

Making Room for The Tallest Poppies: A Call to Action



TALL POPPY SYNDROME (TPS) is a term referring to flowers that grow higher than those around them and as a result, are cut down to size. Apparently, this is a fitting analogy for the Canadian workplace. A recent study by **Thomson Reuters, Canadian HR Reporter, Viewpoint Leadership** and **Women of Influence** reveals the true scope of the issue of women being ‘cut down’ at work — and the results should be a wake-up call for companies across the country.

The Tallest Poppy report shows, in unprecedented detail, that many women are suffering severe psychological and emotional damage from their treatment in the workplace. The data is deeply troubling: Of the 1,501 respondents, 87.3 per cent felt that their achievements at work were undermined by colleagues or superiors.

Respondents came from many different professions and all levels of seniority. They reported that those attacking them were split almost evenly between men and women, and that both co-workers and superiors were at fault. These attacks included bullying and cyberbullying, 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.

More than 81 per cent said they had experienced direct hostility or had been penalized because of their success. Said one respondent: “Looking over my answers increased my own awareness around exactly how deeply my toxic workplace has affected me. I have needed to seek both medical and psychological services to endure my workplace.”

Another told us that, “The negative emotions and all the memories that I have experienced were beyond overwhelming. 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.”

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

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

“In my first few weeks at my new job, I received praise for something I had done in a weekly e-mail from the boss,”

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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.”

Many respondents indicated they felt shame about not speaking up. “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. “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.

TPS can have a devastating effect on psychological well-being: Among respondents, 64.7 per cent reported lowered self-esteem; 60.3 per cent reported downplaying or not sharing their achievements; and 46.2 per cent reported negative self-talk. Clearly, there should be a deep concern about the connection between TPS and mental health.

In addition to the impact of TPS on the individual, whenever employees are forced to struggle to maintain their emotional resilience, their productivity and desire to stay with their employer is impacted. And that is not only unhealthy for the individual, but also for the bottom line.

Our study clearly demonstrated the effect on productivity. Among respondents, 69.5 per cent felt that TPS had a negative effect on their productivity; 69.2 per cent reported a lack of trust among co-workers; and 59.2 per cent reported feeling disengaged from their work. “I try hard not to stand out,” said one respondent.

The study also revealed that 48.9 per cent of respondents were less likely to apply for promotions and that many feel ostracized for their achievements. When employees feel they have less to work for, they are less likely to set ambitious goals, and as a result, TPS will impact every business, especially those relying heavily on employee innovation.

“I feel like hiding most of the time,” shared one respon-

dent, while another told us “I just want to blend in [and] work behind the scenes.” Such employees have little incentive to maintain or increase their productivity — or to innovate. If an employee just wants to get through the day and get home, advancement and growth — both individual and organizational — will suffer. As one respondent said, “I no longer wish to have any role other than [that of] a worker bee.” Not surprisingly, nearly 60 per cent of respondents said their experience with TPS had led them to actively seek a new job.

Is there hope for change? According to respondents, there is no magic answer. Most felt it necessary to change the system itself—to move away from a corporate culture that pits employees against one another towards one where empathy and support are valued. That shift is required to build employee trust, especially among potential high achievers — the ones every company should want to keep.

The first step is for company leaders to recognize the reality of TPS. “Accept without question that this is real,” said one respondent, “and that people are suffering. Also, that an organization is less than it should be for allowing this to occur or ignoring its existence. 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 stressed the importance of such change coming from the very top. With the right people in place at the top, they said, it is possible to change company culture. “It’s really a basic principle: Another person’s success is no threat to your own,” said one. “Stop cultivating the idea that the success of one person means the failure of someone else,” agreed another respondent. “My current employer is motivating workers to constantly report on each other and place blame — which opens the door for jealous people or employees with personal agendas to get ahead by disengaging more successful peers.”

TPS damages both psychological capital and the capital reported on a balance sheet.

Based on our study, the top three ways to address Tall Poppy Syndrome are as follows.

1. TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

Respondents identified several areas that could be offered, including training in sensitivity, leadership, cultural safety, gender bias, diversity, emotional intelligence and an overall general awareness of what TPS is, and its impact. There was also a call for more diversity among executive teams, better-crafted policies, transparency in paths for promotions, building safe and supportive environments and an overall cultural shift within organizations.

2. LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Not surprisingly, it all starts at the top. “Accept without question that this is real, it is happening,” said one respondent. If leadership, at all levels, does not accept it as real and does not examine the roots and processes that are allowing it to flourish and grow, then they are the ones empowering this widespread, debilitating ‘disease’ to spread.” Another implored leaders not to be bystanders and to address TPS when it happens. “Similar to harassment, racism and exclusion, it has to be addressed, highlighted and brought up at staff meetings to demonstrate how to lead by example.”

3. SPEAKING UP

There were clear calls for zero tolerance of this kind of behaviour and a broader desire to eliminate bullying in the workplace. Encouraging the ‘echo effect’ was identified as an effective strategy that could be used to manage TPS. One respondent shared exactly how this can be done: ‘Name and echo’ means naming the achiever and echoing what she has achieved, including the process she followed to get there.”

It was heartening to see so many solutions provided by respondents on the table — including exit interviews, celebrating achievements and mentorship opportunities.

One respondent suggested that CEOs should personally do exit interviews. “Even in large organizations, CEOs are

sometimes too far removed from the culture of their companies and need to spend real time in conversation and observation. Unless, of course, they are the root of the problem; then perhaps boards of directors need to engage.”

In closing

As *The Tallest Poppy* study conclusively demonstrates, TPS is very real, affecting productivity, engagement, morale and retention at countless organizations. And it is an issue that damages capital — both psychological capital and the capital reported on a balance sheet.

Many organizations strive to be known as top employers that care for their employees, because they know this is one sure way to attract the best talent. But what happens when top talent joins the organization? Our study demonstrates that, like overgrown poppies, it is often cut down. Companies with the vision to actively tackle TPS will be gifting themselves a huge advantage. If treating employees as human beings isn’t enough motivation, perhaps economic reality will be.

As indicated herein, immediate change is needed to support women in the workplace and to encourage their accomplishments — and not incidentally, to increase corporate productivity. **RM**

Dr. **Rumeet Billan** is the President and CEO of ViewPoint Leadership, whose clients include CAMH, Purolator, BMO Financial and Refugees & Citizenship Canada. The *Tallest Poppy* white paper is available for download at: www.hrreporter.com/tallest-poppy