

# Episode 280: Episode 281: Toxic Workplaces and Workplace Bullying



**Intro: [00:00:00.96]** Welcome to the Workology Podcast, a podcast for the disruptive workplace leader. Join host Jessica Miller-Merrell, founder of Workology.com, as she sits down and gets to the bottom of trends, tools and case studies for the business leader, H.R. and recruiting professional who is tired of the status quo. Now, here's Jessica with this episode of Workology.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:00:26.40]** Welcome to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE the HR Exam. Workplace bullying is on the rise. While statistics vary, some studies reveal that nearly all of American workers have been affected by workplace bullying as a target or a witness to abusive behavior against a coworker. It creates a toxic work environment, leads to high employee turnover rates and costs. It costs companies billions of dollars each year. Today, I'm joined by Catherine Mattice Zundel. She's a strategic H.R. consultant and coach and trainer who partners with clients to replace toxic workplace behaviors and cultures with positive, respectful ones. She founded Civility Partners in 2008 as a result of working in her own toxic environment, not herself, but experienced bullying. She's written three books, one of which Ken Blanchard called the most comprehensive and valuable handbook on the topic of workplace bullying. Catherine is active in the International Association for Workplace Bullying and Harassment and is one of the four founding members of the National Workplace Bullying Coalition, a nonprofit organization focused on ending workplace bullying. Catherine, welcome to the Workology Podcast.

**Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:01:48.69]** Thanks for having me.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:01:51.33]** Let's start with your background. I talked about how you founded Civility Partners because you had worked in a toxic environment. Can you tell us more about that?

**Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:02:00.54]** Sure. I was the director of human resources at an organization and there was another director there who definitely engaged in toxic behavior. I would consider it bullying behavior. He was an uber micromanager, even over people like me who did not report to him. I thought he was insubordinate to the president of the organization. He definitely had lots of turnover in his department. And it did create a toxic environment for me as the director of H.R. because I found myself stepping in constantly and ended up being the buffer for his behavior and how he was treating everyone else. I spent a lot of time talking to the president about his behavior. And hey, President, could you address it? You know, and the president, I think was fairly conflict avoidant and would not and tell me things like that's just how he is. Don't let it bother you. And so I you know, I was managing this as an H.R. professional, but then also felt attacked by him. So I was also I've also experienced bullying as a target. And between just kind of being caught in the middle of it all. It definitely was pretty exhausting and definitely affected my work product and

quality of work and all of that. And during that time, though, I mustered up enough energy to start getting a master's degree and ended up doing all of my academic research in grad school on workplace bullying. So I, I joke that I have a master's degree in workplace bullying.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:03:36.00] Isn't that so interesting how like bad managers, you can turn a bad experience into a really good one and that now you're helping others navigate through similar types of situations with similar types of people that you experience? I love that.

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:03:53.19] Thank you. Thank you.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:03:55.14] I know there isn't a single answer from a legal perspective, but can you describe for us what workplace bullying is?

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:04:02.91] Sure. So often it is stated that it's the lower level form of harassment and then H.R. I hate this phrase. It doesn't rise to the level of harassment. Actually, harassment and bullying are the same exact behaviors. If you read the definition of harassment on the EEOC website, for example, it describes bullying, that it's feels like a condition of employment and that a reasonable person would consider it intimidating, hostile and abusive. So the only difference really is that if it's equal opportunity bullying, then that's essentially legal. But if it's bullying aimed at somebody due to their protected characteristic, then we call that harassment and it is illegal. So that's the simple answer. But I'll give a little bit more that, you know, the research is very clear that workplace bullying is about a psychological power imbalance, that, again, it's abusive and it's creating this intimidating and hostile environment. It definitely has to be repeated and pervasive, just like with harassment where we're not talking about somebody was rude and now we're all saying you're a bully. We're talking about ongoing behavior. And ultimately, it causes a lot of psychological and physical harm to individuals as they're depressed and burnt out. And actually, the research is very clear that you can develop PTSD from being bullied. And I'll add to my very long answer, I do want to share what I find is there are three buckets of bullying behavior.

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:05:49.56] And this helps with this argument where we just hear a lot of legislatures who are looking at laws around bullying, for example, that they don't want to regulate something like incivility. And so this this can help with that conversation. And as HR speaking to leaders, it's not about a rude comment. So the three buckets of bullying behavior are aggressive communication, doing things like sending off nasty emails, yelling, aggressive body language like a puffed up chest. So aggressive communication that we can all look at and agree it's aggressive. The second bucket is humiliation. So teasing, spreading rumors, blaming others for problems that maybe are out of their control. And the third bucket is manipulation. So removing tasks that are important to someone's job without an explanation, giving unmanageable workloads, hiding tools or things that somebody needs to do their job well. So bottom line is that what I usually see is we don't call someone a bully if they're a yeller, if they're only engaging in one bucket of the behavior, we tend to call people bullies when we are seeing all three of those buckets. So

hopefully that helps clarify if you ever have to do an investigation around bullying or something to really look for those three buckets, aggressive communication, humiliation and manipulation.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:18.78] I felt like you'd explained every WWE like show I've ever seen, but workplace style, not that I've watched a lot of WWE, but I just am picturing those guys doing all the puffed up chest stuff and all the crazy things that they do.

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:07:33.78] So yeah, yeah.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:35.94] I have often said, like, my career was defined by bad managers. I learned exactly what I did not want to do as a leader or manager. And you had turned this into an entire business, which is fantastic.

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:07:46.92] Thank you. Yeah. Sometimes it takes experiencing all of the things you don't want in order to know what you do want to or what what you don't want to be.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:07:56.10] Great. That's why I had a starter husband, so.

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:07:59.25] I just heard that yesterday to someone said something like that to me.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:08:03.84] And learned what I did it went so. Let's let's talk about some of the services that you offer through Civility pPartners, because I think that people are like, OK, like you're helping with workplace bullying. What do you do? How do you how do you help companies and individuals through this?

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:08:20.52] Yep. So there's two main things that we do. We also do training, but training doesn't solve problems. So the two things we do that do solve the problem of bullying. One is I specialize in executive and leadership coaching. Specifically for aggressive, abrasive, assertive, too assertive leaders, so leaders who are engaging in bullying behavior, I coach those individuals and help turn them around. And then Civility Partners also does a lot of work in toxic work environments where, you know, there's a culture of bullying or harassment or discrimination. So we'll do a climate assessment or employee survey and then we really work with the leaders and the employees to create plans to turn that environment around. So those are kind of the two main ways that I'm turning around toxic environments.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:09:17.53]** I love that. Let's talk about the uncertain economy, though. I feel like right now with the current climate that we're in, where a lot of things are in flux, a lot of change is happening. We've been in this crazy world that we're living and working in for over a year now. Does this create the perfect storm for workplace bullying, you think?

**Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:09:36.37]** It does indeed, for a lot of reasons. The research is super clear around bullying, that the organizational climate absolutely facilitates it. So, for example, a high stress environment, an environment where people are working on their own are alone. This is all sounding like our Zoom environment right now. Right. And because of covid. So we have a lot of stressed out people who are working in an environment where they're sort of lonely. They could easily be bullied during a one on one Zoom meeting, rather, versus in the office where other people might hear that bullying taking place. Now, it's in an isolated way and certainly people are all striving to appear as competent and capable as they can possibly appear right now, because if there's any future layoffs or problems in the organization as the aftermath of covid, people want to make sure they're not on the layoff list. So I think while people already pre covid struggled to report things like bullying and harassment, I think they will be even less inclined to report it now because they don't want to be seen as a weak link. So, yes, we are in a perfect storm for aggressive behavior

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:10:56.11]** Where they're worried about keeping their job like this could be the one thing that puts my boss, depending upon who the bully is over the edge and decides that I'm not an important part of the future of the organization.

**Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:11:07.61]** Exactly.

**Break: [00:11:09.70]** Let's take a reset. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell, and you were listening to the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE the HR Exam. Today we're talking about workplace bullying and toxic workplaces with Catherine Mattice Zundel.

**Break: [00:11:26.11]** Personal and professional development is essential for successful H.R. leaders. Join Upskill HR to access life training, community, and over one hundred On-Demand courses for that dynamic leader. HR recert credits available. Visit UpskillHR.com for more.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:11:41.83]** We tend to think about people who are bullies and kind of a stereotypical way. I think, like I think about some shows of bullies and movies and things like that. But I wanted to ask you, you've done a lot of research in this area. Obviously, your coaching and training. Who are the bullies in the

workplace? Who are you seeing? What job titles are they? Lower level employees are they're all senior leaders. Who are these folks?

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:12:05.23] Yeah. So the people that I coach are generally pretty high up in the organization because coaching is a has a price tag versus a lower level individual is more easily let go or mant performance managed. Right. In terms of their behavior. So what I do know about people who engage in bullying is they are extraordinarily focused on competence. They want to be seen as the most competent person there ever was. And in fact, they actually live in a world of anxiety around that being seen as competent. And so that's why they're seen as so valuable to the organization. So that's the other piece of it. People who engage in bullying are often seen as very valuable to the organization because they bring in a lot of money or they have a lot of industry knowledge or both, or they've been in the organization for a long time. And so all of that high success and high value that they bring to the organization is actually driven by this fear of looking incompetent. So while we often think of people who bully as these psychopaths raging and yelling, I kind of joke, they're my delicate flowers or they're like glass because they're easily broken. And that's what drives the bullying behavior. So they're living in this hyper anxiety around being seen as competent and successful and valuable.

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:13:37.66] And when they perceive that is being threatened, that's when the bullying comes out. So just to give you an example, one individual I coached, he reported directly to the owner of a very large organization, and he had really come up in his career. And this organization is actually head hunted him and brought him over. And when he saw that people made mistakes and this was a government type of an agency, he would pull out the law and start reading it in a very aggressive way and sort of yelling and really getting focused on the details. Well, where all of that is coming from is this fear of you who made the mistake. You're making me look bad. You're making the team look bad. And so he was reacting to that with this fight, right. I'm talking about fight or flight. And that was one of many bullying behaviors that he engaged in, was to really get after people with this. Here's the rulebook. Why didn't you read it? Kind of putting you down? Because you don't know as much as I do type of a thing. So, you know, they're they're not these vicious psychopaths that people often portray them as.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:14:56.36] Is there one sex more than the other that tends to be a bully in your experience, or do we see bullies and both men and women?

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:15:04.61] You know, I've seen research that said that it's more often men. It was something like 60-40 for men. And I've also read research that when the bully is a woman, she tends to go after other women, in my experience as a coach. It has been more men that I've coached. There has been a fair share of women, though, as well. And but I haven't necessarily seen this thing around that women are only picking on other women. But yeah, so it seems that there's maybe more males engaging in bullying, but it's not, you know, 90 percent versus 10 percent kind of a thing.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:15:46.99] So we're talking about bullies and men or women, these folks that you're working with as an executive coach for bullies, which I think is a great such a great service that you're

providing. But I wondered, like as I have, I'm thinking about the bullies that I encountered in my workplace. Do they know that they are bullies and that they're toxic? And what does your coaching programs look like for four different workplace bullies?

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:16:17.70] Or so I what I've learned is that they often recognize people see them as a difficult manager or a hard manager, and it's sometimes I've seen where it's almost a badge of honor, you know, I'm just holding them accountable. And that's just how I manage. What they don't recognize is the real impact that that behavior has. So they often see themselves as that, you know, I'm I'm a hard manager. I'm just making people successful, but not recognizing that people are actually quitting because of them or leaving or going home and crying to their spouse. So the other piece of this is they do, of course, lack social and emotional intelligence. If they had it, they wouldn't engage in that behavior. So while a lot of coaches may go in trying to convince people to have empathy or try to teach them social and emotional intelligence, that's not necessarily my process. I'm not going to all of a sudden make them care about people's emotions. And in fact, they often feel like emotions are useless. You know, we're not emotional at work. We're not I don't care how you feel about it. It needs to be done kind of a thing. So the process that I used is actually created by a woman whose name is Dr. Laura Crawshaw, and she had been coaching individuals for a long time and figured out that she was actually really good at coaching these aggressive or abrasive leaders.

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:17:53.19] And so she really honed in on that and over time developed this process that she is now teaching those of us who are interested in learning about it. And so I use her process and I do find that it works. And so she she had figure it out. I can't teach them empathy necessarily. They don't care about that so much. And I want to caveat that again, they're not psychopaths. It's not like they go around not caring about how people feel. What they're focused on is the job and getting the job done. And then emotions sort of come second. And so the process is to meet with the individual, explain the process, and then ask them essentially, what do you know about why I'm here? What have you been told by H.R.? What are we working on here? And they often don't really understand. They're even confused that here all of a sudden they're being sort of forced into coaching. And so I'll say, well, why don't we do a little research? Because I don't really know much either. I don't work here. So let me interview some people. And so I interview people whose names they gave me and just ask a lot of questions around their communication and leadership style. And then I'm able to present feedback to the individual. So I take all my interview notes and I move them all into themes so that it's digestible.

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:19:20.58] And so that document really is that's where the turning point happened. So now it's not just H.R. saying, well, people are telling me this, it's not hearsay anymore. These are the words of the people you told me to interview. And so, for example, one theme might be that they shame people in public. So then, well, let's understand that theme and we can read through the fifteen or twenty bullet points that are their coworker's words that demonstrate that. And what I find often is there is some level of defensiveness in that meeting. Of course, who would want a 20 page document about all of their faults. So that's to be expected. But they also are pretty hurt and appalled that this is how they're seen. So then I'm back to that. They know they're seen as hard, but they just don't understand the extent of the damage. And that feedback really shows it to them. And going back to the question about gender, women often cry in that meeting because they're so upset by how they're perceived. And usually on the next call, after I've read through the feedback, they're ready to change and they'll say things like, all right, I've taken it

in, I get it. If fifteen people said this, then it must be true. What do we do? Can you help me? And so then we go through coaching.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:20:49.39] So powerful, I'm thinking about like I think about bullies of my past that I have worked with and, you know, just they're kind of how they are and their reaction and getting defensive like they don't get a lot of honest feedback about their behaviors. So this might be the first time that they've ever gotten real, honest feedback. And then it's coming from somebody like you who's a neutral third party and you're sharing this. So, wow. I mean, everybody wants to know, I think, how they're perceived, but they might they're not they're not stepping outside themselves to watch it on the on the movie screen. They're in inside the moment in their own kind of personal position, not the metaphysician. So that's really powerful.

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:21:34.96] Yeah, it is. It is. And I'll just add to a lot of times these people are very focused on the success of the organization and their team, which is ironic. So there are a lot of this feedback is about their passion. So, again, they're, you know, caught up in this world of like, we can't make mistakes. We all need to be as competent as possible because the organization depends on it. And so that I'm able to kind of frame it that way, too, like, look, you're passionate. That's what this is about. We just got to find some new ways free managed. But just to give you an example of that, one individual I coached was at a software company and he was a golden goose. This individual created these ideas and he had all these different teams of software engineers underneath him that he was executing his ideas with. And the company would then sell those tidbits of software to the Googles and Microsoft's and large organizations of the world. And we were talking once about his really getting after people for mistakes. And he said, you know, my boss tells me that the five thousand paychecks are all on my shoulders. That's I take that to mean that we don't have room for error. So ironically, he was engaging in this behavior because he wanted to make sure everybody got a paycheck.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:22:58.00] Do you feel like these bullies sometimes maybe are also perfectionists, like they have a really high level and high expectations that they expect from themselves and it's carried through to the teams that they lead and manage?

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:23:12.88] That's exactly right. Yeah, they they live in this high this world of I have to be the most competent person in the room and they expect everyone else lives in that world as well. And I do often find myself saying and I got this from Dr. Crawshaw, you're not the competence crusader. You are an educator. You know, if someone makes a mistake, then help them learn. Don't beat them down for doing something that you perceive as incompetent. So, yeah, absolutely. They are perfectionists and they hold everyone to the standard that they hold themselves to.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:23:51.37] Which is sometimes really unrealistic.

**Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:23:54.70] Yeah**

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:23:55.03] Especially if they're putting in a lot of hours and they're an exempt level employee and their team is non-exempt or something like that.**

**Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:24:02.17] Yeah. Yeah.**

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:24:03.55] Another area that I wanted to talk about and just kind of highlight here is that right now, during this crazy pandemic time, covid-19, two thirds of employees are reporting that they have poor mental health and it's undercut their job performance. And 40 percent of employees are battling burnout. This comes from a survey by the mental health benefits provider Lyra Health and the National Alliance of Healthcare Purchaser Coalitions. I just wanted to point that out because I feel like with all of us working remotely and then all the uncertainty, everything is just heightened. And I wanted to ask you as the expert here, how should HR leaders and their and the employees handle workplace bullying, especially when so many of us are working remotely? Doesn't change if we're working remote versus in-person? And what does that look like, in your opinion?**

**Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:24:55.66] I don't think the process changes or the, you know, the steps might be a little different and how they unfold. But bottom line is that workplace bullying is an organizational problem. And H.R. gets so focused on the individual's rights. For example, you get a complaint about harassment. What do you do? An investigation which is focused on the people, the perpetrator and the target, and maybe some witnesses if there are any. But it's all focused in this little area and focused on the people. But again, the research is very clear that the organization itself actually creates a lot of opportunity for bad things to happen, like us being in a stressful environment. I'm not saying that's an excuse. What I'm saying is that H.R. has to recognize the organizational culture problems that might be causing this behavior and address those. That's just as important, if not more important, than addressing the one individual who's engaging in the behavior of the few individuals engaging in the behavior. That said, even we could do a whole nother podcast about turning around a toxic culture. But it's a whole another eight hour conversation. But in terms of the individual who's engaging in the behavior, H.R. has to absolutely teach managers and supervisors how to address the lower level, seemingly minor incivility. That happens on a regular basis. And certainly we're not micromanaging incivility. We've all had a rough day. We're all exhausted. But, you know, managers and supervisors need to understand that they should be stepping in and coaching that type of behavior early on so that it doesn't escalate. It's a lot easier to solve it early. And then those people who are being coached to behave better as they rise to the ranks, they'll be, you know, engaging in more positive behaviors.**

**Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:26:57.52] And then the same goes for those abrasive leaders engaging in bullying, you know, the C Suite folks or the the EVPs and VPs and directors. I know performance management is a little bit different in that realm, but they still need to be told this behavior is unacceptable and they need to be told early on, the earlier it's brought to their attention, the easier it is for them to change. So what I find with coaching is often this person's been engaging in this behavior for quite a long time. And**

although H.R. and perhaps the CEO have been sharing that, hey, you need to change. You know, I'm hearing about this incident. You can't do that anymore, over, overall the person's being given permission to act that way because there's no real consequences around change or if they don't change. So, you know, I'm brought into this situation where something finally hit the fan and this person's lost and confused. Why am I all of a sudden being held accountable? I've been acting this way all this time, so it's not fair to the individual if you don't step in early. And again, organizations are afraid to because this person's seen as so valuable. They're not going to just run because you ask, you know, give them some clear information about how to change and hold them accountable to it. They you know, if their goal is to be uber competent and be seen that way, help them be uber competent communicators and leaders, it's right in their wheelhouse.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:28:31.82] This is fantastic advice and information. I'm thinking about any I think every person listen to this podcast is probably encountered a bully. They've been the target of one. And now as an H.R. leader, we are often the person who has to deliver that info. And that feedback to that manager, so all helpful advice and insights that you've been sharing today to help us be able to, not I feel like confront's the wrong word, but just address these behaviors as quickly as possible so that we can help this person change, evolve and grow.

Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:29:10.38] Yeah, you know, I'll give I'll give one other piece of advice. The script is really helpful here. So where HR I think gets caught up sometimes is you you have an EVP, let's say, who's being accused of bullying or people are complaining about the behavior. And then H.R. talks to the EVP and says, you know, I'm hearing that yesterday in this meeting you berated somebody or you call it out. Some mistakes that, you know, should have been called out in a different scenario or you made an inappropriate joke and the person responds with, no, I didn't or they're too sensitive or, you know, there's all this justification and or denial when you focus on the facts of the situation, keeping in mind that they don't have a lot of social and emotional intelligence, they're not grasping what you're saying. So instead of getting focused on the facts, which is what we do, we're investigations and all that stuff, that's where H.R. goes. Instead, try saying I'm hearing that people perceive your communication as too aggressive and then when they come back with no, it's not. They're being sensitive. It's not my fault. Whatever it is the response is. Or they'll say, you know, we'll give me examples where the details the response is, I don't know, I'm in H.R. I'm not in your department. So I don't know all of the facts. But I do know one fact and that one fact is that five people over the last six months have shared that they feel that your communication is too aggressive and that one fact has to change. So the fact is that you're perceived this way. So don't get caught up in the facts of different scenarios because they're going to argue with you. But to say that this fact is I've got a series of complaints. That's what we need to address. That fact has to change. The complaints have to stop.

Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:31:20.52] This is a great way to to approach this individual and not get caught up in the nuances of the whole situation. But like you said, the perception. Well, Catherine, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us. I wanted to give you an opportunity to talk about where people can go to connect with you to learn more about what you do at civility partners.

**Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:31:42.45]** Sure. I'm at [CivilityPartners.com](https://www.civilitypartners.com). Look me up on LinkedIn. I'm all over the place. Google me, send me a carrier pigeon, whatever. I'm all over the place. I'm easy to find. But [CivilityPartners](https://www.civilitypartners.com) is my website.

**Jessica Miller-Merrell: [00:31:58.46]** Awesome. Well, we'll link to all the things on the show notes of this over at [Workology.com](https://www.workology.com). So thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today. I think you've given us some really great resources and tools to be able to take action right away in our organizations.

**Catherine Mattice Zundel: [00:32:13.97]** Thank you. Thanks for having me.

**Closing: [00:32:16.37]** Are you loving the Workology Podcast? Our Workology community reaches over 600,000 H.R. leaders every single month. Want to be a sponsor? Reach out to us at [Workology.com/advertising](https://www.workology.com/advertising).

**Closing: [00:32:30.52]** It's really important for HR leaders to be able to support employees who are being bullied at work and ensure that the workplace isn't a toxic one. While it might be surprising to some that bullying can continue into adulthood, we think of bullying happening when we're kids in school. Most people can identify with this experience and must be able to rely on H.R. to help remedy the situation. I appreciate Catherine for taking the time today to share her experience with us. Thank you for joining the Workology Podcast sponsored by Upskill HR and ACE the HR Exam. This podcast is for the disruptive workplace leader who's tired of the status quo. This is Jessica Miller-Merrell. Until next time, you can visit [Workology.com](https://www.workology.com) to listen to all our Workology podcast episodes.