



RESEARCH STUDIES

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**2013 WBI - Zogby
Workplace Bullying from the
Perspective of U.S. Business Leaders**

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2013 WBI-Zogby: Workplace Bullying from the Perspective of U.S. Business Leaders

Most of the research conducted by the Workplace Bullying Institute (WBI) queries individuals who have declared themselves to be targets of workplace bullying. That is, we are able to see the world through the lens of targets. These surveys are based on self-selected samples, and are necessarily non-scientific.

In a WBI 2010 survey of 333 target-respondents, they stated that only 4% of employers had raised awareness of bullying, whereas 81% had done nothing to stop bullying. Of the employers who did nothing, 46% were described as “resistant” to the topic.

WBI asked 311 targets in 2012 to describe policies their employers had created to address workplace bullying. Only 5.5% of employers were given credit for having a policy and enforcement procedure that effectively covered bullying (3% of those policies were titled “Respect” Policies). (WBI-2012-IP-B)

In a separate 2012 survey, 250 targets reported that 30% of their employers said that bullying “doesn’t happen” (at their workplace). Additionally, respondents said that 88% of American employers failed to take action at all. Employers denied their responsibility to fix the problem. (WBI-2012-IP-E)

The portrait of employer activity as told by targets was unflattering. We were able, thanks to the resources of Zogby Analytics, to poll business leaders directly. The results enable a comparison of target and executive perspectives.

The Survey

Zogby Analytics was commissioned by the Workplace Bullying Institute to conduct an online survey of 315 U.S. business leaders in three market areas: San Francisco, New York City and Washington D.C. The survey was completed January 21, 2013.

Using trusted interactive partner resources, thousands of business leaders from the target regions were invited to participate in the interactive survey. Each invitation is password coded and secure so that one respondent can only access the survey one time.

Based on a confidence interval of 95%, the margin of error for 315 is +/- 5.6 percentage points. This means that all other things being equal, the identical survey repeated will have results within the margin of error 95 times out of 100.

The sample consisted of three groups of decision makers: Owner or partner (Owners); CXO/Administrator/Director (CXOs); President/VP/Manager (VPs). There were 58 owners, 95 CXOs, and 158 presidents. One hundred ten respondents led companies with more than 500 employees, 47 led companies with between 201-500 employees, and 48 led companies with between 50-200 employees, and 106 led companies with less than 50 employees.

Two WBI-relevant questions were asked as part of the larger Business Leaders Survey.

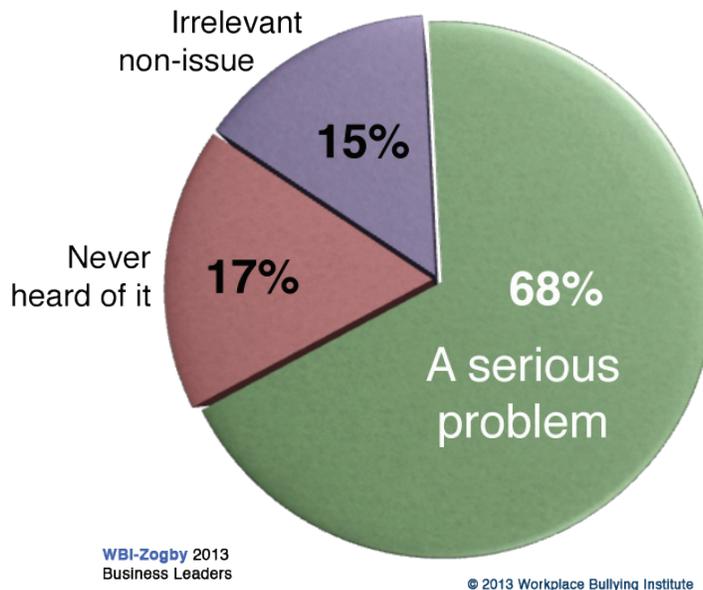
QUESTION 1

Of the original 315 respondents to the first question, 65 chose the “Not sure” response. The results for the 250 remaining respondents who had an opinion are below.

Which of the following best describes your opinion of “workplace bullying” (repeated abusive conduct, “status-blind harassment” that is currently legal) ?

The percentages for each response option were:

- .68 *It is a serious problem*
- .17 *I never heard of it*
- .15 *It is irrelevant, a non-issue, bullying affects only children*



Across the three categories of leaders, the pattern was similar. Bullying as a serious problem received the highest rank. The same was true for geographical regions and size of the company.

The Comparison

To compare target to executive opinions on QUESTION 1, WBI conducted its own instant poll survey (WBI-2013-IP-B).

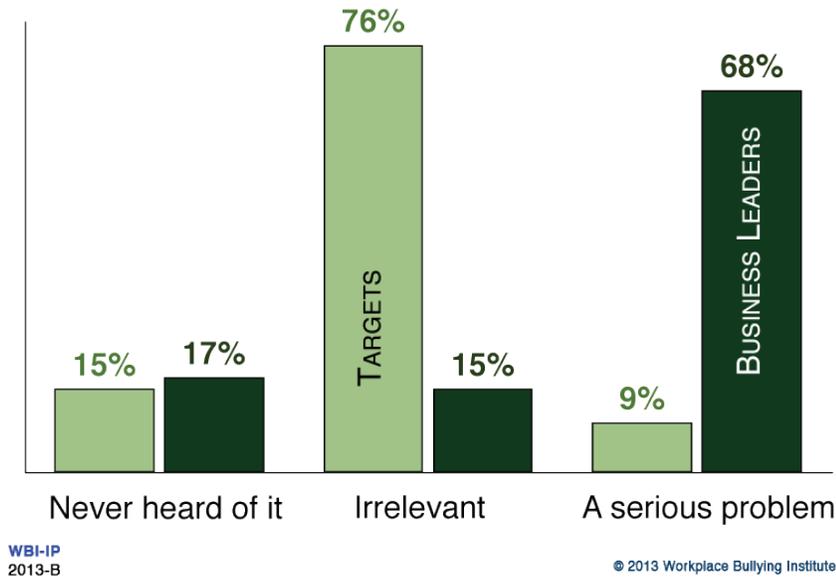
WBI Instant Polls are online single-question surveys that rely upon self-selected samples of individuals bullied at work (typically 98% of any sample). No demographic data are collected. Our non-scientific Instant Polls accurately depict the perceptions of workers targeted for bullying at work as contrasted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

We asked 285 target-respondents to answer the following question.

In your organization, which of the following best describes the owner's or senior executive's personally held opinion of workplace bullying?

Percentages of each response were:

- .09 *They think it is a serious problem*
- .15 *They never heard of it*
- .76 *They think it is irrelevant, a non-issue*



Clearly, the opinions of the two groups differ significantly. Less than 10% of bullied targets believe that executives consider workplace bullying a serious problem. The basis for doubt is that targets typically attempted (unsuccessfully, according to other WBI surveys) to have senior managers act as if it were serious. Similarly targets are dubious about executive opinions, stating that 76% of executives consider bullying irrelevant, thus not deserving attention.

Business leaders reported the obverse in the Zogby survey. They preferred to cast bullying as a serious problem and not irrelevant. From this pair of opinions, we infer that executives chose what they consider “socially desirable” opinions. To report otherwise would make them appear unsympathetic. Targets might interpret the differences as hypocritical, a mismatch of words and actions.

Or perhaps this finding is evidence of a sea change in public opinion about workplace bullying since WBI started its work in 1997 that has even captured business leaders’ attention. It might reflect the new “correct” attitude to adopt. Regardless of the underlying motive, it is reason for optimism.

QUESTION 2

Of the original 315 respondents to the second question, 30 chose the “Not sure” response. The results for the 285 remaining respondents who had an opinion are below.

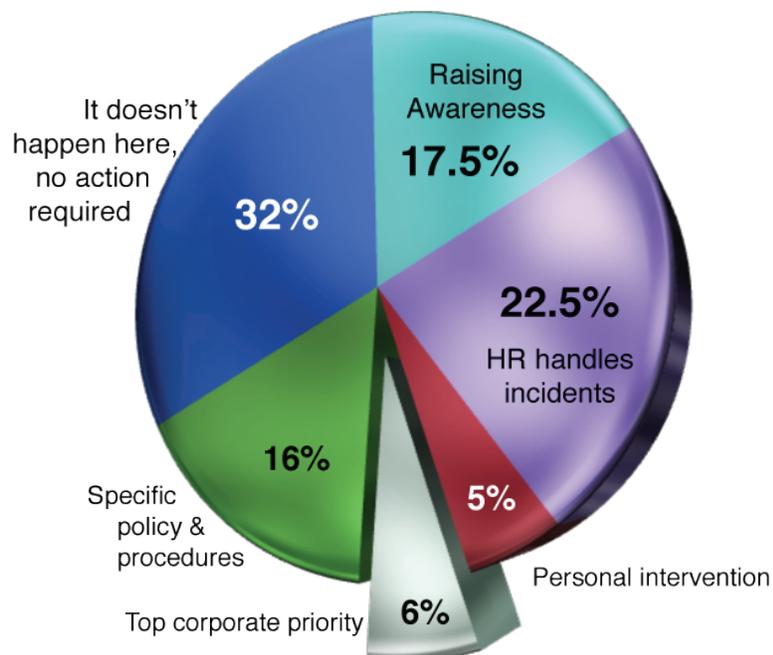
Which of the following best describes what your company is doing about workplace bullying?

The percentages for each response option were:

- .320 *It doesn't happen here, no action is required*
- .225 *When incidents arise, HR handles them case by case*
- .175 *We have raised awareness on the topic*
- .160 *We have specific policy/procedures to address workplace bullying systematically*
- .060 *Leadership is committed to end bullying as a top corporate priority*
- .050 *I have personally intervened in cases*

The responses to this particular question allow us to compare the executive perspective to that of bullied targets. For instance, 17.5% of business leaders said that in their companies they have raised awareness about workplace bullying. Whereas targets said that only 4% of companies had done so.

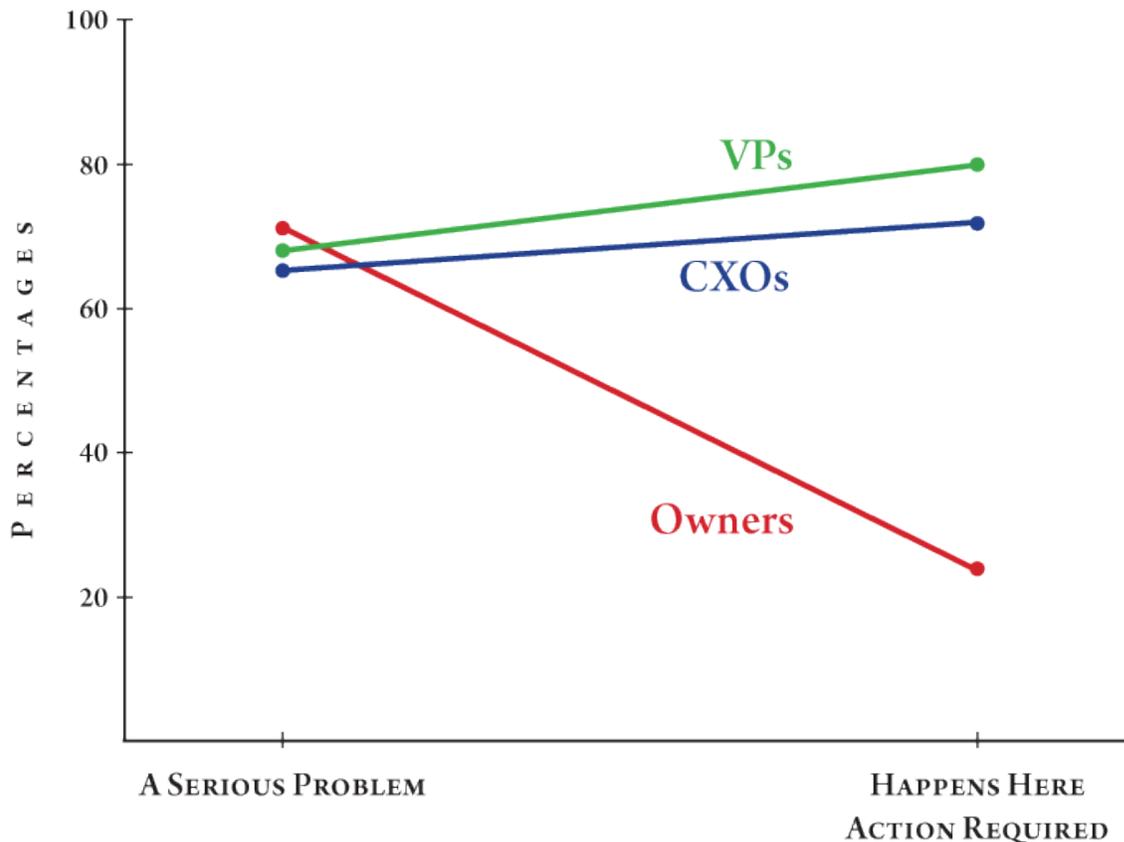
Business leaders claim that more of their companies have adequate and specific workplace bullying policies (16%) than targets reported (5.5%). The target survey (WBI-2012-IP-B) results showed that targets admitted that their companies had some kind of policy in effect in 38% of cases. However, targets believed that 32.5% of those policies were weak or ineffective or inappropriate.



Remarkably, there was agreement between business leaders and targets with respect to the percentage of companies in which bullying supposedly did not occur. Targets said that leaders believe this to be true in 30% of cases and 32% of business leaders in this survey stated the same. This means the targets accurately perceived the view of executives in their companies.

The opinions of business leaders and targets diverge dramatically when considering what percentage of companies are taking any kind of action to prevent or correct workplace bullying. Of the business leaders 68% report their company has taken action, while 88% of targets claim that no action is being taken. The views reflect a major disconnect.

A comparison between responses to Question 1 and Question 2 reveals a confirmation that workplace bullying is problematic, but for Owners it does not happen in their companies and no action is required. The distance from frontline workers and in-the-trenches workplace concerns seems to account for the differences in whether or not action need be taken. Owners, the farthest from daily routines, said bullying is a serious problem (72%) in general, but not a problem in their companies (only 28% would act). The groups closer to the workplace, CXOs and VPs, also describe bullying as a serious problem (65% & 68%, respectively). Unlike Owners, CXOs believe it happens in their companies and action is warranted (73.5%). Similarly VPs think action should be taken (78.6%). CXOs and VPs with more operational responsibilities than Owners believed that something should be done about workplace bullying.



The rank ordering of responses regarding what their companies are doing to prevent workplace bullying varied across leader categories. For Owners, the belief that “bullying doesn’t happen here” was tenfold more frequent than other actions. CXOs assigned nearly equal high frequencies to “bullying doesn’t happen here” and “HR handles incidents.” For that group, “raising awareness” was third most frequent. VPs, the group closest to the workplace itself, gave highest ranking to “HR handles incidents” with “raising awareness” a close second. VPs ranked third “bullying doesn’t happen here.”

The action that CXOs (24%) and VPs (27%) prefer is to have HR handle incidents when they arise on a case-by-case basis. Companies with more than 500 employees were the most likely to rely on HR (36%). Only 4% of Owners said they had intervened in bullying cases.

Discussion

An important point for the reader to remember is that bullied targets are not merely complainants. Some never complained but lost their jobs nevertheless. Targets are the consumers of an employer’s anti-bullying services. They are the ones who ask for help and, if that help is denied, they are the most aware of that denial. In other words, if an executive believes that delegation of the bullying problem to Human Resources is sufficient to stop the bullying and the bullied target knows firsthand the inadequacies of HR solutions, one must give greater weight to the target’s perspective. It is possible that a well-intentioned executive believes HR will do “the right thing,” but it is unlikely that that executive follows through and discovers the conclusion of individual cases. Tracking individual cases is not a common executive function. Therefore, they can be forgiven for not knowing.

The interesting contrast between Owners and the two operational categories of leaders suggest that CXOs and VPs are willing to stop workplace bullying. This view may be too optimistic given the reliable reports over the years from bullied targets that employer anti-bullying initiatives are half-hearted at best. The problem is rarely addressed directly and honestly.

From our consulting experience, we know that leadership commitment predicts success with any company-wide change initiative. An anti-bullying campaign presents special challenges. Leadership commitment is more necessary than ever. Overall only 6% of the business leaders in this survey said that bullying was a top priority. CXOs had the “highest commitment” at 8%, VPs at 6%, and Owners at 4%.

In order for a sea change in American corporate culture to occur regarding workplace bullying, more business leaders will have to make it a top priority and they will need to rely less on HR as the solution.

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