

**SOURCE:** Novi News (Northville,MI)  
**AUDIENCE:** 97,000 [provided by Nielsen//NetRatings]  
**DATE:** 11-09-2012  
**HEADLINE:** How to confront a white-collar bully

Source Website

November 8, 2012

How to confront a white-collar bully

Takin' Care of Business

By Lee Meadows

Guest Columnist

A colleague admitted to me that she was being bullied at work. When I agreed to meet with her at the Starbucks in Novi, I assumed it was to discuss a career change that she'd been contemplating and just needed a sounding board. We had barely sat down for coffee when she started talking about how her work environment had dramatically changed due to restructuring and a change in leadership. From her perspective, the workplace she had enjoyed had become toxic and the change in leadership was beyond abusive. There had been profit issues for the company, productivity issues among the employees and personal attacks within reporting relationships. Changes brought on by the economic downturn were clearly understood, and she did harp on that issue as being a primary contributor. What she didn't understand was the abrupt shift to negativity and, as she stated, "The complete disregard for people!"

Now, I like to think that if you walk the planet long enough, you learn that (1) things aren't always as they seem, and (2) there is another side to the story. Since I was only hearing her side of it, my attempt at helping her sort through the issue was to be a good listener, ask clarifying questions, and guide her to the conclusion that, she knew, would be best for her. What I described was the conscious part of my brain employing the skills I've learned over the years. As you envision that process, let me take you to the parallel part of my brain in which memory operates.

At some level, most of us have experienced some form of bullying. Typically, as a kid and usually by someone who manages to get away with pushing people around. Those memories are not pleasant and can trigger flashbacks of epic proportion. You see, as a kid, I never understood why there was a need to bully someone. It just never made any sense to me. Consequently, bullying was not tolerated in the Meadows household. The patriarch knew, without the benefit of a high school education, that giving in to a bully only leads to a merciless torture. In time, you learn strategies for coping with bullies, and, ultimately, you figure out how to get them off your back. My reflection down memory lane crystallized into a glaring truth that she would have to confront.

"You're going to have to get him off your back," I stated after she'd given me the lay of the land. The landscape consisted of being verbally abused, personal attacks, outside the cube criticisms and threats to employment. The last thing we expect to see is a 'white-collar' bully occupying a position of power and authority in an organizational role. When they do show up, the first obligation is to establish how you wish to be treated.

"I always start with a private conversation in which I share my observation about what I perceive to be a dysfunction between the two of us. I don't talk about feelings, only observations, and I seek clarity as to why."

More often than not, the white-collar bully will say, "Well, that's just how I am, so deal with it!" This is a classic statement to cover the fact that you have just "checked" their behavior.

My response has always been, "Part of the reason why we are having this conversation is how I am dealing with it." From there, I talk about how I wish to be treated and how it is good for our working relationship. There have been no verbal threats, major confrontations or discords about the white-collar bully's family lineage. I state what I expect and what I will not tolerate.

Now, I have had a few reply, "And if I don't?"

"What do you say to that?" she asked.

"I just lean forward, I said. "And I smile."

I have learned that the smile is not the response they seek; it is the one that keeps them guessing.

Lee E. Meadows, Ph.D., is a professor of management at *Walsh College* working at the Novi Campus. He can be contacted at [lmeadows@walshcollege.edu](mailto:lmeadows@walshcollege.edu).

*Highlights: Walsh College*