

Title: "You Can't Talk to Me That Way!"

Author: Arthur H. Bell

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Length: 224 pages

Reading time: 2-4 hours (depending on one's reading skills and reading objectives)

Reading rating: 10 (1 = very difficult; 10 = very easy)

Overall Rating: 3 (1 = average; 4 = outstanding)

Subject areas: Workplace incivility. Verbal abuse

To be sure, the topic of how we conduct ourselves and how we treat others in the workplace is prominent. According to recent studies, fully 20 percent of subjects surveyed said that they were the direct targets of such verbal abuse at least once a week and research suggests the damages are incurred to an individual whether they are the direct victim or a witness. Some estimates are that billions of dollars are lost each year as a consequence of verbal abuse. What follows is predictable: lost time, lost productivity, stealing, and job turnover. Some managers may choose to ignore rude behavior in the workplace, but the consequences nonetheless weigh heavily on family and friends, co-workers, the organization, and its customers.

At the lower end of the spectrum, abusive workplace behavior may take many forms: emotional abuse, bullying, and incivility. Specific behaviors may include verbal aggression such as swearing, interrupting, and humiliation. Bell argues that the difference between these milder forms of incivility and violence is small indeed. To further distinct what is "normal" as contrasted with what is abusive, Bell offers the following criteria:

- Tone of voice: abusive behavior is unusually harsh, sarcastic, angry, or belittling as compared to the tone of voice normally used by the perpetrator.
- Content: Comments stray far from the domain of workplace issues and into value judgments/labeling in areas such as sexual preferences, medication use, and alcohol use.
- Language: Language unusually/offensively foul.
- Non-verbal: Perpetrator sends abusive message via facial expression, hand/arm activity, or physical movement.
- Bystander presence: Abusers may aim to maximize embarrassment by berating a target individual before a crowd.
- Volume: Most abusive messages are delivered in an unusually loud manner.

Why do some otherwise fine individuals turn into verbal abusers? Bell believes that there are a number of reasons. For example, some individuals abuse for the purposes of exercising control, others are settling past differences, while some naively believe that punishment is more effective than is positive reinforcement in the shaping of behavior. To be sure, there are also some individuals who are simply poor at anger management.

Bell offers some techniques for managing exposure to verbal abuse. The first technique is to assert your rights by informing the abuser that he/she may engage you in a conversation, but not

belittlement, swearing, and other abusive behaviors. The second technique is a variant of the tried-and-true “time out” strategy whereby the target individual informs the abuser that he/she is no longer in control of his/her emotions and offer an invitation to continue the conversation when the abuser regains self-control. Techniques to employ after the abusive event include documenting the abusive behavior as soon as possible after it occurs. This documentation enables the victim to capture the details without capturing the emotions. During this process, victims may detach and critically self-examine to uncover behaviors that may have fueled the abusive episode and pinpoint reasons why the victim may have been the target of the abuse.

The next decision the victim has to make is to determine whether their energies should be channeled at obtaining an apology, mending the relationship, or reporting the behavior to one’s chain of command. A long-range plan that victims of verbal abuse would also enact would be to communicate expectations of professional treatment in the future.

Overall, this book offers victims of verbal abuse useful tools to manage the abuser and it offers perpetrators of verbal abuse the chance to become sensitized to the concepts of verbal abuse and the personal responsibility that perpetrators bear for the aftermath of their abusive behavior.

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