

Understanding Workplace Bullying



An HR training guide for recognizing behavior, responding with care, and building accountability.

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Recognize. Respond. Follow through.

Use clear definitions to understand what is happening. Use observable behaviors to decide what needs to change. Keep responsibility for a safe workplace with the organization.

Based on The Ordinary Professor transcript supplied by Dr. Peagram, with additional HR practice tools, fictional scenarios, and facilitator guidance.

Includes a 60-minute training plan, response scripts, an intake worksheet, case discussions, and a 30–60–90-day accountability tool.

Educational guidance. Adapt to your policies and applicable law; this guide does not replace legal advice or a qualified investigation.

How to use this guide

Designed for HR professionals, people managers, and leaders. Participants should leave able to describe a concern, respond respectfully, and identify the next responsible action.

60-minute session	Facilitator focus
0–5 min Set the conditions	Explain reporting channels, confidentiality limits, and the option to pass. Use fictional examples; do not solicit public disclosures.
5–15 min Understand behavior	Review the definitions and power lens on pages 3–4. Ask: What happened, and who controlled access or consequences?
15–25 min Practice responding	Use the response process and scripts on pages 5–6. Practice a two-minute intake in pairs.
25–40 min Apply judgment	Discuss cases on page 7. Separate facts, assumptions, questions, and immediate actions.
40–50 min Build follow-through	Review the intake worksheet and accountability plan on pages 8–9.
50–60 min Check and commit	Use the knowledge check on page 10. Each participant names one behavior they will change.

Before training

Insert your primary and alternate reporting contacts below. Confirm who handles concerns about senior leaders, HR staff, or the usual reporting contact. Arrange private follow-up for participants who raise a concern.

Primary reporting channel / contact:

Alternate reporting channel / contact:

Facilitator boundary: If a real concern emerges, thank the person and arrange a private conversation through the appropriate process. Do not investigate the allegation in the training room.

Understand the behavior

The transcript uses a memorable bullying lens: **power + repeated behavior + intent to harm**. For HR practice, examine context and impact too. A person does not need to prove intent, confront someone, or wait for repetition before reporting.

Term	Working meaning and workplace example
Bullying	A harmful pattern of intimidation, humiliation, exclusion, or undermining, often involving unequal power. Example: repeatedly ridiculing an employee while withholding information they need.
Teasing and humor	Humor may be mutually welcome, careless, or deliberately hurtful. Laughter is not proof of comfort, especially when a leader is involved. Stop unwanted behavior and assess context.
Gossip and rumors	Gossip discusses people who are absent; rumors circulate unverified claims. Sharing someone's private circumstances or unsupported accusations can harm trust and reputation.
Relational aggression	Using relationships or group influence to damage someone's inclusion or standing. Example: pressuring colleagues to exclude a coworker from work discussions.
Digital bullying	Harmful behavior through chats, email, video meetings, or other digital channels. Example: repeated mocking posts or coordinated exclusion from work channels.
Conflict	A disagreement over needs, views, or decisions. Assess whether both people can participate safely; repeated intimidation is not simply a communication mismatch.
Reasonable management	Clear expectations, specific feedback, fair work allocation, and proportionate accountability can be appropriate. Examine how decisions are communicated and applied.

Do not wait for the perfect label

An isolated insult, threat, or discriminatory comment may still require immediate action. Address the behavior even when you have not determined whether it is bullying.

Look for power and patterns

Power is more than a job title

In the transcript, **social currency** describes influence gained through status, relationships, or group membership. A peer may control access to a respected group, critical knowledge, or decision-makers. A group can also target a supervisor.

Assess	Questions to ask
Behavior	What words, actions, omissions, or messages are reported? Describe conduct rather than labeling someone a “bully.”
Pattern	When did it start? What repeated, changed, or escalated? Are there related incidents involving others?
Power and access	Who controls schedules, assignments, information, introductions, visibility, or group acceptance? Can the person disagree without fearing consequences?
Impact and context	What happened to the person’s work, access, participation, or sense of safety? Were expectations clear and consistently applied?
Evidence and intent	What records and firsthand accounts exist? What explanations need testing? Intent is relevant context, but lack of an admission does not settle the concern.

Keep legal harassment separate from the training labels

Under U.S. federal EEO law, unlawful harassment involves protected-characteristic-based conduct or certain retaliatory conduct, with specific legal standards. Offensive conduct may be unlawful when it is a condition of continued employment or sufficiently severe or pervasive. Not every instance of bullying meets that test. [1]

Organizational standards may prohibit harmful conduct before a legal threshold is reached. Have qualified HR or legal counsel assess applicable federal, state, local, and international requirements. Do not use a single “harassment umbrella” as a legal classification.

Respond: a practical HR pathway

1 Receive the concern

Listen without debating labels or promising an outcome. Accept delayed, witness, and incomplete reports. Ask what happened and what the person needs to work safely.

2 Assess immediate needs

Address threats, immediate danger, and urgent safety concerns through emergency or security procedures. Consider interim protections without automatically burdening the reporting employee.

3 Document and preserve

Record specific conduct, dates, context, witnesses, and available records. Separate what was observed, what was reported, and what remains unknown. Preserve relevant records through approved processes.

4 Route for impartial review

Follow policy and identify a qualified, impartial reviewer. Address conflicts of interest, including concerns involving HR or senior leadership. Give the responding person a fair opportunity to address allegations.

5 Decide and act

Base findings on evidence and the applicable policy standard. Match corrective action to the findings, severity, pattern, and risk. Document the reasons and responsibilities.

6 Follow up and monitor

Communicate appropriate process updates without disclosing others' confidential details. Check whether conduct stopped, work access was restored, and retaliation concerns emerged. Reassess when needed.

Three safeguards at every step

Share details only as needed to address the concern; do not promise absolute secrecy. Do not require direct confrontation or a joint meeting. Set and track a specific next contact date.

Words that help in the moment

Situation	Suggested language
Receiving a report	"Thank you for telling me. Please walk me through what happened. What do you need right now to feel safe doing your work?"
Explaining confidentiality	"I will limit sharing to those who need to help address this. I cannot promise absolute confidentiality. I can explain the process and keep you informed."
Clarifying facts	"What did you observe directly? What did someone else tell you? Do you recall the words used, who was present, and when it happened?"
Interrupting harmful humor	"Let's pause. That comment is personal. Please bring the discussion back to the work."
Interrupting a rumor	"I don't have verified information, and I won't pass that along. If there is a workplace concern, let's use the appropriate reporting channel."
Supporting a colleague	"I noticed you were cut off several times. Would you like support documenting or reporting what happened?"
Setting expectations	"Feedback needs to identify the work issue and the expected change. Public insults and personal jokes are not acceptable."
Closing an intake	"Here is the next step and the person responsible. I will contact you by [date]. Please tell us about new incidents or changes in how you are treated."

Shift the "revolving door" pattern

The transcript's revolving-door metaphor describes hearing information and immediately repeating it. Pause before passing it on: Is it verified? Is it necessary for my role? Is this the right channel? Replace rumor-sharing with specific, accurate recognition of someone's work.

Important distinction: Reporting a concern, seeking support, or engaging in protected workplace discussions is not automatically gossip. Do not use civility rules to silence those activities.

Practice with workplace cases

Fictional exercises. For each: identify the behavior, list missing facts, choose an immediate step, and define what you would monitor. Avoid deciding a finding from a short scenario alone.

Case 1 | “Everyone knows I’m joking”

A manager calls one employee “the slow one” in weekly meetings. The employee laughs along but later tells HR they dread presenting. The manager says no one asked them to stop.

Discussion and facilitator notes

Look at repetition, authority, public humiliation, and work impact. Laughter does not establish consent. Receive the report, preserve relevant records, and arrange a fair review. Do not require the employee to confront the manager first.

Case 2 | The invisible invitation list

A well-connected employee tells colleagues a new hire “cannot be trusted.” The new hire is left out of project chats and misses deadlines because decisions are shared only in those chats.

Discussion and facilitator notes

Consider relational aggression, rumor-spreading, and control of work information. Check chat access, invitations, decision records, and individual accounts. Restore necessary work access while reviewing what happened; monitor informal exclusion afterward.

Case 3 | Accountability or bullying?

A supervisor privately reviews three missed deadlines, explains the expected standard, asks about barriers, and schedules weekly check-ins. The employee describes the feedback as bullying.

Discussion and facilitator notes

Receive the concern respectfully. These facts may reflect reasonable management, but check tone, consistency, workload, resources, and whether standards differ across employees. The employee’s label alone neither proves nor disproves misconduct.

HR intake & incident worksheet

Complete during or after a private conversation. Missing details do not prevent a report. Store completed forms with restricted access under your retention policy; this is not a public team worksheet.

Report received by / date / reporting channel:

People involved and roles / preferred contact method:

Specific words or actions; date, time, location, or digital channel:

Firsthand observations vs. information from others; what remains unknown:

Prior or related incidents / frequency / power or access concerns:

Witnesses / relevant messages or records / secure evidence location:

Impact on work / immediate safety or support needs:

Assigned reviewer / next step / owner / next update date:

Before closing: Explain confidentiality limits, reporting alternatives, preservation expectations, and how to report retaliation. Avoid recording unnecessary medical or personal detail.

Turn findings into sustained change

Use this tool after appropriate review. Coaching can support behavior change; training attendance or a coaching session alone does not show that the problem is resolved. Serious or repeated misconduct may require other corrective action.

Checkpoint	Actions and evidence to review
Initial plan	Name the specific behavior to stop and the replacement behavior. Assign an owner and reviewer. Clarify consequences under policy and any interim safeguards.
30 days	Check implementation and early recurrence. Review relevant work records and separate check-ins. Confirm equal access to information, assignments, and meetings.
60 days	Look for consistency under pressure and across settings. Check whether exclusion shifted into chats, social interactions, or assignments. Adjust support or action if needed.
90 days	Assess sustained change and remaining risk. Decide whether monitoring should continue, expand, or close, with documented reasons and a route to reopen concerns.

These are planning checkpoints, not waiting periods or legal deadlines. Act sooner if concerns continue or escalate.

Retaliation monitoring

Compare workload, schedules, reporting lines, assignments, access, and treatment before and after a report. Ask privately about pressure to withdraw, exclusion, threats, or negative references. Review legitimate business reasons rather than assuming every change is retaliatory. Legal protections depend on the activity and applicable law. [2]

Behavior to stop → observable replacement behavior:

Evidence of change / reviewer / review dates:

If behavior recurs, who acts and how?

Keep responsibility with leadership: Do not require an affected employee to repair the team, coach the person reported, or validate the organization's success.

Prevent, check, and keep learning

A prevention checklist for HR

- Define prohibited conduct with concrete examples.
- Provide accessible reporting options outside the normal reporting line.
- Train managers to interrupt harm and route concerns promptly.
- Review who receives information, opportunities, and recognition.
- Track repeat concerns and response quality—not just completion rates.
- Make truthful, specific appreciation a routine team practice.

Quick knowledge check

1. Must an employee prove intent before reporting?
2. Does laughing at a supervisor's joke prove it was welcome?
3. Is every uncomfortable performance conversation bullying?
4. Does completed training prove sustained behavior change?

Answer key: 1. No—receive and assess the concern. 2. No—power and context matter. 3. No—examine fairness, delivery, and facts. 4. No—look for observable change over time.

Source notes & further reading

Core teaching concepts adapted from the supplied *The Ordinary Professor* transcript by Dr. Kortney Peagram: power, intention, repetition, teasing, gossip, rumors, relational aggression, and social currency. HR workflows, scripts, worksheets, and fictional exercises were developed for this guide.

[1] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, *Harassment*. Federal legal context.
www.eeoc.gov/harassment

[2] U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, *Enforcement Guidance on Retaliation and Related Issues*.
Read the EEOC retaliation guidance

[3] Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, *Bullying in the Workplace*. Further reading on behavior and reasonable management; Canadian legal context differs from U.S. law.
www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/psychosocial/bullying.html

External resources reviewed October 14, 2026. Adapt guidance to your jurisdiction and current organizational policies.

Build a more respectful workplace

For workplace training, remediation coaching, and support with difficult conversations, connect with Dr. Kortney Peagram.

www.peagramconsulting.com