



RESEARCH STUDIES

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

**Believe It Or Not:
Impugning the Integrity of
Targets of Workplace Bullying**

Gary Namie, PhD - Research Director

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ARE TARGETS BELIEVED

WBI 2014-F Instant Poll

People who find themselves trapped in a bullying scenario can attest to the crazymaking, irrational nature of the mistreatment. Much of the harm caused by the abusive conduct stems from the shattering of targets' beliefs about fairness, fairness in the work world specifically. First, they are typically the high performers who unknowingly trigger the envy of perpetrators. Targets are aware of their work skill at a deep personal ontological level. Perpetrators come into their lives who determined to reject the agreed-upon perceptions of the targets' skills. There are objective truths, a reality.

When Bullies are Bosses

Perpetrators often use their formal (by organizational rank) or informal power to state the obviously opposite perception about technically skilled targets. Though this defies reality, they convince organizational allies to believe them and not targets.

In simplest form, it becomes a "he said, he said" deadlock. But most bullies who are bosses rely on support from higher up to add weight to their side.

The shrewdest perpetrators use ingratiation over many years to convince their executive sponsors (their enablers) that they, the bullies, are indispensable. Further, if and when they are described as abusive or destructive by one or more targets in the future, the executive will defend her or his "indispensable" perp by ignoring the target's portrayal of a friend and colleague.

Thus conditions are not favorable when targets report the facts about what they have experienced at the hands of the favored perpetrator. After all, targets do bring negative news about people who typically outrank them.

When Bullies are Coworkers

In situations where targets have multiple perpetrators, there are many individuals who can provide accounts of alleged bullying incidents that will be at odds with what targets say happened.

For targets bullied by a gang of coworkers (cliques and mobs also are apt descriptions), it is doubly negative. Not only do they outnumber the target, the target is deprived of the chance to have her or his story corroborated by coworkers. Though few coworkers ever step up to offer support to targets, some do. When coworkers are the bullies, the potential source of support is lost.

Gullible investigators (typically working inside the organization for another department) will have their judgement swayed by many against one, and believe the tale that many tell even if those versions are not true.

The Effects of Not Being Believed

For targets, it's a matter of honor and integrity. Repeated studies have shown that targets claim that their honesty is one of the major reasons for being targeted for abuse. They do seem to be very principled, non-political workers.

Such moral individuals are primed to experience letdowns and disappointments when organizations given equal or more credence to abusers and their supporters. The feeling is betrayal and injustice. There is a profound unfairness when lies routinely trump the truth.

The injustice of not being believed when describing one's personal story is compounded by the sense of powerlessness imposed on targets when employers grant unassailable credibility to higher ranking people, regardless of their mendacity. In most organizations, truth is spoken by management, lies by non-supervisory workers.

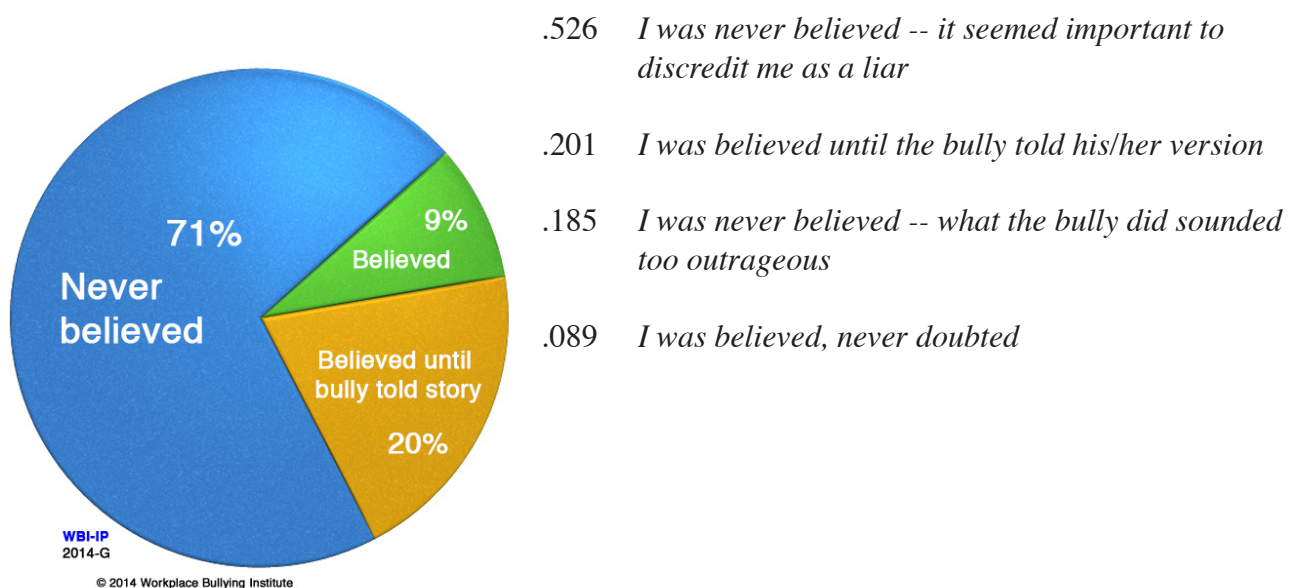
So, whether or not the reason for disbelieving targets is the institutional hierarchical rigidity, being outnumbered or being outmaneuvered by a political animal operating in a cynical world, not believing a truth-telling adult is a destabilizing experience.

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.

In this survey, we asked 666 respondents (bullied targets and witnesses) to tell if they were believed or not when describing their experience with bullying.

Question: *For bullied targets. When I described what happened to me:*

The percentages for each response option were:



Regardless of the reason for disbelief, 71% of targets are never believed from the outset. An additional 20% of targets are treated as unbelievable though initially they were granted credibility. Thus, in total, 91% of targets are not believed when they describe their bullying experiences.

Consider the inanity of not believing recipients of abuse. We've lost our moral compass. Who is motivated to lie — the perpetrator or victim? The bully is motivated to manufacture a case that the well known competent target should be terminated because of incompetence. It's a case built on lies in performance appraisals over time. If targets were the liars, they would lie about strengths, not weaknesses. They would not confess to being emotionally wounded, depressed, spending weekends in bed, strained relationships with spouses or partners. Exposing one's vulnerability, shame and humiliation is not the material on which lies are built.

In some cases, disbelief of targets is couched in the benign sounding line "there are two sides to every story." At other times, the target is straightforwardly accused of lying. In 18% of cases, the disbelief is based on the notion that the conduct described is too outrageous to be believed. "Bob would never do anything like that." Just because Bob reserves his worst behavior for behind closed doors so as to be not seen by others, targets are first-person witnesses. Perpetrators hiding behind closed doors think ahead. They want deniability. And when a power imbalance is present, the manager is the one believed while the target is not.

To not be believed is an insult. It impugns the integrity of the person not believed. Insult added to the stress-related health injuries from suffering abuse at work.

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

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