



# The Tallest Poppy

Successful women pay a high price for success

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## About the authors

**Dr. Rumeet Billan** is an award-winning, internationally recognized entrepreneur, learning architect, author, speaker and humanitarian. She raises human potential and builds resilient leaders. Dr. Billan is one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women (Women's Executive Network) and her work has been featured in *Forbes*, *The Globe and Mail*, *The Financial Post*, and more. She is the President of Viewpoint Leadership and an expert on Psychological Capital and Resilience. She has just released ***Who Do I Want to Become?***, a book for anyone, or any age, who has been stumped by the question of what they're going to be when they grow up. She contributes to social impact initiatives that improve access to, and quality of, education in North America, South America and Africa. Through her work, Dr. Billan provides a platform that encourages youth, women, communities and organizations to envision what could be possible. For further details, please visit [www.rumeetbillan.com](http://www.rumeetbillan.com)

**Todd Humber** is the publisher and editor-in-chief for *Canadian HR Reporter* at Thomson Reuters. He has been covering the human resources profession as a journalist since 1998.

He is the recipient of a Gold Kenneth R. Wilson Award for Best Editorial (2016) and won an honourable mention in that same category for 2015. He has chaired numerous conferences and recently served as the emcee for the National HR Awards and Canada's Safest Employers.

Todd holds a journalism diploma from Durham College and studied history at the University of Windsor.

## Executive Summary

Employee satisfaction and productivity are major issues in workplace studies, and some research has focused on professional women. But very few studies have looked at the relationship women have with their co-workers and superiors and how that relationship affects not only their productivity, but their emotional and psychological well-being.

*The Tallest Poppy* remedies that. It looks specifically at working women across Canada from all demographics and professions, and how their psychological health and workplace performance are affected by their interactions with both colleagues and supervisors. And the results are discouraging.

The study makes for alarming reading and should be a wake-up call for companies and leaders across the country. An immediate change is needed to support women in the workplace, to encourage their accomplishments and, not incidentally, to increase productivity for companies.

The research study, *The Tallest Poppy*, is a partnership between Thomson Reuters, *Canadian HR Reporter*, Viewpoint Leadership and Women of Influence. Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) is a term commonly used in Australia, referring to flowers that grow higher than others being cut down to size by the shorter flowers around them. The study shows that TPS is alive and well in Canadian companies, and the result is devastating to female employees.

### Survey methodology

The study was planned and carried out in 2018. A survey was sent out to contacts in the databases of *Canadian HR Reporter* and Women of Influence, and was also shared on social media networks. Most of those who received the survey were women. The survey was sent out on May 8, 2018, and responses closed on June 30, 2018. In the end, 1,501 respondents took part in the survey.

This paper will discuss the data revealed by the survey about the prevalence of TPS in Canadian workplaces, looking at who is doing the cutting, the destructive effect it has on women both in terms of their psychological health and workplace performance, the damage done to company productivity and retention, and what solutions were offered to the problems.



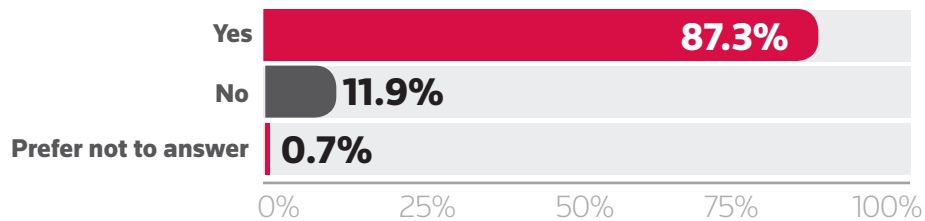
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### Does TPS Exist?

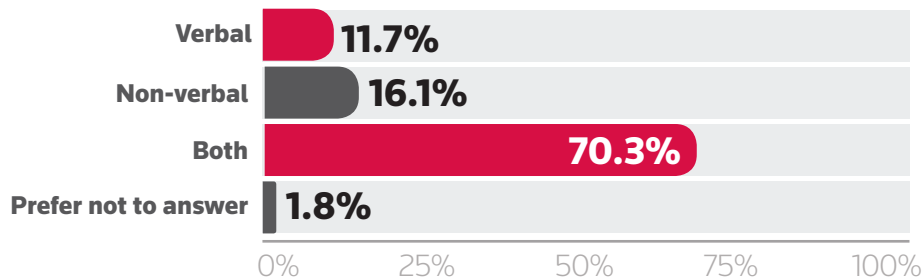
The data is troubling. Of the 1,500 respondents, 87.3 per cent felt their achievements at work were undermined by colleagues or superiors. More than 81 per cent said they had experienced hostility, were ostracized or penalized at work because of their success at their job.

#### Q1 Have you felt that your achievements were undermined by others at your workplace?



*Commentary: Nearly nine in 10 respondents feel they have been undermined by others at the workplace — a massive, concerning majority. Clearly, this is an issue that is taking a large toll on individuals and the workplace. It also presents a massive opportunity for HR and leaders to make a big difference.*

#### Q2 Have the penalties been verbal or non-verbal?



*Commentary: Only one conclusion to draw from this — the price paid is both verbal and non-verbal.*

And those attacks came from across the whole spectrum. Respondents worked in many different professions, across all of Canada, at all levels of seniority. Respondents reported that those undermining their achievements and creating the hostilities were split almost evenly between men and women, and that both co-workers and superiors were at fault. These attacks included bullying and cyber-bullying, downplaying or dismissal of achievements, having others take credit for their work and being ignored or silenced. Some respondents even said they had been fired for essentially being too successful at their job.

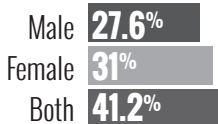
“At a high-level consultant meeting, I had the courage to (constructively) suggest that we might be able to make better progress on increasing both productivity and billable hours/profitability by considering some roundtable reporting changes,” said one respondent. “The boss flew into a rage, berating me in front of my predominantly male colleagues, labeling me as a negative influence on the group. My male colleagues said nothing in my defense at the meeting.”

# 87.3%

Respondents who felt their achievements were undermined by others at work.

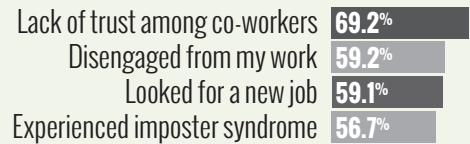
## Men, women equally to blame

The person who undermined you was:



## High cost for employers

Being cut down had the following consequences:



# 69.5%

Respondents agreed that being cut down impacted their productivity.

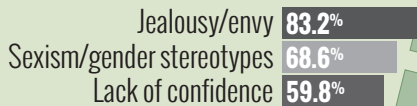
## Lost talent pool

Nearly **one-half** of tall poppies said it had impacted their desire to apply for promotion.

# 48.9%

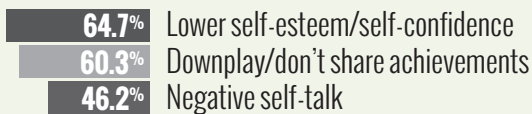
## Why it happens

Jealousy and sexism top list of drivers:



## It takes a toll

How has this impacted you?

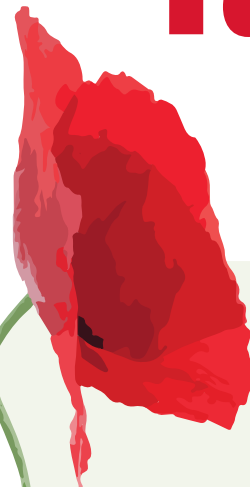


## With friends like these...

Almost half said friends (**43.9%**) had cut them down and more than one-third (**37%**) blamed their social network.



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## If you see something, say something

More than **4 in 10** witnessed a co-worker being cut down and did nothing. About **1 in 10** participated in the cutting.



See [www.hrreporter.com/tallest-poppy](http://www.hrreporter.com/tallest-poppy) for more information.

Source: The Tallest Poppy, a joint research project involving Canadian HR Reporter, Thomson Reuters, Viewpoint Leadership and Women of Influence. More than 1,500 respondents completed the survey in May and June 2018.

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“Three executives, the former owners of the company, surrounded me and herded me over to the handrail overlooking the floor below,” said another respondent. “They were hostile, scathing, physically threatening. Then they herded me into my office, blocking the door and cutting off my exit. Again they were hostile, scathing, berating, physically threatening and I had no help and no witnesses — deliberate on their part.”

“In my first few weeks at a new job, I received praise for something I had done in a weekly e-mail from the boss,” said another. “Co-workers openly stated their jealousy and talked about it all week. It ended up being embarrassing rather than rewarding. This has set the tone for me not wanting to declare any achievements or try to move ahead in this role. I know I will be cut down.”

“After being the first woman in my organization to be promoted to senior management, several of my male co-workers stopped speaking to me,” said a respondent.

“After having joined the organization at a director HR level, I was promoted two years later to the position of vice-president shared services,” said a respondent. “This promotion caused a rapid deterioration in what had been a positive working relationship with my colleagues. Previous peers resented my success and the individuals on the executive leadership team became distant and openly distrustful.”

“I was yelled at in front of my colleagues in a staff meeting by a male supervisor,” a respondent said. “During what we were told was an open discussion, I expressed an opinion on an issue that was different from his. I explained my rationale for my opinion, and he then proceeded to berate me in front of everyone, even though my opinion coincided with that of a male colleague who had spoken right before me, who did not get lambasted in front of everyone.”

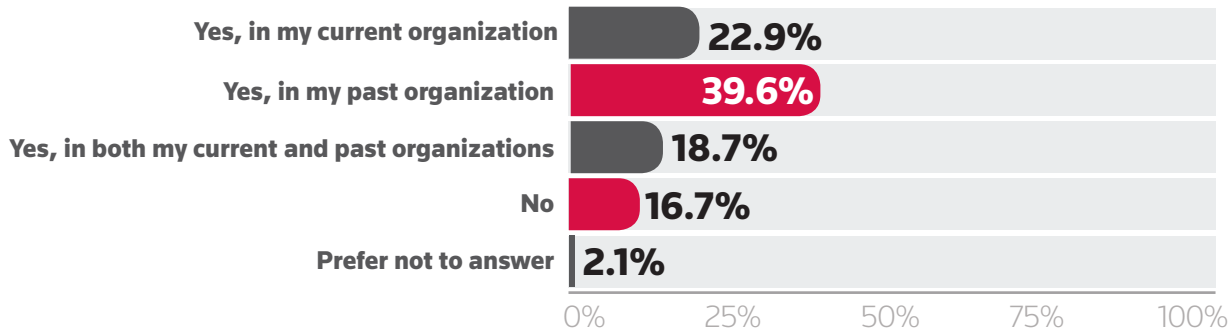
TPS is so widespread in the workplace that even among those responding, more than 40 per cent said they had witnessed examples and had done nothing and 10 per cent admitted to undercutting co-workers themselves.

“I was scared to speak up and offer suggestions or opinions for fear of being denigrated. I’ve observed this behaviour towards others and I didn’t step in to defend them, I chose to sit silent rather than being confronted myself,” said one respondent.

“I have hated myself when I sensed I may have fallen victim to participating in this deplorable behaviour and realize I have done it because it’s prevalent in organizational culture,” said another respondent.

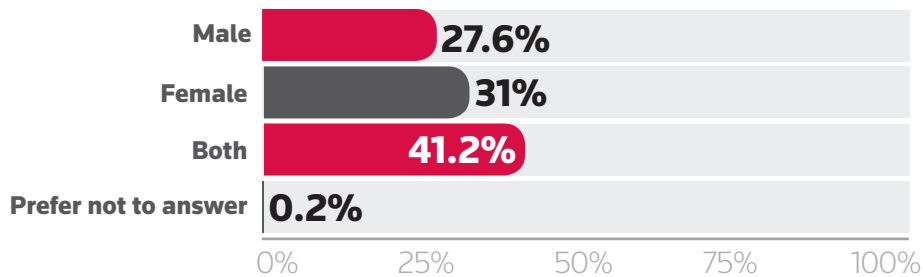


### Q3 Have you experienced hostility, being penalized and/or ostracized at work due to your success and/or achievements?



*Commentary: Beyond just being undermined, a solid majority – more than 80 per cent – said they had experienced hostility because of their workplace and career success.*

### Q4 Think about the person(s) who have penalized or undermined you the most in the workplace. Are they:



*Commentary: Women are slightly more likely than men to be the ones cutting down successful females – but there aren't any clean hands here. Both men and women are guilty of undermining.*

### Q5 What was their relationship to you?

RELATIONSHIP	Male	Female	Prefer not to answer
CEO	74.8%	21.2%	6.5%
C-SUITE EXECUTIVE	69.6%	43.1%	2.7%
SUPERVISOR/MANAGER	56.6%	61.9%	0.9%
PEER/COLLEAGUE	56.1%	72.5%	0.3%
DIRECT REPORT	46%	66.6%	2.8%
CLIENT	76.5%	41.3%	8.7%
COMPETITOR	59.9%	57.1%	9.6%
VENDOR	68.9%	23.5%	21%
OTHER	51.7%	44.9%	16.1%

*Commentary: There is no "typical" cutter – the survey found men and women at all levels were guilty of undermining successful women. The "other" field included comments about friends of supervisors, the media, strangers and volunteers.*

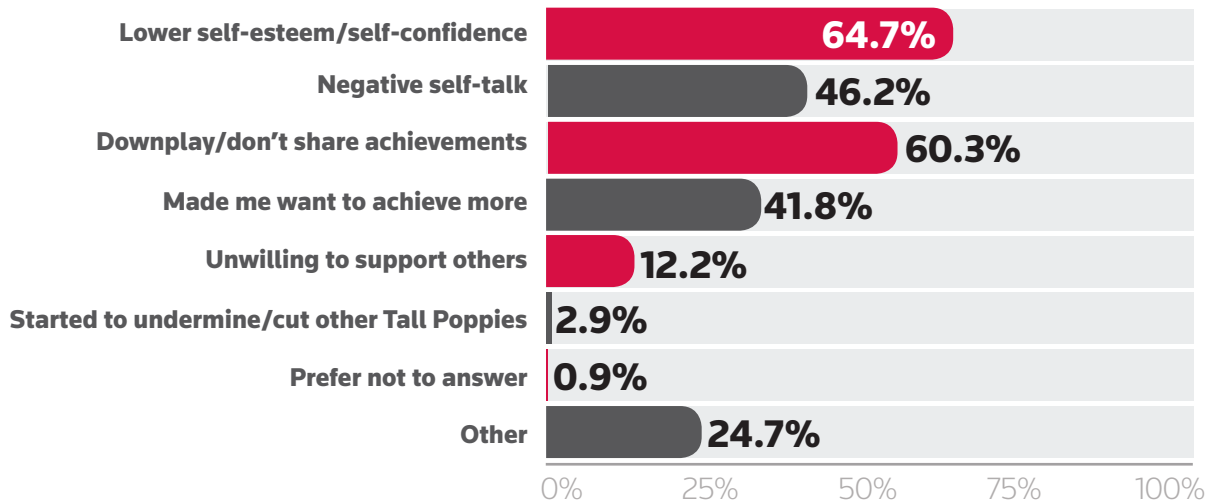
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## How does TPS affect individuals?

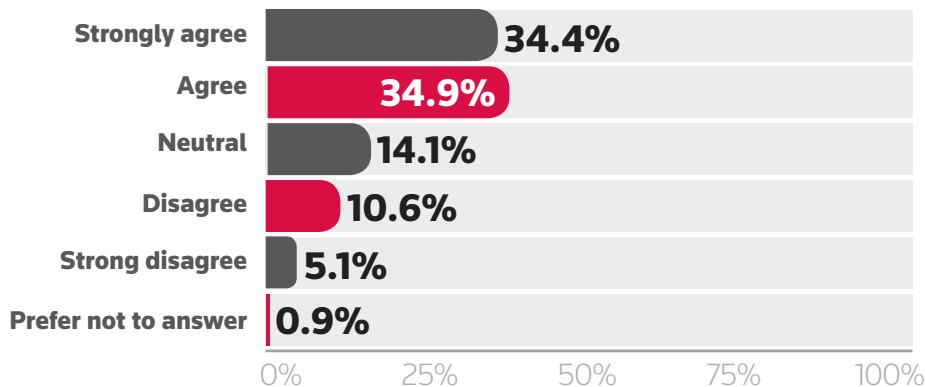
Not surprisingly, respondents reported that TPS had a devastating effect on their mental and psychological well-being and emotional resilience. Among respondents, 64.7 per cent of respondents reported lower self-esteem and self-confidence, 60.3 per cent reported downplaying or not sharing their achievements and 46.2 per cent reported negative self-talk because of constantly being undercut.

### Q6 How has this impacted you? (Select all that apply)



*Commentary: The other field attracted a lot of narrative on the impact. Among them: taking special measures, such as writing down all interactions; sending a message by leaving the organization; imposter syndrome; and feeling rejected and alone.*

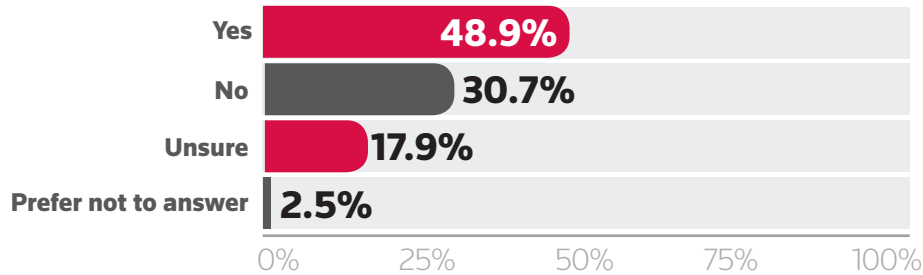
### Q7 Being cut down by others has impacted by productivity at work



*Commentary: Nearly 70 per cent of respondents agree or strongly agree it is impacting productivity. Not much more to be said here. Overwhelming evidence of the toll it is taking.*



## Q8 Has this impacted your desire to apply for a promotion?



*Commentary: Nearly one-half of high performing employees (primarily women) are loathe to apply for a promotion after being cut down.*

"My recent experience has been a complete nightmare, the worst experience I've ever had and worse than I could have ever imagined," said one respondent.

"Seeing my answers to some of these questions increased my own awareness around exactly how deeply my toxic workplace has affected and continues to affect me. I have needed to seek both medical and psychological services to endure my workplace," said another.

"I feel I have nowhere to turn that will get me help without getting me a pile of grief. I'm scared to say anything," said another woman.

"I could not believe that the newsletter recognized a co-worker who put in an ecological toilet at her cottage. That is where I am... less than a composting toilet," one respondent replied.

"I just won an Award of Excellence at my job," said another respondent. "The ceremony is tomorrow. Three people at my workplace have congratulated me. I don't even feel comfortable sharing my achievement on social media or with my close friends even though I'm so proud of the initiative that I worked on to achieve it. I'm so sad that I can't share how excited I am about this."

"...The negative emotions and all the memories that I have experienced were beyond overwhelming... and then the anger for all the wrongs," said a respondent. "This isn't just a small impact, it is deep, emotional and its effect, I don't think, can be recovered from at this point in my life."

"I frequently question my ideas," said another. "I am often paranoid to share my ideas for fear of others taking credit or downright stealing."

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## Q9 In what ways have you been penalized at work due to your successes and/or achievements?

This question generated a lot of comments from participants – nearly 300 detailed the consequences of being successful. And they were not insignificant – a sampling:



"This was my world and I couldn't see that there was life outside of it – yet it was stressful," said a respondent. "It probably destroyed my marriage."

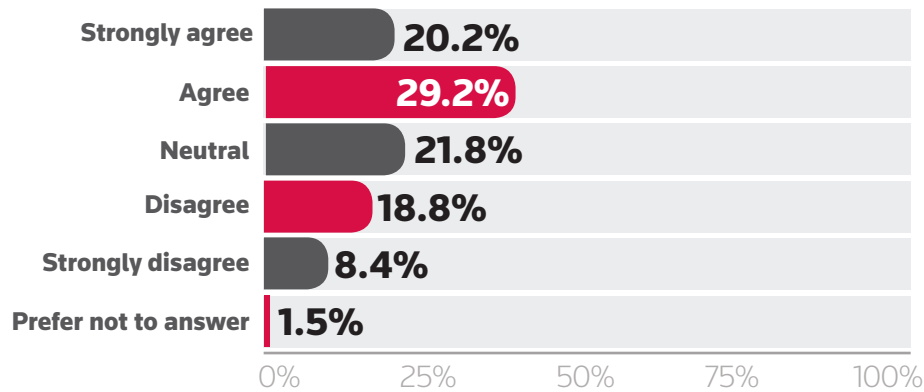
"I became very depressed, developed uncontrollable tics, began to drink more to cope. I had to seek therapy," said a respondent.

"I felt anxiety, not wanting to work," said a respondent. "Others look at me and talk to me as if I am a broken victim."

Similar words and phrases echo throughout the survey’s replies. Respondents talked of “death spirals,” “loss of confidence,” “insomnia,” “illness,” “self-doubt,” “rejection,” “feeling unsafe and threatened.” “PTSD,” “hopelessness” and “mental breakdowns.”

Those feelings alone, alarmingly prevalent among respondents from across Canada and across all industries and levels of seniority, should be enough to spark action from corporations. But when employees are forced to struggle constantly to maintain their emotional resilience or even their sanity, their productivity and enthusiasm inevitably plummet. And that will impact the bottom line of any company.

### Q10 I believe I will be ostracized if I am perceived as ambitious at work.



*Commentary: One-half of respondents believe they will be ostracized if they are perceived as being ambitious.*



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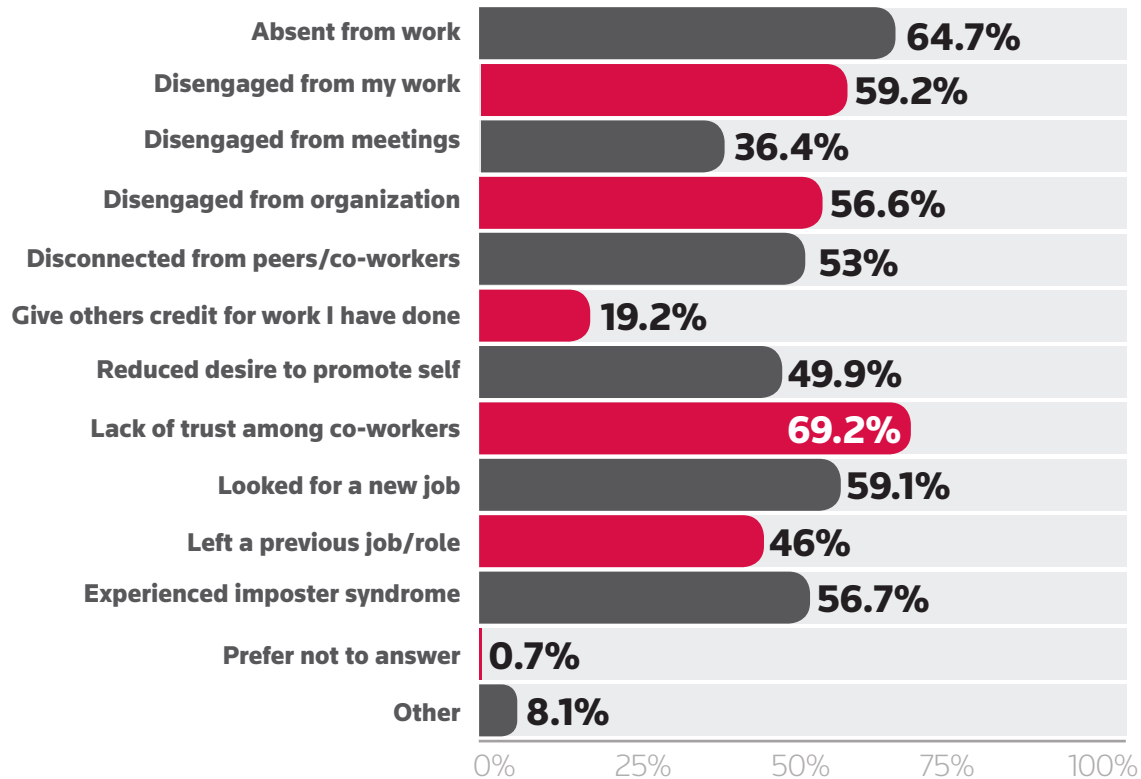
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## How does TPS affect companies?

The study clearly demonstrated the effects of TPS on workers and their productivity. Among respondents, 69.2 per cent reported a lack of trust among co-workers; 59.2 per cent reported feeling disengaged from their work; and 69.5 per cent felt that being regularly attacked and belittled at work had a negative effect on their productivity.

Falling productivity is obviously terrible news for any company. But the study also showed that 48.9 per cent of respondents were less likely to apply for promotion because of experiencing TPS, and it showed that many respondents feel ostracized for their achievements at work. If employees feel they have less to work for, they're less likely to set ambitious goals. This will impact every business, especially those that rely heavily on employee innovation.

## Q11 How has this impacted your productivity at work? (Select all that apply)



*Commentary: Imposter syndrome is a feeling of inadequacy and self-doubt despite evidence of success.*

Replies in the study clearly demonstrate this issue.

"I'm forced to choose between mental health and continuing to be a high achiever," said a respondent.

"I try hard not to stand out," said another. "I dismiss my own accomplishments at work."

"I do not want to attract attention," said another. "I just want to do my work and try to curb and compartmentalize potential bitterness."

"It made me nervous to go to work or care about what I did," said one respondent.

"In my first few weeks at a new job, I received praise for something I had done in a weekly e-mail from the boss," said a respondent. "Co-workers openly stated their jealousy and talked about it all week. It ended up being embarrassing rather than rewarding. This has set the tone for me not wanting to declare any achievements or try to move ahead in this role. I know I will be cut down."

"There is no point to applying for promotion since I know my achievements will be downplayed," said a respondent.

"I recently received a promotion which came along with offside comments from coworkers questioning my abilities and how I moved so quickly through the organization," said a respondent. "The added stresses of this in addition to settling in to a new role were a lot to handle. I would like to wait for longer before applying for another promotion because I know these comments will once again return."

"I feel like hiding most of the time," said one respondent, and "I don't want to be in any light right now, I just want to blend in, work behind the scenes," said another.

If employees aren't seeking promotion and don't want their achievements known, they have little incentive to actually accomplish those achievements. For companies, this is extremely bad news. It means many workers feel no reason to maintain or increase their productivity or to innovate or debate strategy. If an employee just wants to get through the day and go home – "I no longer wish to have any role other than a worker bee," as one respondent said – corporate growth is going to suffer.

Now the news isn't all bad. About 40 per cent of respondents did say that being consistently undermined and belittled made them even more determined to achieve more. But the bad news is that in many of those cases, they felt they would be better able to achieve that success working for a different company. Nearly 60 per cent of respondents said their experience with TPS had led them to actively seek a new job.



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"I got fed up banging my head against the ceiling and left to work somewhere where my skills and talents were valued," said a respondent.

"I left because I had very clear signals a promotion would not be possible," said another respondent. "This is because in order to get ahead in a company, it has to be possible to attribute the positive results of endeavors back to the person who had the idea and/or put in the effort (regardless of their gender or other factors). If colleagues and/or management cannot make this mental connection, in their eyes you have no valid argument for promotion."



"I left the position and found a promotion at an organization that appreciates my value," said a respondent.

"I'm more interested in finding work elsewhere, and starting fresh in a new place with a blank slate," said another.

Obviously, this failure of retention is a problem for any company, especially if those leaving are among the best and brightest or most experienced. But that same negativity can infect a company completely up and down a corporate structure.

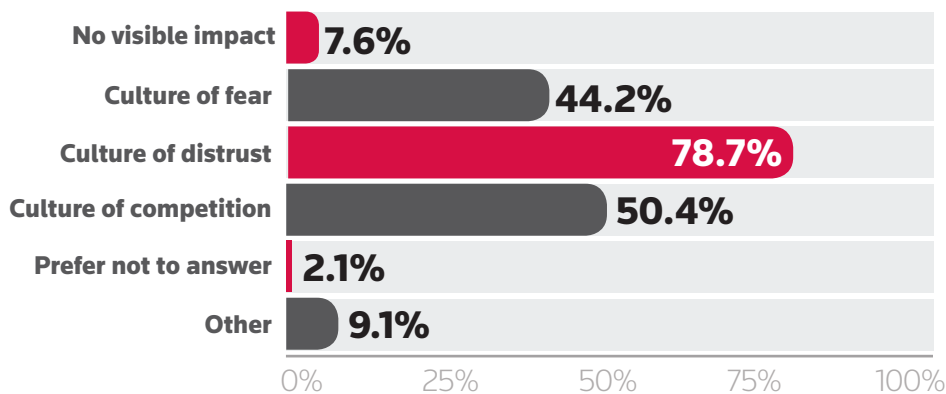
"We live in a highly judgmental culture," said one respondent. "Depending on the organization, it's not just tall poppies that are cut down, but people who are not considered productive enough can also be sneered at. Workplaces can be toxic when people feel they have to prove their value – it can lead some to try to undercut others."

## How to Change Corporate Culture

Is there hope for change?

Interestingly, despite the struggles so many of the respondents have gone through, there were numerous replies that laid out a positive path forward. The bad news is that nobody had a simple one-step solution to the problem, because there isn't just one single solution. Rather, most respondents felt it necessary to change the system itself, to move away from a corporate culture which pits employees against one another and celebrates competition and towards one where empathy and support is valued.

### Q12 How has this impacted the culture of the organization? (Select all that apply)



*Commentary: Fear, distrust and competition are not a recipe for a healthy, productive corporate culture.*

That shift in company culture – towards one that encourages support, achievement and empathy – is required to build the trust of employees, especially the potential high achievers, the ones who could become the leaders of the future, the ones a company desperately needs to keep if it is to succeed going forward.

The first step is for company leaders to deal with reality, to recognize that TPS is very real and must be addressed.

“Accept without question that it is real,” said one respondent. “That people are suffering. That an organization is less than it should be for allowing it to occur or ignoring its existence. That if leadership (at all levels) does not accept it as real, does not examine the roots and processes that allow it to flourish and grow, then they are the ones empowering this widespread, debilitating ‘disease’ to spread.”

Respondents offered numerous suggestions of steps that need to be taken to bring about such a change. These include: education and training on such issues as emotional intelligence, sensitivity, gender bias, diversity and TPS itself; employees speaking up and sticking together; changing reward and promotion structures to favour qualifications and achievement; encouraging communication and

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transparency; eliminating favouritism and old boys' clubs; and implementing zero tolerance policies and actually penalizing those who break them.

Respondents stressed the importance of such change coming from the very top of the company structure.

"Corporate culture starts at the top," said one respondent. "Leaders must say what is important and demonstrate those values by their actions."

"Senior management should model the appropriate behavior – speaking up in support of others' success, intervening (diplomatically or not, as appropriate) when they observe or hear about people disparaging others' success, and encouraging/praising people who take appropriate risks."

"The change must be from the top down," agreed another respondent. "If management demonstrates and enforces the correct behaviour, the lower levels of the company will emulate it. It becomes intrinsic to the corporate culture."

"Lead from the top down – the leaders set the culture of the firm," said another respondent. "If leaders are supportive of success and teamwork, then usually the staff will follow. Get rid of and call out people who do not subscribe to the philosophy of supporting others in your firm."

"They can start hiring leaders (managers/directors) who have PEOPLE skills," said a respondent. "Often, leaders are hired for their work skills and not people skills; they are then more likely to turn a blind eye when Tall Poppy Syndrome is at play – not because they want to, but because they simply don't have the skill-set or confidence to handle the situation well."

With the right people in place at the top, said respondents, it could be possible to change the culture of the company.

"Stop cultivating the idea that success of somebody means failure of someone else," said one respondent. "My current employer is motivating the workers to constantly report on each other and put blame, which opens the door for jealous people or employees with personal agendas to get ahead by disengaging more successful peers."

"It's really a basic principle: another person's success is no threat to your own," said a respondent. "Build an organization that embraces that principle, and proactively demonstrate commitment by frequently and publicly recognizing achievements of individuals... This kind of thing signals and reinforces a culture of shared success and collaboration and reduces the possibility of TPS taking root."

"Foster a culture of competency, empowerment, trust and inclusion. Not fear-based, ruthless and bullying," said another.

Respondents said that companies must be serious about stamping out TPS and its related behaviours, must put strict policies in place and must be willing to apply severe sanctions to individuals who violate those policies.

"It takes understanding that there is a cost to pay to take a stand on this issue, and there must be a willingness by the organization to pay the cost," said a respondent. "For example, if policies are put in place to prevent/minimize these behaviours, then the organization must be willing to let go of individuals who continue to exhibit this behaviour – even if they are a leader or a high performer. That's



the cost. If an organization overlooks it for some individuals, the policy is of no value.”

“Organizations need to develop, enact and effectively utilize workplace harassment and bullying policies,” said another respondent. “Often such policies are in place, but individuals are reticent to either use or support them. Zero tolerance for bullying is a must.”

But respondents recognized that there is also a responsibility for employees to take a stand, to support their co-workers and come together to oppose TPS in all its manifestations.

“Do not be a bystander and address it when it happens,” said a respondent. “Bring up scenarios frequently before it happens. Similar to harassment, racism and exclusion, it has to be addressed, highlighted and brought up at staff meeting to demonstrate how to lead by example.”

“Provide training to staff and management on issues such as Tall Poppy Syndrome, as some may not be aware it exists,” said another respondent. “Ask employees to come forward if they ever feel they are a victim of Tall Poppy Syndrome or witness it throughout the company. The company must make their employees comfortable coming forward and not punish them for it like some companies do.”

“When someone sees this going on, it needs to be called out and dealt with immediately,” said a respondent. “It is also important to show public support for the person who is being cut down. In my experience, the ‘cutter’ makes a point of spreading misinformation around their department, trying to bring other staff on-side. It is important to show that the ‘poppy’ is a valued member of the organization, and that doing your best at work will get you rewarded, not bullied/ostracized/ transferred.”

Respondents also felt that particular attention needs to be paid to young employees, regardless of gender, just starting out at a company, to educate them about the realities of TPS and how to avoid its pitfalls in favour of building a more supportive and encouraging environment. Senior managers also need to make a particular effort to mentor young women to ensure they get a fair chance.

“Have workshops for both young males and females that outline roles and responsibilities of leadership,” said a respondent. “Help guide them through having different genders as leaders and subordinates so that they can appreciate and understand the importance that both roles play. Have dedicated workshops for your tall poppies that allow them to grow in their confidence and understanding of shared fate, in working for and with other women ensuring that they do not lose focus on the importance that men also play in their lives and their growth.”

“Mentor and encourage,” said a respondent. “Walk the talk. Be a professional with excellent discernment ourselves. Support businesses that are run by successful women. Hire young tall poppies! Pave the way within your own organization to ensure they have a positive experience.”



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## Conclusion

As this study conclusively demonstrates, Tall Poppy Syndrome is a very real issue impacting individuals and organizations. It's one that exists across Canada, in all industries and at all levels of all companies. It's an issue that certainly affects the corporate bottom line, in terms of productivity, engagement, morale and retention. It's an issue that destroys capital, both the psychological capital of employees and the literal capital of a company's balance sheets.

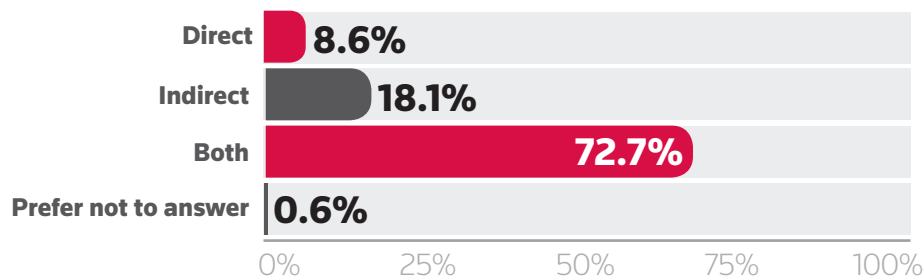
It's also an issue that can have a devastating effect on people's lives linked to depression, fear, anger or sadness. Reading through the study offers a deeply worrying snapshot of how women's lives have been negatively impacted by TPS.

It has to change. And companies with vision can bring that change about. The companies that have the foresight to actively tackle the problems around TPS will be gifting themselves a huge advantage over their competitors. That's an approach that makes good economic sense, if nothing else.

If women with the potential to become leaders or innovators in their field know that your company is serious about offering them equality, support, encouragement and a fair chance at advancement, that is going to make your business a lot more attractive to many qualified employees than a competitor who isn't. Not only will you be boosting your corporate profits, you'll be helping advance equality, not just in the workplace but across society.

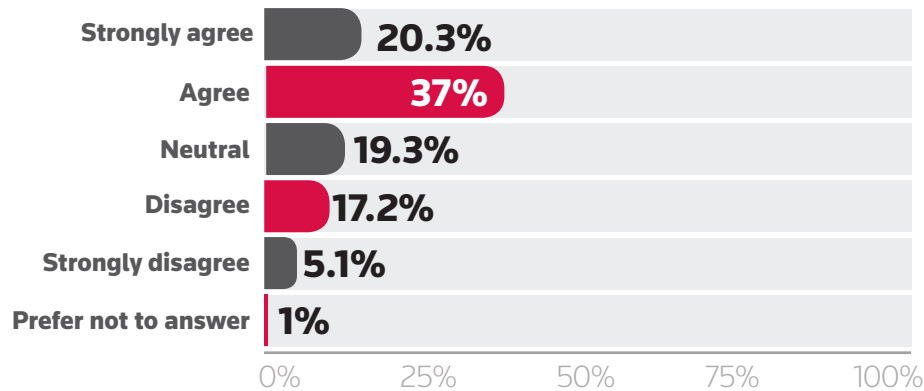
## More findings

**Q13** Were the penalties directed towards you or were they indirect (i.e., behind your back, and reported to you by someone else)?



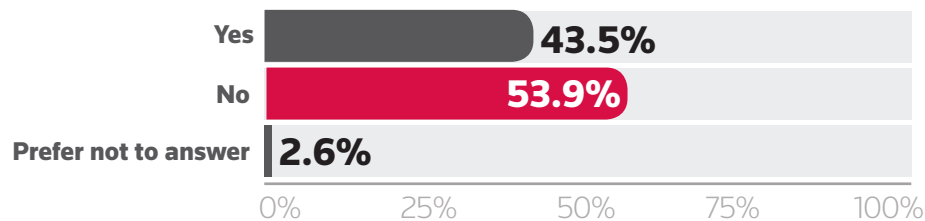
*Commentary: While the penalties were overwhelmingly both direct and indirect, it's not surprising that indirect penalties were more prevalent.*

**Q14** I feel pressured to downplay or not share my achievements/success at work.



*Commentary: More than one-half feel pressure not to brag about their achievements and success at work.*

**Q15** Have you experienced hostility, being penalized and/or ostracized by others outside of work, due to your success and/or achievements?

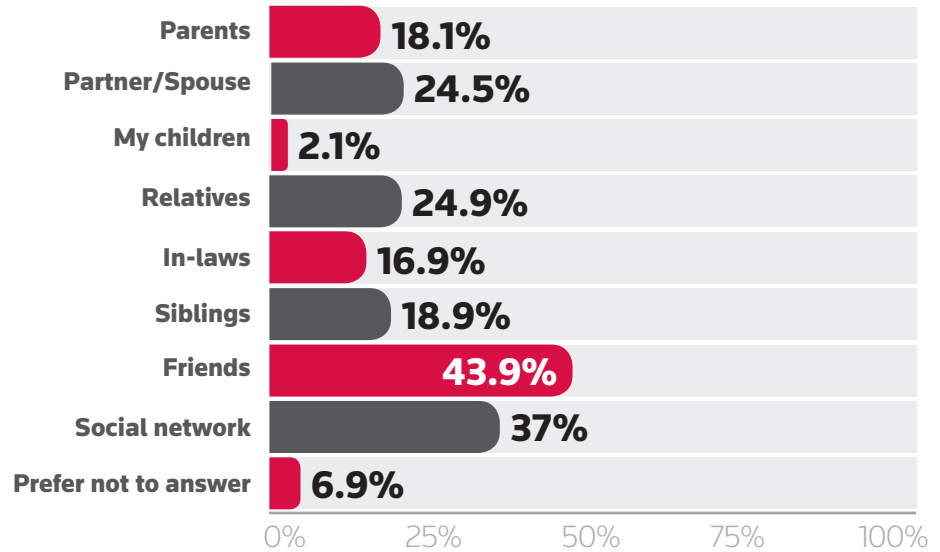


*Commentary: While a minority, more than four in 10 said Tall Poppy Syndrome spreads its ugly tentacles outside the workplace.*

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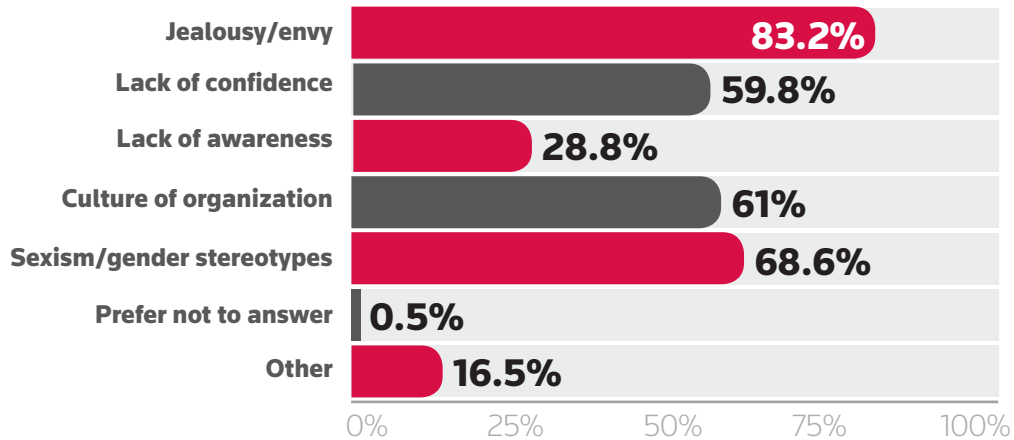
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**Q16** Which person(s) outside of the workplace has treated you this way? (Select all that apply)



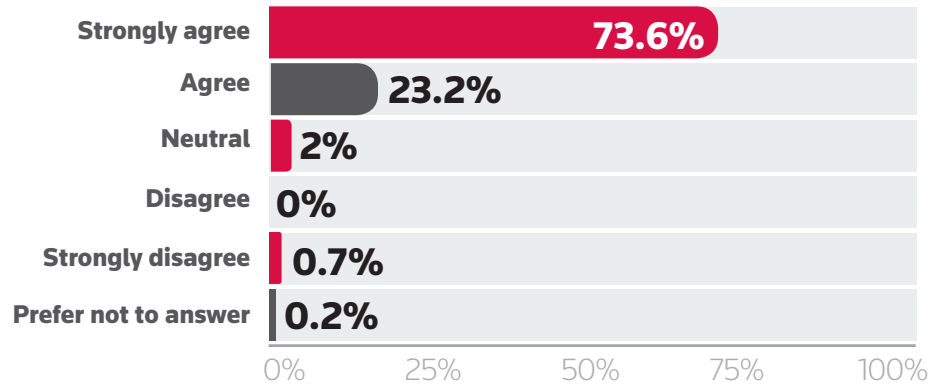
*Commentary: With friends like these ... friends and social networks were the most likely to undermine outside the workplace, followed closely by relatives and partner/spouse.*

**Q17** Why do you think Tall Poppy Syndrome occurs? (Select all that apply)



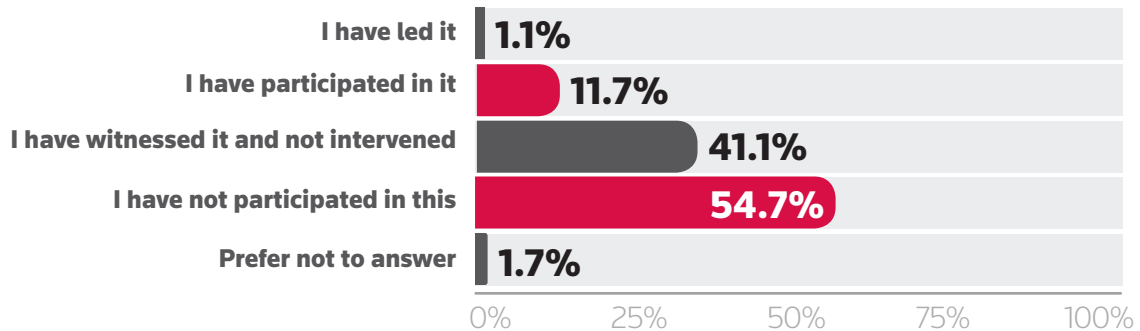
*Commentary: Jealousy and sexism were identified as the main drivers of TPS.*

**Q18** I am supportive of other women who are succeeding at my workplace. (Select all that apply)



*Commentary: Respondents – the majority of whom had been cut down – signal a strong commitment to be supportive of other women who are successful.*

**Q19** Upon reflection, have you participated in negative reactions to others' achievements at your workplace? (Select all that apply)

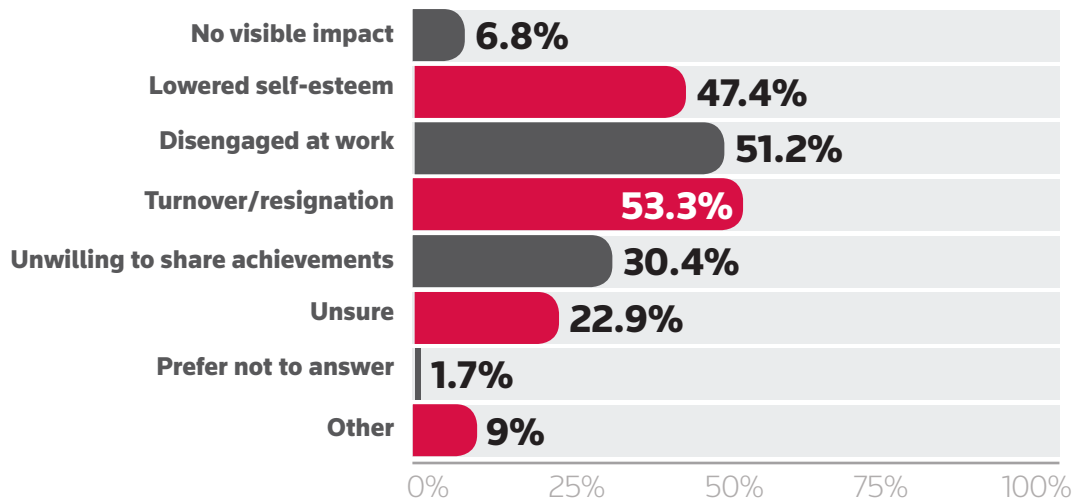


*Commentary: There are a lot of bystanders when it comes to Tall Poppy Syndrome.*

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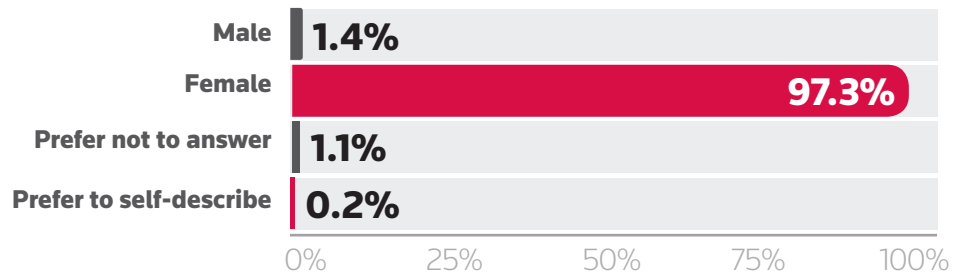
**Q20** In your experience, what impacts have you seen on individuals who have experienced Tall Poppy Syndrome? (Select all that apply)



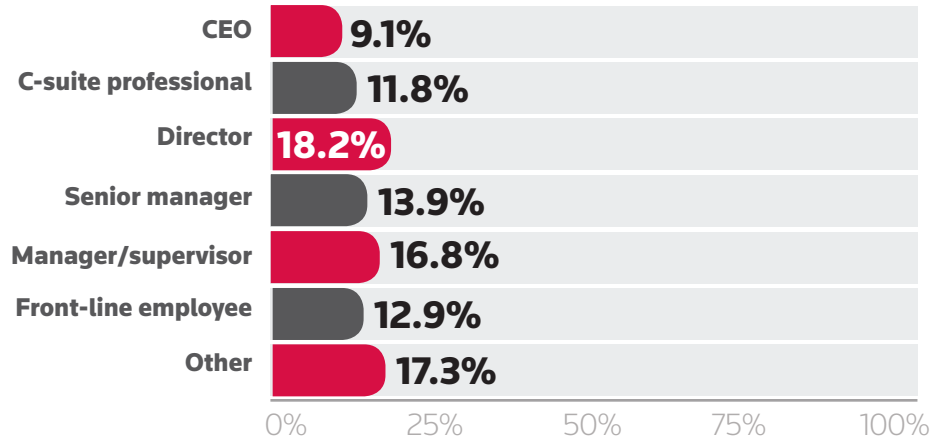
*Commentary: In the eyes of witnesses, turnover and disengagement are the biggest side effects of being ostracized and cut down.*

**Demographics**

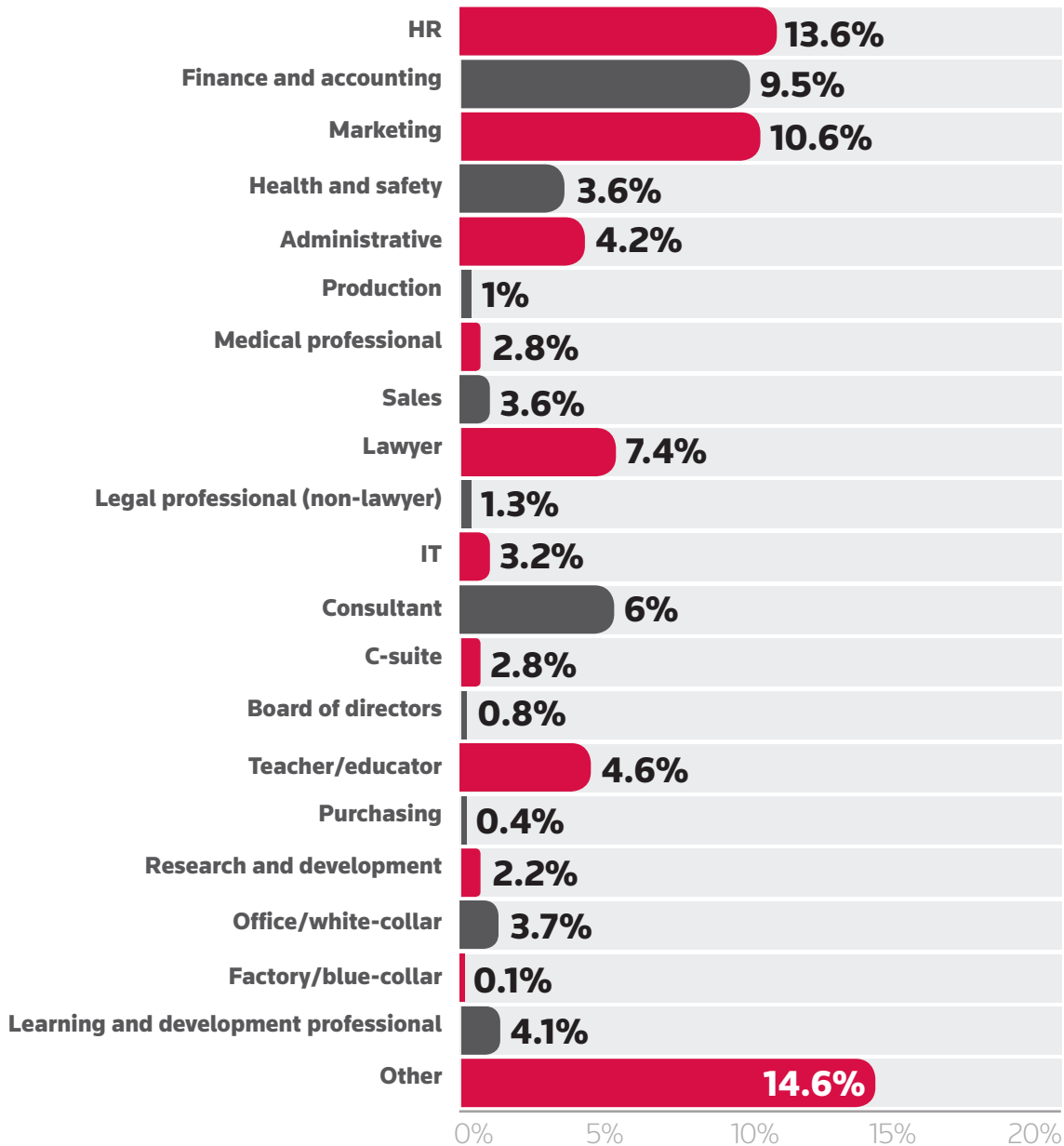
**D1** What is your gender?



## D2 What best describes your job function?



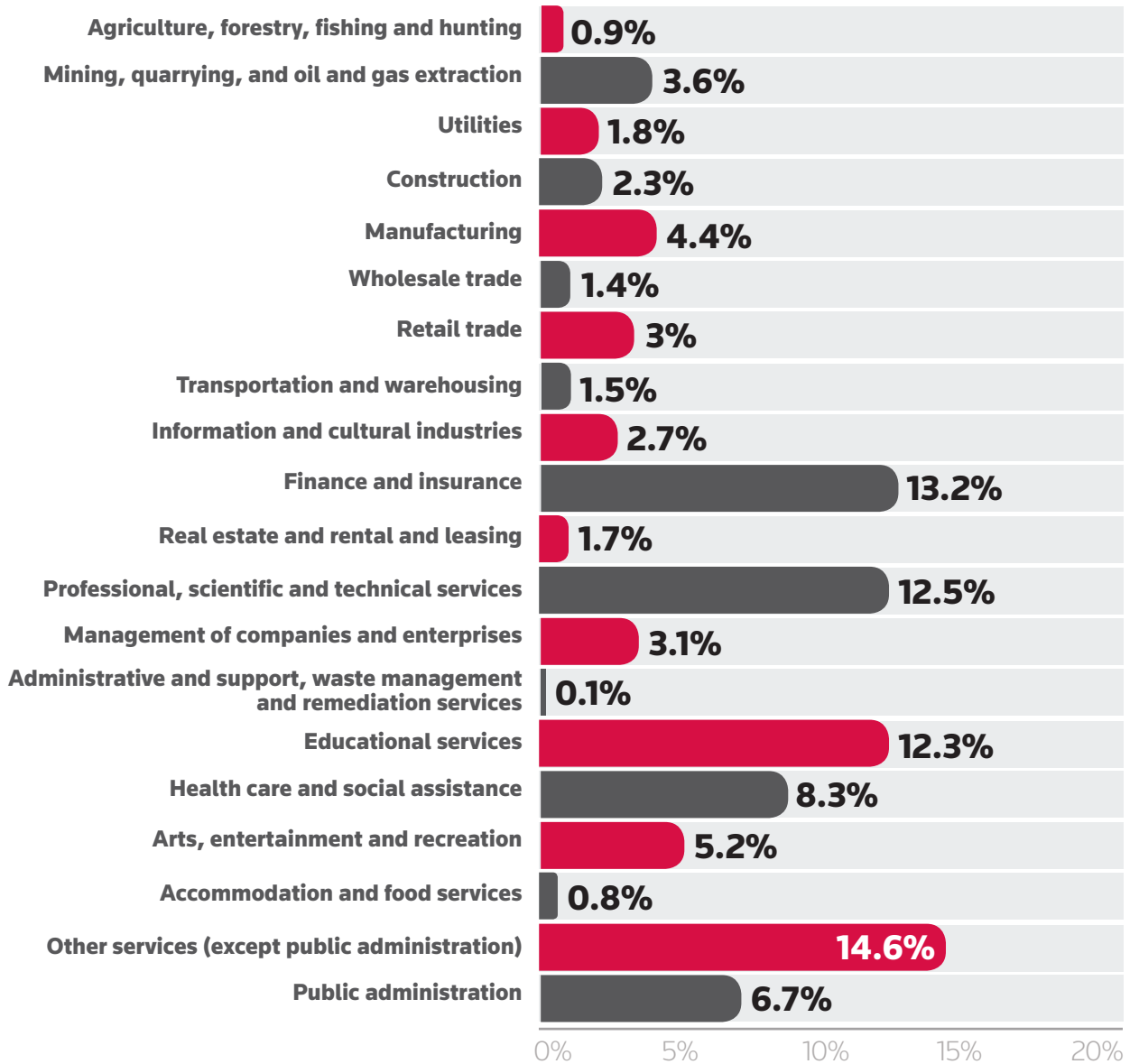
## D3 What best describes your job function?



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## D4 What best describes your industry?

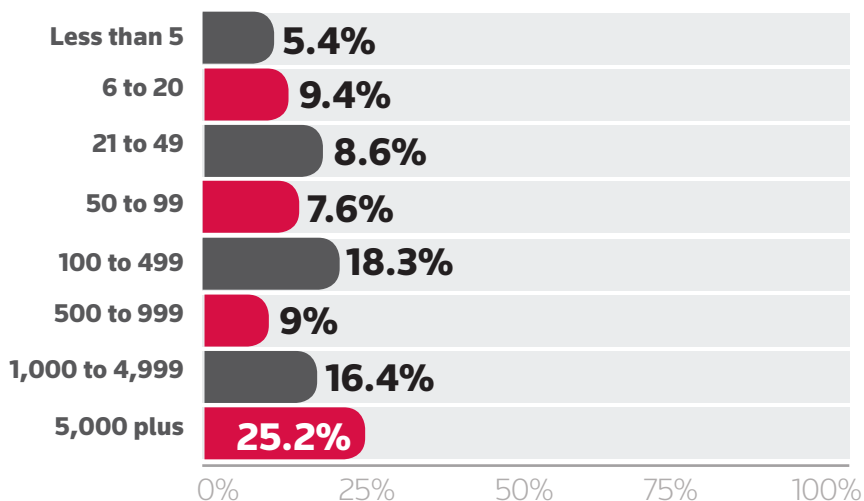




## D5 Is your employer:

SECTOR	Past Employer	Current Employer	Both
PRIVATE SECTOR	53.7%	43.8%	21.5%
PUBLIC SECTOR	50.2%	48.4%	17%
NOT-FOR-PROFIT	53.4%	44.5%	13.3%
SELF-EMPLOYED	20.8%	73.6%	10.65%
I'M NOT CURRENTLY EMPLOYED	32.5%	57.5%	15%

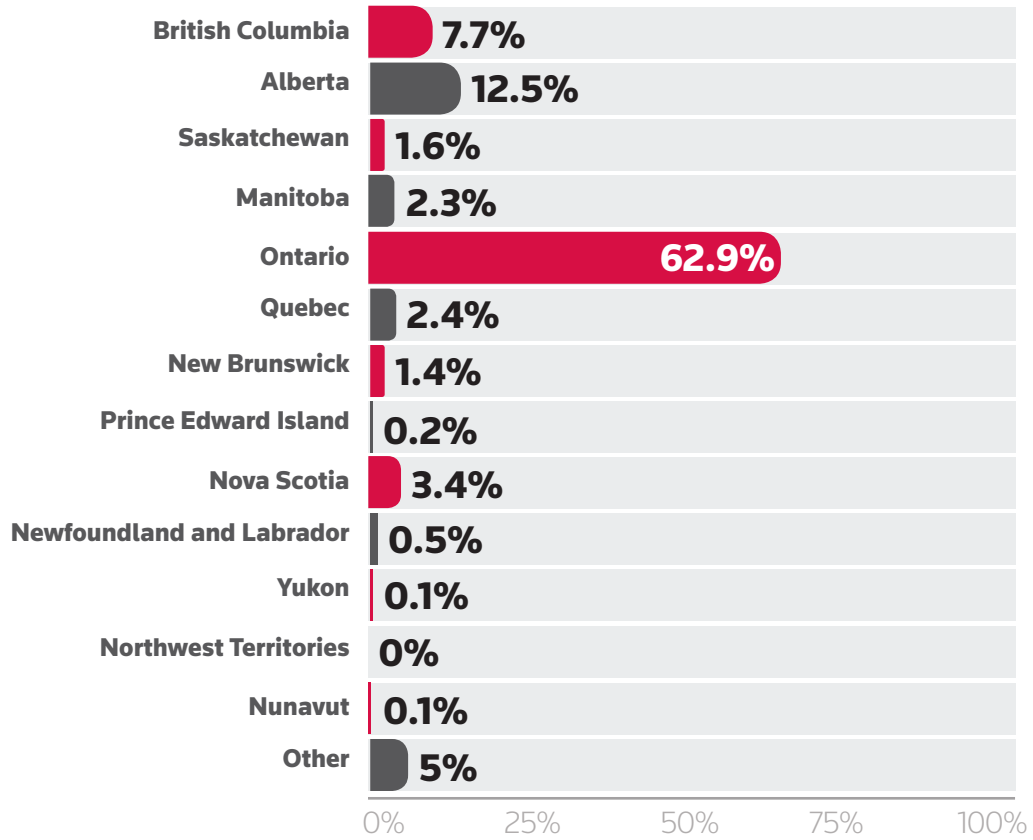
## D6 How many employees work at the organization where you experienced or observed TPS?



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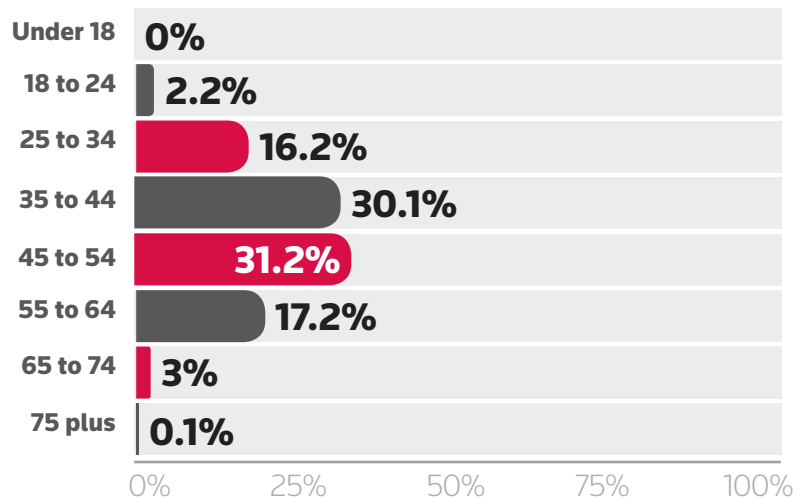
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## D7 What province do you reside in?

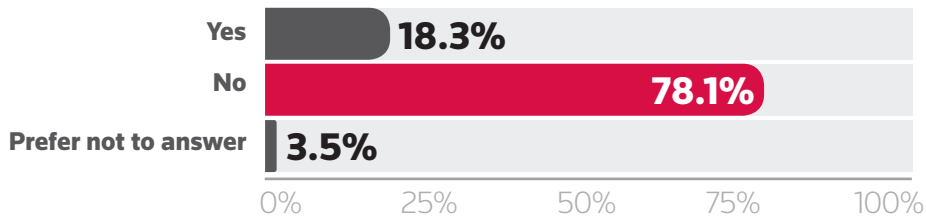


*Commentary: Other primarily included the United States and the United Kingdom.*

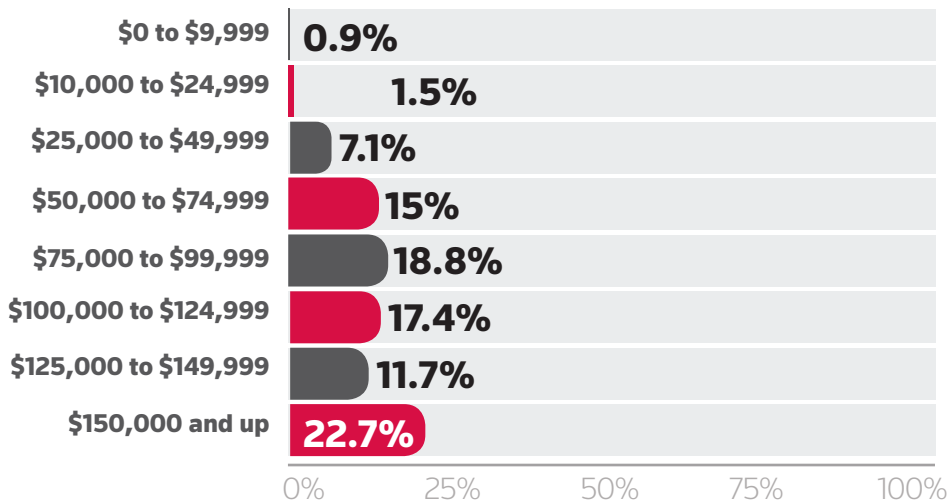
## D8 What is your age?



## D9 Do you identify as a racialized person/visible minority?



## D10 What is your annual income?



## Appendix 1 – Article from Canadian HR Reporter

### Many ‘tall poppies’ cut down at work

Women often belittled, bullied or dismissed – but many determined to rise back up: Exclusive Canadian HR Reporter survey

**By Sarah Dobson**

*This article originally appeared in the October issue of Canadian HR Reporter.*

To rise up in the workplace, to succeed and stand tall – to be a “tall poppy” – is something that should be celebrated and encouraged. And yet many women find themselves cut down, attacked, resented and criticized because of their achievements.

This can lead to productivity and disengagement issues, alongside absenteeism and turnover, according to a survey delving into “Tall Poppy Syndrome” (TPS) by Canadian HR Reporter in partnership with Viewpoint Leadership and Women of Influence.

The perpetrators are almost evenly split between women (31 per cent) and men (27 per cent), or both (41 per cent), found the survey of more than 1,500 people.

And the most common ways they cut women down is through cyberbullying (64 per cent), bullying (58), dismissals of achievements (55), calling someone selfish or superior (52), taking credit for others’ work (51), and leaving out or ignoring successful women, or downplaying their achievements (both 50 per cent).

Mostly, it feels as if tall poppies are being penalized, said Lauren van den Berg, national vice-president of government affairs at Restaurants Canada in Toronto.

“Whether it was doing a good job on a project or making a win on a particular policy issue, whatever the case was, it was downplayed in public, it wasn’t celebrated the way the successes of my colleagues, my male colleagues may have been – to the point where you start thinking you’re taking crazy pills,” she said. “And that sort of self-doubt perpetuates itself.”

For Jennifer Petryshen, a lawyer at the Office of the Attorney General of New Brunswick, it was mostly behaviour you would characterize as bullying, so “people just refusing to speak, people being overly critical of things that were either minor mistakes, or not really mistakes at all, which this one person escalated to the point of yelling at me in front of a waiting room full of people, like ‘I don’t know why you think you’re so special.’”

And the response from the organization was disappointing, choosing to view it as a personality conflict with the mantra that “people just need to get along,” she said, when the situation was clearly beyond that.

Sometimes, it can be more passive-aggressive behaviour, according to Reva Ramsden, associate dean at the School of Manufacturing, Automation and Transportation at the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, in recalling a meeting where a supervisor was explaining an issue and said it was probably too complicated for some of the people in the room.

“It was so subtle and so inappropriate, and I thought about it after, and I’m like ‘Does he even realize how that came across?’ I don’t even think he was aware of it, because it was accepted for so long.”

At a previous employer, Jennifer Cordeiro, manager of talent acquisition in consulting and deals at PWC in Toronto, was faced with women who had been there for a long period of time and resented her success.

“They didn’t like that so much and would try to sabotage that. So (that meant) not delivering on my client messages, not taking the orders from clients that would call, things would go missing — just so I would then have a fall from that.”

### **Productivity issues**

Not surprisingly, this kind of behaviour takes its toll.

Seventy per cent of respondents said it impacted their productivity at work. Sixty-five per cent cited lower self-esteem; 60 per cent said they downplayed or didn’t share their achievements; and 46 per cent had negative self-talk.

“If you’re spending eight, nine, 10 hours a day at your job, ostensibly it’s because you want to do a good job. And when there’s no acknowledgement or recognition for that, you start to second-guess yourself. And that’s sort of how the poppies can, I guess, cut themselves down,” said van den Berg.

“It also had a very isolating effect.”

It got to a point where Petryshen wondered if she just had a problem with women.

“It does really lead you to question yourself,” she said. “And I couldn’t pin it on anything else. You know, I got along with everybody else. It was unusual for me, all of a sudden, to find a group of people I couldn’t get along with, but it ended up really being demoralizing,” she said. “It just sort of sucks the joy out of the workplace... you start having the Sunday night dreads and ‘Oh my God, I have to go back there.’”

Most often, tall poppies who had been cut down at work came to feel a lack of trust of co-workers (70 per cent), or were either disengaged from their work or looked for a new job (both 59 per cent), while 57 per cent were disengaged from their organization or experienced imposter

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syndrome (meaning they felt inadequate and filled with self-doubt despite being successful).

Fifty-three per cent said they felt disconnected from their peers or co-workers, while 46 per cent actually left a previous job because of the behaviour. Thirty-six per cent were disengaged from meetings while 20 per cent were absent from work and 19 per cent gave others credit for work they had done.

“It got to the point where you couldn’t do anything without being criticized for it. And I ended up switching and transferring to another hospital in town,” said Petryshen.

“Management didn’t want to touch it with a 10-foot pole, the union didn’t want to touch it, and there was really no resolution to it, except somebody had to leave the workplace for it to get better.”

It can be difficult raising the issue, she said.

“Any of these things taken individually are so tiny that you either feel silly complaining about them, or you do complain, and they’re like, ‘Well, that’s ridiculous, suck it up, buttercup.’ And so, though it’s really subtle, it’s sort of this death by 1,000 cuts.”

By doing a great job, Petryshen said she faced interpersonal conflict around whether to go the extra mile.

“If you see the opportunity to take care of something in the department, do you do it? Because, you know if that person sees it done, it’s just going to make your life worse... you feel sort of like there’s just no way you can win in that situation, after a while, and the best solution is just to remove yourself, if no one else is going to do anything about it.”

Fifty-seven per cent of respondents said they felt pressured to downplay or not share their achievements at work. Almost half (49 per cent) said the behaviour impacted their desire to apply for a promotion while another 49 per cent said they felt they would be penalized if they were perceived as ambitious at work.

“It contributes a great deal to what makes a toxic work environment toxic, because if your best people don’t feel engaged or recognized or appreciated, they’re not going to be your best people for very long, and all you’ll have left is the middling back-end of the pack. And the organization as a whole will suffer — deliverables, outputs will suffer, members and clients will suffer — but so will the industry, reputations, brand, all the good work that has been done will be sort of brain-drained,” said van den Berg.

“As much as it made me angry and motivated me to do better, it also was like, ‘Well, why the hell am I giving you my best effort when I’m not getting anything in return, if I’m not benefiting in some way, whether it be through promotion or recognition, or a pay raise or title or... quality of life and work-life balance?’ So you vote with your feet.”

### Motivated to succeed

However, 42 per cent said TPS also made them want to achieve more.

There’s often no greater motivator than being angry, and using that constructively, said van den Berg — “using it to motivate yourself, to push yourself, to prove yourself that much more. Because

we're doing that already, most of the time, as women in a workforce dominated by men... it spurns you on to go further."

"It made me want to push harder and do that much better to make sure that no one could find fault with whatever it was I was doing with my work ethic, with my output, with my deliverables."

While the bullying could be a blow to self-esteem, said Cordeiro, she is also someone "who would fight harder to earn that respect."

In one situation, for example, where her peers were trying to sabotage her work and take credit for it, she worked hard to get along with those individuals.

"I was able to be very straightforward, provide feedback, express my feelings and my objectives and long-term goals. And I was able to turn that relationship around and manage it," she said.

"But it is stressful — when you go home at the end of the day, you're like 'Oh, my gosh, why are people doing this and trying to sabotage my successes? Either I take it, or I try and find something else to make a difference.'"

### **What's behind the behaviour?**

As to why people choose to cut down others because of their success, most respondents cited jealousy or envy (83 per cent), followed by sexism or gender stereotypes (68 per cent), the culture of an organization (61 per cent), lack of confidence (60 per cent) or lack of awareness (29 per cent).

"It's always been old white men who know other old white men; it's done by Rolodexes rather than by merit," said van den Berg.

"It's been such an old-school environment — a lot of those sort of institutional memories linger."

For women, modesty and humility are vaunted over success, and many people who feel inadequate cut down the ambitious folk rather than developing ambition and drive to succeed on their own, she said.

"It's those challenges that, in turn, are reinforced by how women are expected to behave in the workplace, and how we're penalized for any number of 'masculine qualities' that would otherwise be celebrated."

It feels cliché to say someone is jealous, said Petryshen, but there was an element of jealousy with one of her bullies, who disparaged her house and husband.

"It really just spoiled the work environment, which was otherwise technically a very interesting job and the other people were lovely. But it's that one person who just sort of poisons the well."

Sometimes, it's a person's lack of education or self-awareness that makes them want to cut others down, said Ramsden.

"You go back to emotional intelligence... some of these things are so obvious that if we took the time to have the discussion, people would realize the impact of their words, or those subtle ways

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of phrasing things. And, I think it would go a long way in improving," she said.

"It's just the courage to have the conversation and the courage to confront someone because, I think, nine times out of 10, they don't even realize (what they're doing) because it is so ingrained in our culture or it is such a part of the culture where they work," said Ramsden.

"And sometimes I think they're worried about their own expertise being questioned, so a lot of it stems from ego and pride. But if you're just brave enough to have a conversation, we're all pretty reasonable individuals at the end of the day."

And the thing about poppies is "there's plenty of space for all of us," said van den Berg.

"It's not a zero-sum game and one tall poppy doesn't make it impossible for another poppy to grow taller, too."



# The Tallest Poppy

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