



RESEARCH STUDIES

workplacebullying.org

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

**The Many Ways Workplace Bullying
Offends Its Targets**

Gary Namie, PhD - Research Director

Do not cite findings without crediting WBI

© 2014 Workplace Bullying Institute, All rights reserved

THE MANY WAYS WORKPLACE BULLYING OFFENDS ITS TARGETS

WBI 2014-C Instant Poll

At WBI we teach extensively about the health risks of bullying for its victims, the bullied targets. Health risks are documented in the extant research literature and in the collection of prior WBI studies. We have also explored perceived injustices associated with bullying.

Harassment is considered “offensive” mistreatment. Offensiveness is subjective. What offends one person might not adversely affect others. However, when people are hurt, upset or angry over the behaviors by another person specifically directed at them, they have the right to claim to be offended.

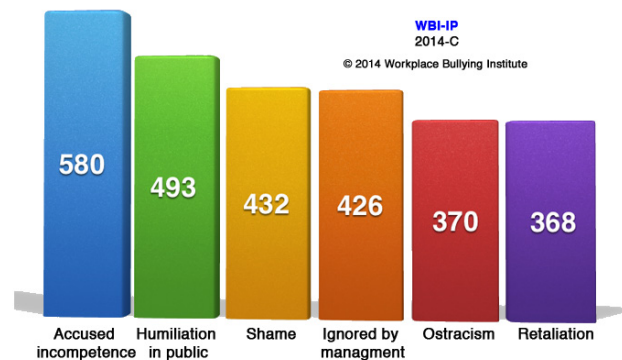
At the very least, bullying is offensive. It is also demeaning, ostracizing, disempowering, cruel, threatening, humiliating, untruthful, and unrelated to work itself.

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 1,031 respondents (bullied targets and witnesses) to describe the five most offensive aspects of the bullying experience.

Question: *As a bullied target, what aspect of the bullying offended you the most? Check the top 5.*

There were a total of 4,588 choices made by the 1,031 respondents. The top 6 from the list of 17 choices appears in the graph. We plotted the actual number of respondents who chose each item. The proportions based on the 1,031 respondents are shown in parentheses. Though respondents were allowed up to five choices, numbers 5 and 6 were virtually tied in rank, so both are shown.



Being accused of incompetence when I possessed more technical skills than my accuser 580 (.568)
 Being humiliated in front of coworkers 493 (.483)
 Feeling ashamed though I did nothing wrong 432 (.423)
 Management ignoring my complaint 426 (.417)
 Having coworkers ostracize, exclude & reject me 370 (.362)
 Retaliation that followed my complaint 368 (.360)

Prior WBI studies identified superior technical skills of targets as the primary reason they were targeted. They posed a threat for the thin-skinned perpetrators who appear less capable by comparison. Therefore, to pick the most competent, “go-to” expert in the workteam for abuse seems the cruelest act of all. The most offensive act was the bully’s lie that the target was incompetent.

The claim is dissonant with everything the target has known about her- or himself for an entire work career. It would be laughable were it not for the power the perpetrator yields to act in accordance with the lie. Soon after leveling the false charges (and they are false by objective criteria), perpetrators rely on human resources support to start a “performance improvement plan.” The PIP itself is humiliating but doubly harmful because it is not based on facts or data.

The group of top items are interrelated. Once an accusation of incompetence is made, nothing the target says will be believed by management. Being humiliated in front of coworkers triggers and justifies coworkers’ social exclusion directed at the target, their former friend. And each of the tactics generates a great deal of shame.

When managers ignore complaints of workplace bullying, several consequences follow. First, the complainant, the bullied target, is made to believe that the complaint is “illegitimate.” That is, the person is made to feel that he or she had no right to feel wronged. Second, by ignoring the complaint or treating it with indifference, management, speaking for the employer, is saying that the problem with the bully is not real or is not as big as the target believes it is. Management support for the bully trumps all of the harm the perpetrator caused the target. Third, when management abdicates its responsibility for the bullies behavior, it shifts the blame from leadership to a lower level, HR, problem. In fact bullying can be resolved only by leadership, not HR.

The lies, humiliation, shame and exclusion are the most insufferable aspects of bullying and define the experience.

Finally, retaliation has been shown to be inevitable (in 99% of cases according to an earlier WBI study). Senior managers tend to punish complainants who dare to reveal negative information about bullies in lower or middle management with strong personal bonds with those senior managers.

There were a total of 4,588 choices made by respondents across the list of 17 items. Not everyone chose 5 items. In rank order from highest to lowest, with proportions based on the total number of choices (which will not add to 1.000) of each, here are the responses:

The Top 6 Ranked Items

Being accused of incompetence when I possessed more technical skills than my accuser .126

Being humiliated in front of coworkers .107

Feeling ashamed though I did nothing wrong .094

Management ignoring my complaint .093

Having coworkers ostracize, exclude & reject me .080

Retaliation that followed my complaint .080

The Other 11 Items

Having coworkers not support me .074
 Not being left alone to do my work without meddling .072
 HR not treating my complaint seriously .067
 Losing my job .048
 Told to be sympathetic towards the bully's issues .037
 Stigmatized as weak or as victim .032
 Told to toughen up .032
 My inability to get a comparable next job .022
 The bad reference that prevented getting a next job .019
 Denial of unemployment .007
 Denial of workers comp claim .003

Some other noteworthy results:

- a) "Losing my job" was less offensive than nine other indignities suffered.
- b) It is more offensive to bullied targets to be ignored by management than by HR. Perhaps so little is expected of the latter group.
- c) The low ranking given to denial of unemployment could be the result of (1) the acceptance by unemployment claims agents that bullying leads to constructive discharge that was not in the bullied target's control, or (2) the fact that so many other items better described the total bullying experience. The same can be said about the low rate assigned to denial of workers comp claims.

Gary Namie, PhD
 WBI Research Director
 Daniel Christensen
 WBI Research Assistant

**WORKPLACE
 BULLYING
 INSTITUTE**
workplacebullying.org