling the direction of your life.

They are no longer determining who you are.

I hope you are already beginning to feel this transformation.

Perhaps you are starting to recognize behaviors you once found confusing. Perhaps you are becoming more careful about who you trust. Perhaps you are developing

stronger boundaries. Perhaps you are beginning to document what happens instead of simply hoping other people will notice. Perhaps you are beginning to understand the importance of social discernment. Perhaps you are becoming more intentional about protecting yourself.

These changes may seem small at first.

But small changes accumulate.

Experience accumulates.

Wisdom accumulates.

And eventually, you look back and realize:

You are not the same person you were when this journey began.

You did not become cruel. You did not become manipulative. You did not become obsessed.

You became more aware. More intentional. More discerning. More difficult to control.

And you learned how to protect the person you are becoming without losing the person you already were.

That is transformation.

CHAPTER 10

MAKE YOUR MOVE

The ByeBully Framework is built around three essential abilities.

First: Learn to detect the game.

Develop the insight to recognize the signs of workplace bullying early.

Learn to see what may be happening before you become trapped inside confusion, fear, and manufactured uncertainty.

Second: Disrupt the false narrative.

When someone attempts to create a damaging narrative about you, learn to think strategically about when - and how - to respond.

Not every incidental insult deserves your attention.

Not every ridiculous rumor deserves a battle.

But when you see someone aggressively constructing a false narrative that could cause real damage, you may need to address it.

Third: Stand firm, then move on.

Protect yourself. Disrupt what needs to be disrupted. Refuse to lose yourself in the process.

Then live your life.

That is the ByeBully Framework.

And I can confidently tell you that these are not merely theories.

I have lived this framework for years after spending many more years learning it.

There was a time when I did not understand how to cope with bullying inside an organization.

I certainly did not understand the first step of this framework.

I couldn't detect much of anything.

I learned through pain. I learned through observation. And I learned through the advice of wise people who genuinely cared about my welfare.

Step One: Learn to See the Game Early

There was an occasion when a regional leader repeatedly attempted to undermine me.

His efforts were unsuccessful.

Eventually, he began working through two particularly devious people I had to interact with every day.

What was interesting was that their attempts to trap me failed.

I began noticing their behavior. I saw the little movements. I noticed when they were being sneaky.

And once I recognized what they were attempting to do, I was ready.

Their efforts suddenly stopped.

They slithered away like snakes disappearing beneath a rock.

Soon afterward, both of them were gone.

Later, a colleague of mine - a person with decades of experience and a keen understanding of organizational politics - pulled me aside.

He told me he believed the regional leader had been trying to set me up.

He thought the sudden departure of those two associates, both of whom had been close to that leader, suggested that something disruptive had happened behind the scenes.

I told my friend that I already knew I was being set up.

I was simply going to let the situation play out.

I remember that experience well because the regional leader seemed content to keep me guessing.

But I wasn't guessing anymore.

I understood what I was seeing.

His agents had failed.

And now they had become liabilities.

If they continued trying to undermine me and were exposed, there was too much of a paper trail connecting their actions to what had been happening.

That could create additional problems for the person directing the effort.

So the effort changed.

Detection. Insight. Awareness.

Call it whatever you want.

It can be incredibly valuable to preserving your inner peace.

When you begin recognizing patterns of manipulation, you no longer have to spend every waking moment asking yourself: **What is happening to me?**

You are no longer simply reacting.

You are observing. You are thinking. You are deciding.

Sometimes you are just taking notes - and continuing to enjoy your life.

Step Two: Disrupt the False Narrative

The second step is more strategic.

It is less passive than the first.

When you become aware that someone is attempting to create a malicious narrative about you - something designed to harm your reputation, relationships, career, or future - it may be time to act.

I experienced this personally.

A friend once called me and told me that a woman I had previously worked with was telling people that I had committed a crime.

My friend said she felt compelled to call because she did not believe the accusation and wanted to hear directly from me what had actually happened.

I was angry and exasperated at the same time.

I was in my late forties by then, so I cannot say I was shocked.

The person spreading the story was already known for unusual behavior, and by that point in my life, I had seen plenty of craziness.

I immediately confirmed that the accusation was false.

Then I called the woman who had been spreading it.

She stammered. She stumbled over her words. She was clearly uncomfortable hearing from me.

I told her what I had learned about the false accusation she was spreading.

Then I told her very clearly that she needed to stop repeating that information or I would consider formal legal steps to protect myself.

She became quiet.

She did not deny what she had done.

She also refused to tell me who had originally given her the accusation.

But something important happened.

The narrative was disrupted.

Later, I discovered who had started the original rumor.

When I confronted that person, she denied being the source.

Eventually, however, the same person attempted to create another damaging allegation.

This time, she put it in writing and filed it with a court.

I formally responded through the legal process.

I challenged the allegations. I demanded evidence. And I made it clear that I would consider appropriate counteraction if the false claims were not withdrawn.

Weeks later, they were retracted.

There was no meaningful apology.

But I did not need one.

I was not searching for sincerity.

I was protecting myself.

The false narrative had been interrupted.

And afterward, I felt peace.

Do Not React Without Thinking

This is the part of the ByeBully Framework where I most want you to use your ability to think.

People can become extremely anxious when they realize someone is constructing a harmful narrative about them.

Some go charging forward with everything they have.

They go in with guns blazing - **to kill a gnat.**

That can create problems of its own.

If you attempt to break a narrative too early, you may find your entire argument buried beneath an avalanche of denials.

Manipulative people often deny.

They deny what they said. They deny what they did. They deny what they intended.

And if you confront them before you have your facts in order, they may try to make **you** look irrational for bringing the matter up.

That is why timing matters.

Do not be too late.

But do not be too early.

Patience matters.

Allow evidence to strengthen your understanding of what is happening.

Then, when a significant event occurs, you will be in a much better position to decide what to do.

For me, there was a precipitating event.

Someone falsely claimed that I had committed a crime.

Before I confronted the person repeating it, I had confirmation that she had made the accusation to more than one individual.

At that point, I knew the matter was serious.

And I had enough information to act.

So I acted.

Not Every Battle Deserves Your Energy

For every occasion when I strongly confronted a vicious bully, there were other occasions when I simply ignored what someone was doing.

Why?

Because their efforts did not matter.

They were not creating a narrative that anyone cared about. Their behavior had no meaningful effect on my future. They were not relevant to my path.

That is something you must learn to consider.

Before responding, ask yourself:

Is what they are doing really significant?

Only you can answer that question.

But if the answer is yes - if someone is creating a narrative that could seriously damage your reputation, relationships, livelihood, or future - you may need to act decisively.

Break the narrative.

Protect yourself.

Then move on.

Because here is the truth:

It is understandable to want to eliminate every lie. Every rumor. Every piece of innuendo. Every action designed to hurt us.

But realistically, we can only do so much.

At some point, we have to decide how much energy we are willing to devote to completely defeating people who tried to harm us.

Some of them are little more than barking, toothless dogs.

And we must never forget something important:

Our goal is not to spend the rest of our lives fighting senseless people.

Our goal is to stand up.

Protect ourselves.

And then move forward.

Step Three: Live Your Life

The third step of the ByeBully Framework is simple to describe.

But it may be the most difficult to master.

Stand firm. Then move on.

Live your life.

Build better friendships. Spend time with people who are supportive and genuine. Create new experiences. Pursue your goals. Protect your peace. Experience more peace of mind and peace of heart.

I am not trying to oversimplify this step.

I know how difficult it can be.

But I want you to think about something.

How much is your peace worth?

How much are additional years of your life worth to you?

People can suffer immensely when they become obsessed with breaking every unfavorable narrative about themselves.

We can become stuck.

When we keep fighting long after the battle has stopped producing anything valuable, or when our thoughts become consumed by the people who hurt us, our lives begin revolving around the very people we are trying to escape.

And that becomes another victory for the bully.

Do not give them that victory.

Prolonged workplace bullying and severe stress can have serious human consequences.

The full cost is not always easy to see.

A person may leave a career. Lose confidence. Withdraw socially. Struggle emotionally. Lose opportunities. Or spend years trying to rebuild what was damaged.

That suffering matters even when it is not easily measured.

And that is why you cannot allow bullies to make you lose yourself while you are trying to defend yourself against them.

We need you here.

You may be one of those sensitive, thoughtful people who makes the world better.

Bullies do not get to decide who you become.

You do.

That is the heart of ByeBully.

You are learning to decode their games. Disrupt their control. And stand firm.

You do not have to become cruel like them just to protect yourself.

You do not have to become obsessed in order to defeat manipulation.

You do not have to spend the rest of your life proving something to people who have already demonstrated that they are not worthy of your energy.

See the game.

Think.

Protect yourself.

Act when action is necessary.

Ignore what does not matter.

Break the narratives that threaten your future.

Then reclaim your attention.

Reclaim your peace.

Reclaim your life.

That is the ByeBully Framework.

And now you have a choice.

You can continue living as the confused target - constantly wondering what is happening, constantly reacting, constantly allowing other people to determine where your emotional energy goes.

Or you can become something different.

Someone different.

There is still a life waiting for you.

There are still friendships waiting for you. There are still opportunities waiting for you. There are still things you have not built. Places you have not gone. People you have not met. And versions of yourself you have not yet discovered.

So do not remain frozen inside someone else's game.

Detect it.

Disrupt what matters.

Stand firm.

Then move.

Your life is still waiting.

Now go make some moves.

APPENDIX A

14 COMMON SIGNS OF WORKPLACE BULLYING

Workplace bullying does not always begin with an obvious confrontation.

Sometimes it develops gradually.

A change in treatment. A pattern of criticism. Information being withheld. A growing sense that something is wrong even though no single incident seems large enough to explain it.

One event by itself does not necessarily mean you are being bullied. But when several of these signs appear repeatedly over time, pay attention.

Look for the **pattern**.

1. You Begin Questioning Your Own Judgment

You constantly question your own judgment, wondering whether you are overreacting even though the same troubling issues continue to occur.

2. Expectations Keep Changing

Expectations change without explanation, making success feel like a constantly moving target.

3. You Are Treated Differently

You are treated differently from others in similar situations without a clear or legitimate reason.

4. Important Information Is Withheld

Important information, resources, or opportunities are selectively withheld from you.

5. Your Mistakes Are Magnified

Your accomplishments receive little recognition while your mistakes receive disproportionate attention.

6. You Become Increasingly Isolated

You begin to feel isolated from coworkers, conversations, meetings, or important decisions.

7. Small Incidents Form a Pattern

Small incidents accumulate into a consistent pattern that leaves you feeling discouraged, disadvantaged, or targeted.

8. You Are Encouraged to Doubt Your Own Memory

You are encouraged to question your memory, judgment, or perception of events.

9. You Live With Constant Uncertainty

You experience ongoing uncertainty about where you stand, what is expected of you, or whether your work will suddenly be criticized.

10. Managing Personalities Begins Replacing Your Actual Work

You spend more energy managing personalities and avoiding conflict than performing the work you were hired to do.

11. Your Confidence Begins to Decline

Your confidence gradually declines even though your abilities and work ethic have not changed.

12. A Negative Narrative Appears Around You

Other people begin treating you according to a negative narrative that seems to have developed without your knowledge.

13. You Feel Compelled to Document Everything

You find yourself carefully documenting conversations and decisions because your version of events is frequently challenged or dismissed.

14. The Behavior Continues Over Time

The behaviors targeting you are repeated over weeks or months rather than being an isolated disagreement or incident.

Pay Attention to the Pattern

One difficult coworker interaction is not necessarily workplace bullying.

One disagreement is not necessarily workplace bullying.

One poor management decision is not necessarily workplace bullying.

The warning comes when behaviors begin connecting.

You notice repetition. You notice escalation. You notice that several of these signs are appearing at the same time.

That is when you should stop dismissing what you are seeing.

Observe carefully. Document what matters. Talk to people you genuinely trust. And begin thinking strategically about how to protect yourself.

You do not need to panic.

You need to **pay attention**.

The earlier you recognize the pattern, the more options you may have.

That is the purpose of learning the signs.

Detect the game before you become trapped inside it.

BYEBULLY

Protect the person you are becoming.

ByeBully.org