



RESEARCH STUDIES

workplacebullying.org

**The WBI Website
2014 Instant Poll-A**

**Personal Attributes of
Bullied Targets at Work**

Gary Namie, PhD - Research Director

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PERSONAL ATTRIBUTES OF BULLIED TARGETS AT WORK

WBI 2014-A Instant Poll

Since the start of WBI, we have been conversing with bullied targets who telephone us for advice. Over 10,000 targets have taught us their world from the inside. Previously WBI identified in an online study (WBI, 2003) a set of personal attributes that targets themselves said was the reason they were bullied. That list included being independent, possessing more technical skill than their bully, being liked by peers, an ethicality and honesty the bully did not have and being apolitical — not willing or able to play the game of organizational politics.

Some academic researchers, especially those in business schools who tend to adopt management as their referential lens through which they interpret bullying, investigate factors such as “victim precipitation” or the “provocative victim.” In other words, attributes of targets are seen as causal; it’s a way to blame targets for their fate. It implies that a rational person, when confronted with such provocateurs, would engage in anti-social actions against them because they somehow “deserved it.”

Clearly, no one deserves to be abused and suffer the type of health harm bullying generates. On this all good people should be able to agree.

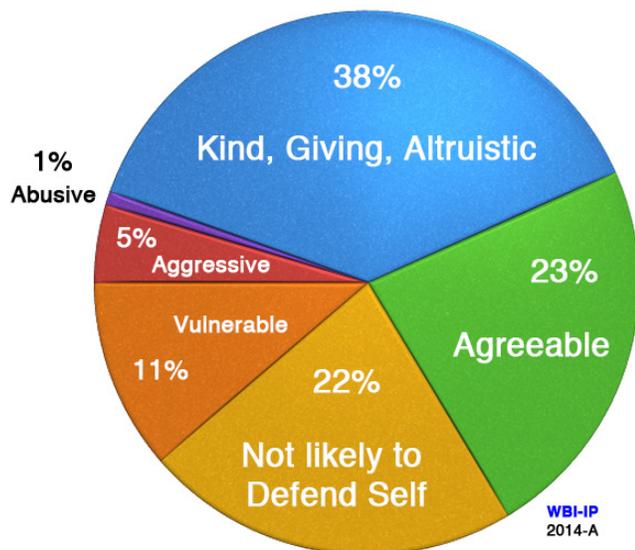
WBI Instant Polls are online single-question surveys that rely upon self-selected samples of individuals bullied at work (typically 98% of any sample). No demographic data are collected. Our non-scientific Instant Polls accurately depict the perceptions of workers targeted for bullying at work as contrasted with the views of all adult Americans in our scientific national surveys.

For this survey, we asked 744 respondents (bullied targets and witnesses) to describe personal attributes of targets:

Which interpersonal style best describes the person TARGETED for abusive mistreatment in bullying situations you have known?

The percentages for each response option were:

- .379 *Kind, Giving, Altruistic*
- .231 *Agreeable - Cooperative*
- .223 *Not Likely to Defend Self*
- .113 *Vulnerable*
- .046 *Aggressive - Argumentative*
- .008 *Abusive*



The most popular self-descriptions were positive, a not unexpected finding. Agreeableness is also a well-recognized personality dimension, one of the “Big Five” of the NEO personality inventory. It means to be “friendly,” “good-natured,” “cooperative,” “trustful,” “nurturing,” “sociable,” and “considerate.”

Many targets cannot defend themselves when surprising attacks are launched against them at work. According to this survey, only about 22% are unable. By Staale Einarsen’s definition of bullying, what makes an individual a target is an inability to successfully thwart the bullying. In other words, we expected a higher percentage in this category. Truthfully, “not likely to defend self” and “vulnerable” are two negative self-perceptions and are not socially desirable choices.

Finally, we asked about targets being “aggressive-argumentative” to assess the likelihood of a “provocative victim.” Less than 5% self-reported this trait. This low representation matches our anecdotal experience that few targets are abrasive or belligerent when we hear their accounts.

Critics of targets are fond of invoking the theory that everyone abused becomes an abuser. That targets of bullying evolve into bullies themselves. The fact is that not all children who were abused in childhood abuse others as adults. That rate of transgenerational transmission is closer to 30%. Neither do battered spouses inevitably turn into batterers. According to this survey, less than 1% of bullied targets admit to bullying others.

In conclusion, the profile of bullied targets does support the notion that they are more pleasant individuals with whom we can all interact than are their aggressive bullies. There is a vulnerability that plagues targets and may be attributable to a “niceness” into which they have been socialized. They are cooperators, not competitors. But bullied targets are certainly not bullies.

Gary Namie, PhD
WBI Research Director

Daniel Christensen
WBI Research Assistant

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