

Standing Strong: How to Protect Yourself Against Abuse in Business

By Lisa Lee Martin

Oklahoma's business community is strongest when leaders refuse to tolerate abuse, set clear boundaries, and back people who speak up. This article offers practical tools to recognize abuse in business, protect yourself, and respond with confidence and courage.

What "abuse in business" looks like

Abuse in business is any repeated behavior that uses power to control, intimidate, or exploit you. It can come from bosses, partners, clients, vendors, or investors.

Common forms include:

Verbal and emotional abuse: Yelling, insults, humiliation in meetings; threats like "You'll never work in this town again if you don't do this"; gaslighting: denying promises, twisting facts, making you doubt your own memory

Financial and contractual abuse: Changing payment terms after you've delivered work; pressuring you to work for "exposure" while others are paid; hidden fees, surprise deductions, or withholding payments to force concessions

Boundary and time abuse: Demanding 24/7 access to you; ignoring agreed scopes and piling on "just one more thing" without compensation; guilt-tripping you for taking time off, parenting, or caring for your health

Harassment and discrimination: Sexist, racist, or homophobic comments and "jokes"; unwanted touching, sexually suggestive remarks, or romantic pressure tied to business favors; treating you differently because of gender, race, age, disability, or pregnancy

Retaliation and intimidation: Punishing you when you say "no" or raise concerns; cutting your hours, freezing you out of meetings, badmouthing you in the community; threatening lawsuits or "going after" your reputation for asserting your rights

Abuse is not "tough business." It's a pattern of disrespect and control. Healthy business is firm, clear, and sometimes demanding—but never demeaning or unsafe.

Early warning signs you should not ignore

Abuse almost always starts small. The earlier you recognize it, the easier it is to respond.

Watch for these red flags:

They rush you past your intuition: "You're overthinking it, just sign." They push for immediate decisions, discourage legal review, or resist written agreements.

They don't respect "no": Every boundary becomes a negotiation. They act offended or wounded when you enforce reasonable limits.

There is one set of rules—for you: Deadlines and penalties apply only in one direction. They show up late, pay late, or cancel last minute but explode when you do the same.

They isolate you: They insist you communicate only with them, not their team or your own advisors. They talk down others you might go to for help: "Lawyers just kill deals," "HR is useless," "You can't trust them."

Your body reacts: You leave interactions exhausted, on edge, or quietly ashamed. You rehearse conversations in your head because you expect a blow-up.

When your gut and the facts match—even a little—treat it as data, not drama. You don't owe anyone the benefit of the doubt at the expense of your safety or sanity.

How to protect yourself before abuse starts

The most powerful protection is what you build before there is a problem.

Put everything in writing

Use clear contracts: Spell out scope, payment terms, deadlines, ownership, and what happens if either side backs out. Avoid vague phrases like "as needed" or "as discussed"; put the specifics in black and white.

Confirm conversations: After calls or meetings, send a short follow-up email: "Here's what we agreed to..." This protects you from gaslighting and makes it easier to enforce boundaries later.

Define your non-negotiables

Decide in advance what you will not tolerate, for example:

- No yelling, insults, or slurs
- No unpaid "trial work" beyond a small, clearly defined sample
- No major scope changes without a new agreement
- No late-night calls or texts except true emergencies

Write your non-negotiables down. When you feel pressured, come back to that list and ask: "Is this crossing my line?"

Build your safety net

Legal and financial advisors: Have a relationship with an attorney and CPA who understand your industry. Even a short paid consultation can save you from long-term harm.

A trusted circle: Share your concerns with mentors, peers, or industry groups. Isolation is where abusers thrive; community is where they lose power.

Personal boundaries: Create separate business email, phone, and accounts. Don't mix personal and business finances; it's harder for others to control what they can't access.

What to do in the moment

When abuse or harassment happens in real time, your goal is safety, clarity, and documentation—not winning an argument.

Name the behavior and set a boundary

You do not have to be perfect, polite, or clever. You only have to be clear.

Examples:

- "Do not raise your voice at me. We can continue this conversation when it's calm."
- "I'm not comfortable with that joke. Please don't make comments like that to me again."
- "That request is outside our agreement. If you'd like to add it, we can revise the contract and adjust the fee."

Sometimes a calm, firm boundary is enough to reset a relationship. Often, it reveals who they really are.

Step away if needed

You are allowed to exit a harmful interaction.

On a call: "I'm going to end this call now. We can revisit this in writing."

In a meeting: "I'm not willing to be spoken to this way. I'm going to step out."

With a client: "This relationship isn't a fit for how I do business, so I'm ending our work together as of [date]."

Safety comes before sales, before reputation, before being liked.

Document immediately

Right after an incident:

Write down what happened: Date, time, location; who was involved and who witnessed it; exact words or actions, as close as you can remember

Save all evidence: Emails, texts, voicemails, social media messages; screenshots in case anything is deleted

Your notes don't have to be fancy. They just need to be honest and time-stamped. Documentation turns "he said, she said" into a pattern.

Handling abuse when it comes from inside your business

If you are an employee or leader inside an organization, you may have formal channels—and sometimes formal resistance.

Use internal processes, but don't rely on them alone

Review your company's policies: Employee handbooks, anti-harassment and anti-violence policies, reporting procedures. Follow the steps as closely as you safely can.

Report to the next safe level: If the abuser is your direct supervisor, go to HR or their supervisor. If HR is not safe, document attempts and seek outside support (legal counsel, state or federal agencies).

Remember: HR's job is to protect the organization. Your job is to protect yourself.

Protect your employment and your health

Keep a record of your work: Save performance reviews, positive emails, and objective metrics. If retaliation happens, this record matters.

Guard your mental and physical health: Chronic stress is not "just part of the job." Therapy, coaching, medical care, and time off are

strategic decisions, not signs of weakness.

If you ultimately choose to leave, you are not "giving up." You are choosing not to fund abuse with your talent and time.

Handling abuse when you're a business owner

For business owners, especially in a tight-knit market like Oklahoma, abusive partners, clients, or vendors can feel financially dangerous. That's real—and you still have options.

Fire abusive clients and partners

You can end a relationship without starting a war.

Sample language:

- "After reviewing our recent interactions, I've decided our working relationship is no longer a good fit. I'll be completing only the work already agreed to, and our engagement will end on [date]."
- "We require respectful communication and adherence to contract terms in all partnerships. Because that hasn't been the case, we will not be moving forward."

Yes, you might lose money in the short term. You will also free capacity for clients and partners who treat you—and your people—well.

Create a zero-tolerance culture

Put it in writing: Add clear language to your contracts and policies: no harassment, no hate speech, no retaliation, no threats. Spell out consequences, including termination of the relationship.

Train and empower your team: Teach people how to recognize abuse and how to report it. Back them when they say "no" on behalf of the company, even if it risks a deal.

Your brand isn't just your logo or your marketing. It's how safe people feel doing business with you.

When to seek legal or external help

Abuse crosses the line into legal territory faster than many people realize. You don't have to wait until things get extreme.

Seek professional, legal, or external help when:

- There are threats of physical harm, stalking, or property damage
- There is sexual harassment, assault, or coercion
- You're being pressured to do something illegal or unethical
- You are experiencing repeated discrimination or retaliation
- A serious incident happens at work and leadership refuses to act

Support may include:

- Speaking with an employment or business attorney
- Contacting relevant state or federal agencies (for example, for discrimination, wage issues, or safety violations)
- Calling law enforcement when there is immediate danger or criminal behavior
- Utilizing local advocacy organizations and hotlines for safety planning, especially if business abuse overlaps with domestic abuse

You deserve professional backup. You're not "making it a big deal." It already is a big deal.

Reclaiming your power

Abuse in business thrives on secrecy, shame, and the lie that "this is just how it is." The more we name it, the less power it has.

Your power does not come from never being targeted. It comes from:

- Knowing your worth and your rights
- Putting your boundaries in writing and enforcing them
- Walking away from money that costs your soul

- Standing with others who choose respect over fear

In Oklahoma, our business stories often begin with grit: people building from nothing, taking risks, betting on themselves. Protecting yourself from abuse is not separate from that story. It is part of it.

You are allowed to be ambitious and kind, firm and fair, profitable and principled. You are allowed to demand safety, dignity, and respect in every deal, every partnership, every workplace.

That's not bad for business. That is good business.

About the Author

Lisa Lee Martin is a filmmaker, screenwriter, and producer based in Tulsa, Oklahoma. As the owner and operator of RM Entertainment Channel, she brings decades of experience in entertainment production, content creation, and business management to her work. Lisa has developed and produced multiple original television series and manages streaming platform operations across major networks including Roku, AppleTV, FireTV, and AndroidTV. Through Raman Martin Film Productions, she has led projects from script development through post-production, combining creative vision with practical business acumen. Lisa is passionate about empowering fellow entrepreneurs and creatives to build sustainable, respectful businesses in Oklahoma's growing entertainment and business landscape.