

# When Accountability Is Labeled as Bullying: Navigating Employee Complaints About Being Managed

## Labor & Employment Law Update

By Joey Wright on September 16, 2025

In workplaces today, managers face a delicate balancing act. On one hand, they are responsible for enforcing company policies, maintaining productivity, and holding employees accountable for performance. On the other, they must manage in a way that fosters trust, engagement, and respect. Increasingly, however, employers are seeing a rise in employee complaints that blur the line between legitimate concerns and simple aversion to being managed.

It is becoming more common for employees to claim “bullying” or “harassment” when a supervisor enforces rules, sets boundaries, or addresses underperformance. While it is important to take every complaint seriously, company leadership must also recognize the distinction between inappropriate conduct and the normal exercise of managerial responsibilities.

### The Difference Between Bullying and Management

Workplace bullying refers to repeated, unreasonable actions of individuals (or a group) directed towards an employee (or a group of employees), that are intended to intimidate and create a risk to the health and safety of the employee (s). Workplace bullying often involves an abuse or misuse of power. Bullying includes behavior that intimidates, degrades, offends, or humiliates a worker, often in front of others. True bullying is unacceptable and can create both legal and cultural risks for organizations.

Conversely, quality management involves providing direction, setting expectations, and holding employees accountable for meeting those expectations. A manager who reminds an employee to be on time, documents performance issues, and/or enforces company policies and standards is not bullying, but instead, they are doing the job for which they were hired.

The difficulty arises when employees perceive constructive feedback as personal criticism, or when embarrassment or discomfort with accountability is reframed as mistreatment.

### Root Causes of Complaints

Arguably, there are several factors that contribute to this dynamic:

- **Shifting Cultural Norms.** Workplaces today emphasize empathy, collaboration, and psychological safety. These positive trends can sometimes lead employees to expect only supportive feedback, not corrective conversations.
- **Generational Perspectives.** Younger workers, raised with greater emphasis on individual expression and well-being, may interpret firm management as overly harsh or unnecessary.
- **Unclear Expectations.** When policies and performance standards are not consistently communicated and uniformly applied, enforcement can feel arbitrary, which, in turn, can set the stage for complaints.
- **Fear of Consequences.** Filing a complaint against a manager can be a defensive tactic used by some employees to shield against poor performance reviews, discipline, or even termination.

### Protecting Managers & Supporting Employees

Organizations cannot and should not ignore employee complaints, but they also cannot undermine managers who are applying policies in good faith and working diligently to be an asset to the company. In order to support employees and managers alike, organizations should:

- **Clearly communicate all policies and procedures.** Ensure employees understand workplace rules, performance expectations, and the rationale behind them. If standards are transparent, enforcement is less likely to feel like targeting.
- **Provide ample, informative training for managers.** Organizations should endeavor to equip leaders with tools for delivering feedback professionally and consistently. Managers should know how to document performance issues, avoid loaded language, and keep conversations fact-based.
- **Take seriously and properly assess all complaints.** Human resources should investigate complaints promptly and objectively. A significant consideration is whether the alleged “bullying” reflects unfair treatment or merely the employee being held accountable.
- **Cultivate a supportive culture.** Encourage employees to voice concerns while also emphasizing personal accountability. An organizational culture that values respect and responsibility reduces the risk of these misinterpretations.

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Managing people is not always easy or comfortable, but difficult and uncomfortable do not equal mistreatment. Leaders who enforce policies and procedures in a fair and consistent manner are fulfilling their responsibility to their employer, not engaging in bullying. For organizations, the challenge is in addressing complaints with care and compassion while reinforcing expectations and the legitimacy of managerial authority.

Ultimately, clarity, consistency, and communication are the strongest defenses. By drawing a clear line between genuine misconduct and routine accountability, organizations can protect employees from bullying and mistreatment, while also empowering managers to lead effectively.

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