

Bullies and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

My first job out of [law school](#) was working for the area's only federal district judge in a small courthouse in northern Michigan. The courthouse was in a post office building, and to get inside of the courthouse, you needed to pass through an x-ray machine that was staffed by two guards. The guards were older men, probably in their late 50s, who had formerly worked for the Detroit police department. They were pretty bored at their station, since not much seemed to go on by the x-ray machine. One of the guards was always incredibly bored and was therefore always looking to get into long conversations. My job kept me pretty busy, but one day I decided to sit down and start chatting with him. I was glad I did because it turned out to be one of the most interesting conversations I had ever had.

The guard told me he had spent the past 10 years of his career sitting in police cars outside the homes of a few kids in the neighborhood where I grew up. These homes were within a few streets of my house. The retired officer told me that he and various policemen had been doing 24-hour surveillance of a few of these homes for "at least a decade, just watching who came and went."

"A couple of your neighbors were among the most powerful crime bosses in the country," he told me. "They were being watched all the time."

The neighborhood in which I grew up consisted of quiet urban streets. Since the courthouse I was working in was around 100 miles from there, it was a real coincidence to find myself talking to someone who had spent 10 years sitting in a police car right down the street from my house. I certainly never saw these police cars or the police officer doing stakeouts down the street when I was growing up, and I never heard anything about it from anyone.

The people whom the guard mentioned, with whom I had gone to school, all had Italian last names, and their parents had been rumored to be in the mafia. When I asked the retired officer what the parents did to warrant such massive police attention, he said something I will never forget:

"Lots of stuff. But like most people who succeed over a long period of time, they were experts in bullying and intimidating people, and getting them to do what they wanted them to do. They are just grown-up bullies who are really mean-spirited."

This former police officer essentially saw the world in terms of *bullies* and *the bullied*. In fact, everything about the way the guy saw the world was in terms of people intimidating others, and people being intimidated by others. He was very short, and in listening to him speak I started to feel that he himself had probably been bullied when he was younger, perhaps because of his stature.

The guard's statement really stuck with me because at the time I was working in a courthouse, seeing all sorts of conflicts every day. I was seeing cases of companies being sued and suing people. I was seeing cases of bank robberies and other crimes. However, when I looked at most of the cases I was dealing with, I realized that most of the conflict always had a bully on one side of it. In fact, when it comes right down to it, most conflicts involve bullies in some way.

Over the next several months I started looking at every case I worked on in a different light.

- I saw a case of a man who found a bum on the street and talked him into robbing a bank for him by intimidating him.
- I saw a case of a woman hurt in a giant convenience chain, in which the chain was "layering up" and intimidating her by dragging up her past, threatening her with malicious prosecution and questioning her motives.
- I saw a case of a company copying a very small competitor's product and then making it incredibly difficult for the small company to sue, by making the legal process extraordinarily cumbersome and expensive for them.
- I saw a case of the government bullying someone that it did not like by taking away their property and making things difficult for them.
- I saw the case of a large company taking away the business of a small company by unethical means, and then making it incredibly difficult for the smaller company to fight back.

The judge I worked for did an excellent job of mediating all of these disputes; however, what I realized when I saw all of this was that there is a lot of truth to the notion that the world consists of *bullies* and *the bullied*.

The more I thought about the kids I had grown up with whose parents had been in the mafia, the more I realized that these kids had almost *mastered* the art of being bullies. These kids were absolutely, hands down, the most popular kids in their school. The more I thought about this, the more I began to believe that a lot of their power came from their ability to bully the other kids around them. They were bullies in some very subtle--and also some other not-so-subtle--ways.

Here are some of the tactics I saw them employ, which most bullies commonly use:

The bullies would make certain people they may have been competitive with, or simply did not like, feel uncomfortable or awkward. These bullies would walk up to other guys with whom they may have been competitive, and they would point out some imperfection. For example, they might approach a big kid who thought he was cool and criticize his backpack, his shoes, or one of his mannerisms. I saw the bullies do this many times, and this is something that can really throw people off balance.

It was as if these kids were always on the offensive. If you were standing around with them and a group of other kids, one of the bullies might tease another kid, whom he did not like, about his hair or some inconsequential sort of thing.

The effect of making people feel uncomfortable over time is a strategy that bullies often use to throw others out of balance. It

establishes a power dynamic between two parties, wherein one party is the criticizer and the other person takes all the criticism. This is a way that a bully might try to establish dominance and superiority over another person.

People are bullied in business all of the time. You are bullied by stores and you are certainly bullied by employers.

A few days ago, I was on the Costco website, and to my astonishment, I noticed that they were selling funeral caskets with next-day air delivery service. The sale of caskets is a great business for the funeral homes. When people come to a funeral home to purchase a casket for someone they love, they typically feel far too upset and nervous to negotiate the sale price of a casket. They are told what the price is, and they are expected to accept the price and leave it at that. Most people would be far too uncomfortable to negotiate the price of a casket, and people rarely do this. Most people would also be uncomfortable ordering a casket via next-day air from Costco, and instead, they are intimidated into paying much more than they need to, at the average funeral home.

In the Jeff Bridges movie *The Big Lebowski*, there is a scene in which Bridges (whose character is called "The Dude") and another character get into an argument in a funeral home about being forced to spend \$299 on a "vessel" in which to carry their friend's ashes from the funeral home. The urn is the lowest costing option available. The funeral director is extremely serious, well dressed, and surrounded by marble and wood, in a very intimidating sort of environment. The scene works, and it is so interesting because the viewer realizes that nobody would do something like this in a funeral home.

There are all sorts of power dynamics at play in most companies. For example, many people feel extremely uncomfortable asking for raises and are made to feel this way by their employers. Their boss may be in a separate office. Their boss may make them extremely uncomfortable if and when they bring up the idea of a raise. The ability to make you uncomfortable to ask for this or that is a perfect example of how bullying can be used in a subtle way.

The bullies would threaten certain people in order to intimidate them. Threats are probably among the most common techniques used by bullies. People can simply be threatened with physical harm, social ostracism, or something along those lines.

In my school I never saw the kids whose parents were being watched ever beat anyone up. However, on at least a few occasions I witnessed them threatening to do so. The threat of violence is something that scares a lot of people. Usually, when people are threatened this way, they immediately back down--and the bully gets his or her way. The threat of violence simply repels people; it frightens and makes people run away.

One of the most common scenes from movies is a man kissing or having an affair with another man's girlfriend, after which the boyfriend finds out and chases him around, threatening to beat him up. In this case, a threat of violence is used to frighten away other potential suitors. I just saw this on an episode of *Curb Your Enthusiasm* last night. If you spend a day watching television, you will generally see this scenario occur at least once.

Threats are not always about violence. At work, for example, the ultimate threat is the threat of firing someone. If someone feels threatened with being fired, he is more likely to comply. If someone is threatened with not getting a raise, she is more likely to comply. Many employers use all sorts of spoken and unspoken threats in order to get various people to do whatever the employer wants them to do. In fact, if you look at any job, you will generally see that some sort of bullying and use of threats (spoken or unspoken) is occurring.

The bullies would say or write nasty things about people in order to put them down--and keep them down. There are many circumstances in which it is simply not prudent to intimidate people with physical violence, to damage their property, or to intentionally make them feel uncomfortable or awkward. In these situations, one of the greatest tools that bullies have at their disposal is saying or writing nasty things about people.

Bullies can start rumors about people by saying negative things about them to others--whether or not the statements are true. These rumors can keep the subject of the rumors on edge, making him or her feel like an outcast, and worse. People can be attacked verbally through rumors, innuendo, and by other means.

When I was growing up, I remember hearing numerous negative rumors floating around. These rumors included statements about kids' mothers (one of whom was rumored to be a porn star) and more. These kinds of rumors can obviously do a lot of damage to one's mental state as well as to one's social standing.

Newspapers and the media can also be bullies. Many media, for example, are very *left wing* or *right wing*. Media that have one political leaning or another can be quite brutal, attacking their opponents in one way or another. It is not necessarily what the offending party says; it is often how they say it and what they imply. In addition, people can simply be victims of others' writings or broadcasts that are meant to attack, humiliate, or oppress.

The bullies would leave people out of activities. Bullies can very effectively taunt and badger certain people by intentionally leaving them out of activities. Leaving people out signals to them that you do not value them or their participation. People who are left out may feel insecure and as if they have no value. To a bully, leaving people out of activities is a way to make them feel bad about themselves, which gives the bully a sense of power over them.

When I was growing up, bullies would often be in charge of picking their teammates for various sports and games on the playground. If the bully did not pick someone, that person would feel bad about himself or herself. Not inviting someone to join a group of people for an activity, not allowing someone to participate in a group, and so forth are all tactics that serve to isolate people and make them feel insecure and alone.

This happens in the business world as well. There are events that take place in a company, to which certain people might be invited--and to which other people are not invited. There are meetings to which only certain people are invited--and others are left out. Some clubs will accept certain people and not others. Bullies can use these social structures to their advantage, in order to make a targeted person or group feel bad about themselves.

The bullies would often damage other people's things. Another very common tactic used to intimidate people and get them to conform and/or push them down is to damage their property. When you deface or hurt people's things, this can do a lot to intimidate them.

One day, I was walking down the hall in my middle school on a late afternoon, after school had ended and the hallways had been deserted. I noticed a couple of kids in front of a locker that was not theirs, with the locker open. They were ripping up the pages of the books and defacing the personal belongings that were inside the locker. I did not know whose locker it was, but I am sure that the victim of this behavior must have been left feeling quite intimidated and upset.

Damaging other people's things intentionally is something that is meant to, and often does, intimidate other people. In Detroit,

for example, during the time when neighborhoods first started to become socially integrated, one of the tactics that bullies used was to spray paint, trash, or vandalize the homes of African Americans. This kind of behavior is extremely common, and it is a method of intimidation that bullies (in this case racists) use to hurt people and scare them away.

If you park a really nice car in a really bad neighborhood, the odds are pretty good that the car will eventually be vandalized. This is just how it goes. Things that stick out and that are better than their surroundings are typically damaged and attacked. This is a lesson that you should understand in the workplace and in your life as well.

In order to stifle action, and to frighten and intimidate, bullies may damage the property of others. At work it could be someone going in and messing up your papers, doing something to your computer, or otherwise harming your belongings. This kind of behavior can serve to keep you down and on edge, and it also puts the bully in control.

The bullies would intimidate others by calling them names. One of the greatest techniques bullies use is name-calling. Calling names can catch people off guard, and it is a tactic bullies employ to get compliance from others. The use of name-calling is so effective, in fact, that sayings such as, "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" were developed to help people cope with being bullied.

Name-calling is an excellent weapon that can hurt and intimidate others very effectively. Name-calling puts the receiving party constantly on the defensive, and often forces them to prove to others that they are not this, or not that.

When I was in seventh grade, a kid I knew was running for [student council](#). He was one of the smarter kids in the class, but he was not popular and was somewhat socially awkward. He put up a bunch of posters around the school with his name on them, in order to get people to vote for him. Within a few days, someone had written all sorts of funny characterizations of the kid on the posters and various statements that mocked him.

I remember walking by these posters and finding them very humorous, even laughing at them. I realized that it would be very difficult for anyone to take the guy seriously after seeing these *revamped posters*, and sure enough, he lost the student council election.

Names like "lazy," "stupid," and "underachiever" are all words that can do a lot of damage to people in the workplace, because they characterize people in a negative light. Bullies are experts in name-calling and will throw bad names and other negative statements around with abandon. This can really harm people and, ultimately, help bullies achieve their objectives.

The bullies would often intimidate others by simply not talking to them. One of the most effective tools of bullies is simply ignoring certain people. They may ignore the victim only some of the time or all the time. Since the victim doesn't know how to react, this gives the bully power and control over people who typically expect to be acknowledged and spoken to in a normal manner.

When I was younger, I saw bullies constantly ignore certain people, just blowing them off completely, as if they did not exist. In the business world, ignoring people can be extremely effective in allowing certain people to gain control over others. Ignoring some people and not others can send a signal of inferiority to those being ignored and serves to intimidate them.

When you meet and spend time with the people who are the greatest successes at anything, whether they are [attorneys](#), businesspeople, or another profession, they have almost always mastered the art of either (1) bullying others, or (2) *not allowing themselves to be bullied*. Your ability to succeed in the world will be directly proportional to your ability to do one of these things well.

My personal belief is that you can never succeed over the long run by being a bully, because you will upset so many people along the way that eventually enough sentiment will build that people will want to knock you down at all costs. Therefore, the best option is to avoid bullies and learn how to be successful without being a bully.

If you get good enough at anything, you will very quickly encounter many people who will try to knock you off your horse. There are numerous reasons for this, and it is not important what these reasons are. What is important, though, is to realize that all the career advice in the world will never do you any good if you do not know how to stand up for yourself and defend yourself against bullies.

Essentially, you can divide the world into those people who are bullies and those who are not. Despite the fact that when we typically think of bullies, we think of children who harass other kids on the school playground, in reality the bully is much more serious and pervasive than this. Bullies are people who, for whatever reason, are trying through whatever means to intimidate you and keep you from doing the things you enjoy and living the life you dream of. They will use pretty much any method at their disposal to exert control over you. What is important with bullies is to realize when someone is trying to bully you; then you can simply choose not to play their game. *Your ability to succeed over time in any job and in whatever career you choose will in almost all cases relate to your ability to defend yourself against bullies.*

THE LESSON

Your ability to defend yourself against bullies will determine your odds of long-term success in any career. Bullies throw other off balance by making them feel uncomfortable over time, establishing a power dynamic between themselves and their victims. Bullies exist throughout the business world, and once you learn to identify them you can avoid problems by simply choosing not to play their game.