

Employer Engagement in preventing/correcting workplace bullying: Two completely different views

Perspective 1 is through the lens of people who know bullying from the inside, from the perspective of being the target of a bully's wrath. They have the experience with their employer's involvement with bullying. People who visit the WBI website and complete a front-page Instant Poll weigh in on a variety of issues. From their answers, we can describe the world through the lens of bullied targets because site visitors (98%) declare themselves to be bullied targets. The research samples are called "self-selected" samples. Despite the polls being "unscientific," they provide the most useful information for other bullied targets and shed light on the bullying phenomenon.

Perspective 2 is the national snapshot captured when we commission a national poll. We did this in August for the 2010 WBI U.S. Workplace Bullying Survey. Our pollsters, Zogby International, polled 4,210 individuals selected to represent all adult Americans. The sample was a "scientific" one because of the sampling methodology used. It allows WBI to extrapolate the findings to the general U.S. adult population. Surveys like these meet the requirement for publication in scientific journals and at academic conferences. However, when half of the population has no knowledge of bullying (49.6% of the 2010 WBI-Zogby respondents claimed never witnessing and never being bullied), results can be misleading.

What a difference personal experience makes. For instance, we asked in our National Survey and also in one of our Instant Polls:

How engaged is your employer with preventing or correcting workplace bullying?

A large portion -- 36.9% -- of the national survey respondents said they were "not sure" about employer activity. We did not give the online survey respondents the same opportunity. We eliminated the "not sure" people and adjusted the percentages accordingly for a direct comparison between the two groups. Here are the differences.

For each response category, the percentages for survey group are given.

Employer is ...	National Survey Adult Americans (n = 2,658)	Targets' Survey Online Sample (n = 332)
Very engaged. Employer has a specific policy, separate from harassment and violence policies. Policy is enforced.	33.4%	2.7%
Partially engaged. Employer has the specific policy, but does not enforce it.	9.9	12
Promotes awareness. Employer sponsors training or seminars. No policy	11.8	4.2
Unengaged. No employer activity. Unaware.	42.6	35.2
Resistant to topic. Refuses to educate employees or to create policy when asked by union or employees.	2.2	45.7

From the online targets' survey, we see that 81% of employers are either doing nothing to address bullying or actually resisting action when requested to do something. The non-expert public direct comparison percentage is 44.8.

Most startling is how optimistic is the general public that employers are very engaged in the battle against workplace bullying. One-third of adult Americans gave employers credit for having specific policies and faithfully enforcing them. Perhaps this confidence assumes that since schools have been forced to deal with bullying, workplaces for adults would similarly address bullying. Of course, this statistic is not founded on truth. Bullied targets tell us that less than three percent (2.7%) of employers are actively engaged like the public thinks.

The two views about employer engagement are divergent. The differences are so great that the veracity of one or both groups warrants scrutiny. Who shall be trusted -- the "average" American or a veteran of the bullying wars? We have 14 years experience with the latter group. They have proven themselves to us to be honest.

It also is true that one cannot imagine the intensity of the defense for the bully coupled with attempts to discredit and demoralize you, the target, until it happens to you. In other words, without direct experience, you might believe the promises that all employers care deeply about the health and safety of their workers. This is a naive belief not supported by the evidence -- empirical (as shown in the above table) and anecdotal (if you talk to bullied targets).

The findings above illustrate a second point about the American public. Americans hold myths about employers as benevolent stewards of workers. They want to believe. And as most elections prove, they are susceptible to slogans, broad promises, and symbols. Facts and evidence pale by comparison. Americans are willing to ignore facts when their worldview dictates a contrary view. This indefensible ignorance about employer actions seems to have affected our own national survey.

It is critical that lawmakers understand the reality of the bullying phenomenon and employer resistance to voluntary action. A major point of our advocacy for the anti-bullying Healthy Workplace Bill is that without laws compelling action, employers will continue to ignore bullying. Employer lobbying groups promise that voluntary action will suffice. When lawmakers, the source of much of the over-hyped optimism and sloganeering in our culture, adopt the false belief that a third of employers are doing the right thing now, they will be reluctant to sponsor or support the legislation.

The danger of a society duped by untruths about workplace bullying is that action is stalled. The more credible truth about employer action is that very little is happening. Targets have told us so.

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Zogby International was commissioned by the Workplace Bullying Institute to conduct an online survey of 4,210 adults from 8/18/10 to 8/23/10. The margin of error is +/- 2.2 percentage points. The sample was weighted to reflect accurate gender, age, and regional representation.