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THE ABRASIVE LEADER

White Paper



FORWARD

It's my job as a conflict advisor, mediator, and Boss Whisperer® coach to detect the disconnects within relationships that create destructive conflict and division in an organization. Sometimes I can see a conflict brewing that is more than a one-time personality clash between two people — it's chronic behavior that needs addressing before it poisons the entire team or organization.

When this behavior comes from a leader, the conflict costs are high and can be measured in dollars (1) as well as in the immeasurable harm to the people within the abrasive leader's sphere.

Here are just a few of the costs:

- ⇒ Attrition of valued employees who request transfer out of the leader's department or leave the company altogether
- ⇒ Reduced productivity, increased absenteeism, lower quality of work as a result of stress, defying or avoiding the leader
- ⇒ Potential loss of valued customers and stakeholders who become targets of the behaviors
- ⇒ Eroded reputation of the organization
- ⇒ Mistrust of management seen as condoning this bad behavior
- ⇒ Potential or actual harassment litigation

Abrasive behaviors cause emotional distress and disrupt organizational functioning. I have seen this behavior bring a team, and even a company, to its knees.

Your organization has a responsibility to assure the physical and psychological safety of your workforce. HR and management professionals need to understand what they're dealing with in an abrasive leader and how to turn the situation around to the benefit of all parties involved.

This guide will take you there.

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THE DATA

“Workplace bullying is never acceptable — and it’s getting worse.”

We have all experienced leaders who rub their coworkers the wrong way, plaguing the workplace with interpersonal friction that harms morale and productivity.

What kind of behaviors are we talking about?

Our definition is any interpersonal behavior that causes emotional distress in others sufficient enough to impede their productivity or disrupt organizational functioning. It isn’t just a personality conflict — it’s a chronic pattern of disrespectful behavior.

Abrasive behavior is characterized by interpersonal interactions that are perceived as disrespectful and unwanted by the recipient.

Abrasive behavior can range on a continuum from mildly irritating to severely disruptive.

Abrasive behavior has the effect of violating the recipient’s dignity and/or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment.

- ⇒ ***30% of U.S. adults are bullied at work***
- ⇒ ***79.3 million workers are affected by workplace bullying***
- ⇒ ***43.2% of remote workers are bullied***
- ⇒ ***Targets have a 67% chance of losing a job they loved when targeted for bullying***
- ⇒ ***65% of bullies are bosses; bullying remains primarily top-down. (2)***

THOUGHT EXPERIMENT...

Consider each situation below and answer the question: What would you do if...

...you oversee the person who's showing unacceptable conduct?

...your company doesn't have clearly defined policies in this area, or an Employee Assistance Program (EAP)?

...your fellow managers recommend not to rock the boat, and just transfer the abused/target out of the abuser's area?

Consider these answers:

- ⇒ In a position of responsibility over the abuser, you share the company's responsibility to manage both performance and conduct to assure the physical and psychological safety of everyone in your workforce.
- ⇒ Whether or not your company has clear policies or an EAP, behavior that is potentially destructive to others requires attention.
- ⇒ Separating the abuser and the abused is no more effective than removing the bucket from under the leak — the bucket isn't the source of the problem.

THE PROBLEM

“You are not helpless. The leader is not hopeless!”

You've gotten multiple complaints from employees describing how difficult it is to work with this individual. You have tried talking to them, to no avail. You encounter denial: "I'm not abrasive!" or they justify the behavior as a necessary management strategy or typical leadership style.

They may even have acknowledged their destructive style and promised to change their ways, but after a brief period of improvement, the old behaviors return. You and the organization value this person's expertise, but their technical performance is now being overshadowed by their disruptive interpersonal conduct.

What are the signs of abrasive conduct in your workplace?

Included but not limited to:

- ⇒ Complaints regarding the individual's interactions with coworkers
- ⇒ Chronic pattern of disrespectful behaviors
- ⇒ Requests to transfer out of the leader's department
- ⇒ Attrition of valued employees
- ⇒ Decreased morale and motivation
- ⇒ Potential or actual harassment litigation

You feel helpless — you wonder if the situation is hopeless, or if you're wrong about them, or if you should work with the employees who are being targeted, or just fire the person outright and take the repercussions.

What you do know is this: It can't go on.

Something has to change.

Knowledge is power in this complex situation.



THE ABRASIVE LEADER

“It’s nothing personal, it’s just business. The job has to get done.”

Who is the Abrasive Leader? Are they evil, incorrigible? Mentally deranged and a permanent menace to society? Plotting to cause damage to others on a daily basis?

Typically, this is not the case at all. Researchers such as Dr. Laura Crawshaw, founder of the Boss Whisperer Institute (3) which specializes in coaching abrasive leaders, find that in most cases the person in question doesn’t realize they’re being abrasive in a harmful way. They believe their ‘style’ is what’s needed for the job: “Sometimes you have to kick butt to get things done.”

The abrasive leader doesn’t mean to do harm to others. They don’t see that their behavior is having an impact on coworkers’ emotions; they don’t understand why people are upset. In some cases they are acting under the cloud of their own stress and anxiety, fear of failure, or being seen as incapable. They may feel threatened and react emotionally and thoughtlessly as a result.

They might be individuals who don’t have the interpersonal skills or capacity to motivate their people, so they “flog the work forward.” It’s likely they have moved up to leadership positions in the company by virtue of their valuable technical skills, without any leadership training along the way — the “Peter Principle” in the interpersonal relations space.

What is also true is that these people tend to be cognitively brilliant, have great instincts, and want to be successful — meaning they are coachable.

THE DILEMMA

“I know the behavior is toxic, but what can we do? They’re too valuable to the organization.”

The situation becomes even more complex when the abrasive leader is considered to be invaluable — even crucial — to the company.

In every project I’ve worked on that has involved abrasive leaders, each one has had these common elements:

- ⇒ A leader that has been diagnosed as abrasive with all the associated costs, sometimes including threats of harassment lawsuits.
- ⇒ A leader who’s considered an incredibly valuable asset which includes positive relationships they hold with internal and external stakeholders.
- ⇒ HR and management teams that oftentimes deeply care about the leader, and have made attempts to change the behavior or work around them.

The dilemma for the HR/management pro becomes this: You have a responsibility to the company, its stakeholders, and all employees. The leader’s valuable, but costs are mounting due to their behavior. You’ve tried everything, and don’t know what to do.



There are many factors that swirl around these situations — legal, personal, political, financial — but one factor tops all others, and is key to consider in your role: **Conflict in the workplace virtually never solves itself (4). Unaddressed, the conflict caused by unacceptable conduct festers and expands, leaving damage to an organization in its wake.**



THE SOLUTION

“Abrasive behavior is learned — and can be unlearned.”

This is great news, and there are proven tools available to HR and management pros to work with this situation and these individuals effectively.

Boss Whispering® is a coaching method designed specifically for abrasive leaders based on extensive research with over 400 executives, managers, supervisors and professionals as well as more than 30 years of successful practice by certified coaches worldwide.

An accelerated private (highly confidential) coaching approach sets limits and consequences for continued abrasive behavior, at the same time offering the abrasive leader an opportunity to improve their management style. Among the goals to reach:

- ⇒ Develop insight into the perceived impact their words and actions have on others.
- ⇒ Learn how to gain control of their aggressive defense tactics against perceived threats.
- ⇒ Develop strategies to reframe their behavior to “achieve their objectives with carrots rather than sticks.”

In most cases, people find the process deeply rewarding and enjoyable, and are grateful for the changes they have made as they see increased engagement and productivity from their employees, expanded career opportunities, more rewarding relationships, and less stress overall.

How does abrasive leader coaching work?

1. Initial 1:1 assessment.
2. Regular in-person or virtual coaching sessions. Boss Whispering® usually lasts 8-10 sessions, and demonstrable results should be evident by the third coaching session.
3. Coaching is also done with others in management positions on strategies to overcome resistance and support the employees who have been impacted by the abrasive behavior.
4. Changing this behavior is possible, but it takes backbone and focused effort — and buy-in from the leadership of the organization.

THE NEXT STEP

“Let’s harness higher performance in leaders who are perceived to be abrasive.”

How do you know that someone’s behavior, or the report of someone’s behavior, is something that needs your attention?

This was a question our coaches wrangled with often in working with leaders who were perceived as abrasive or as bullies. So our team decided to tackle this challenge, for our own analysis and then to offer it to our clients. We built a unique tool called the Abrasive Leader Diagnostic™, (5) designed to identify the nature and scope of abrasive conduct.



We offer it now online, confidential (no contact info captured), and free, in order to empower HR and management professionals to diagnose the situation yourself and get a 360 view of what’s going on. If you receive a complaint from an employee or team members, you can have them take this questionnaire to give you the data you need to assess the situation.

Based on research and our own in-the-field analyses (which we update regularly), the diagnostic identifies problematic behaviors through the following factors.



1) Behaviors to consider. Here is a short list:

- Intimidation through shouting, glaring or name-calling
- Intentional ignoring or excluding; withholding information
- Over-control/micromanagement either over the group or singling out an individual
- Failure to keep agreements, maintain confidentiality or respect boundaries
- Making threats; throwing or hitting objects or people
- Any complaints about sexual harassment or discrimination

2) Symptoms to look for, such as:

- Complaints about their interactions with others, including customers
- Employees who have asked to transfer out of the leader's area, or have left the company
- Comments heard such as, "Don't get on their bad side," or "Watch out for them today!"
- Productivity or morale decreasing in the leader's area; an increase in employee distress or complaints
- Potential or actual harassment that may violate company policy or ethical/legal limits

3) Behavioral history: Questions are designed to identify a one-off behavior lapse vs. recurring instances or a repeated pattern of abrasive behavior; and if it's targeted to an individual, team, people in the leader's area, or everyone.

An instant report is generated from the results of the questionnaire (again, no contact info is retained — our profession takes privacy and confidentiality very seriously).

We have found this diagnostic tool to be invaluable in starting the process with an organization to get a clear picture of the situation.

Is there a personal vendetta going on or sabotage, or is there a common thread of specific ongoing behaviors that point to this person? Are responses from a cross-section of several employees or team members giving a comprehensive view of the extent — and the harm — of this behavior? Do the results give us a credible, thorough report to leadership to motivate them to action and effective solutions?



CONCLUSION

“All managers should understand the importance of differentiating performance from conduct, and know how to manage both.” ~ Dr. Laura Crawshaw

Addressing the very real problems of workplace bullying starts with awareness and reporting by those who are being affected by these behaviors— HR, management, the employee/ coworker who is targeted or witnesses the abuse, or even the leaders themselves who suspect that they are exhibiting bad behavior.

HR/management must assess the situation and initiate the process to make a change, with conviction and courage.

Leadership must be open enough to hear the distress signals and commit to providing a safe workplace that protects their employees from psychological harm.

And we have a proven methodology which can change the behavior of the abrasive leader, thereby restoring the team and organization to higher performance, productivity and profitability. The outcome is a situation where everyone wins — including the leader.

For the first time in the 14 years that the Workplace Bullying Organization has conducted surveys on this topic, bullies have begun to admit their bullying — 4% nationally, representing 6.6 million people (6). **This is the best sign I can think of that the time is *now* to make an impact on this pervasive national workplace problem.**

FOOTNOTES/SOURCES

- (1) <https://www.resologics.com/resologics-blog/2014/3/18/conflictcalculator?rq=cost%20of%20conflict>
- (2) <https://workplacebullying.org/2021-wbi-survey/>
- (3) <https://www.bosswhispering.com/>
- (4) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2019/10/08/how-to-stop-the-ripple-effect-of-unmanaged-conflict-in-your-workplace/?sh=5fc2c0a0296a>
- (5) <https://s.abrasiveleaderdiagnostic.com/resologics>
- (6) <https://workplacebullying.org/2021-wbi-survey/>