

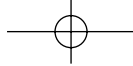
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Why We Don't Take Bulls (or Bosses) by the Horns

There's no question that abrasive bosses do harm. So why don't we confront them and put an end to the pain they cause? Why don't peers and subordinates stand up for themselves? Why don't superiors step in and set limits? Your local matador will tell you that stepping into the bullring to take a bull by the horns is extremely risky business. The same holds for abrasive bosses. People don't step in to confront abrasive bosses for the same reason that people (with the exception of a few very well paid matadors) don't take bulls by the horns—*they're afraid*. There it is again, that same threat → fear → defense dynamic that we examined in bears, bosses, and now coworkers. Abrasive bosses perceive coworker incompetence, which stirs anxiety over their own competence and survival, which in turn provokes the *fight* defense: aggression. In response to this aggressive threat, coworkers experience survival anxiety and resort to the *flight* defense: withdrawal, otherwise know as *lying low*. We don't take the problem of abrasive bosses by the horns because we're afraid of getting gored—psychologically and professionally.

The View From Below

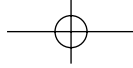
It's no mystery why subordinates are afraid to confront an abrasive boss. Consider these synonyms for subordinate: *subservient*, *inferior*, *submissive*. As a subordinate you don't have authority over your boss—you're an underdog to the top dog. Powerlessness is a pretty poor starting point for setting limits with an abrasive



boss, because if you challenge your boss's dominance, *the only way to go is down (or out)*. Subordinates in nonhuman dominance hierarchies quickly learn the dangers of challenging the leader, and it's no different for humans chained to the command of an abrasive boss. Confronted with a direct challenge to their authority, abrasive bosses defend their supremacy with retaliatory aggression. These aren't the nonlethal, day-to-day threat displays we've seen abrasive bosses (and alpha wolves) use to intimidate and thus motivate subordinates into compliance. No, direct challenges to dominance can provoke mortal combat in which aggression has a single, very dangerous objective, a fight to the death to eliminate the threat. In the animal kingdom elimination can be achieved through death, disabling injury, or exile. In the corporate kingdom these translate to termination, crippling devaluation, or relegation to the company's Siberian sales office.

They say elephants never forget. Let me tell you, employees never forget the fate of coworkers who fought back against an abrasive boss. These duels to the death are branded into their psyches. Listen to a coworker describe an abrasive attorney's go-for-the-jugular response to one such dominance challenge:

“She came flying out of her office and started yelling at Mara, our administrative assistant: ‘What is wrong with you that you can’t get me the files I asked for?! *What do I have to do to get you to do your job?!*’ You could tell that Mara had had enough—she’d worked there for twenty years, and nobody ever treated her that way. She was literally trembling with anger, but she stood up for herself: ‘The files won’t be released from the court until next week. I already told you that—I sent you an e-mail yesterday. And I don’t appreciate being attacked.’ The attorney exploded: ‘You can’t talk to me that way! How dare you talk to me that way. I’m going to have you written up for insubordination!’”



It's an all-too-common tale, a three-act play acted out in endless variations: (1) abrasive boss attacks subordinate; (2) subordinate defends self through fight rather than flight; (3) abrasive boss moves in for the kill. *The End*. These public executions are particularly instructive, allowing bystanders to observe coworkers sticking their necks out, only to have those necks end up on the chopping block. Fairy tales serve to teach children this same lesson, a lesson learned by Alice in the course of her adventures in Wonderland:

[I]n a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting "Off with his head!" or "Off with her head!" about once in a minute.

Alice began to feel very uneasy: to be sure, she had not as yet had any dispute with the Queen, but she knew that it might happen any minute, "and then," thought she, "what would become of me? They're dreadfully fond of beheading people here: the great wonder is, that there's any one left alive!" [Carroll, 1865/1941].

Annihilation isn't the only effective defense against subordinate uprisings—abandonment can work equally as well. In this strategy the abrasive boss abandons the offending employee, a tactic more commonly known as *writing them off* and *waiting them out*. As one abrasive boss confessed: "I do discard people—write them off, discard them. . . . I am very spontaneous when it comes to assessing somebody. I value some—I give them more time. The ones I don't value—I write them off."

In this approach the abrasive boss first determines that the offending individual is "difficult" and thus unworthy of the boss's time or attention:

"If he isn't going to do his job, I'm not going to babysit him."

"She's a total incompetent. Why should I waste my time on her?!"



“All he does is complain about problems. I’m not going to put up with it.”

Starvation motivates animals to migrate in search of food; abrasive bosses apply this same principle to unwanted employees. Once employees have been written off as undeserving, it is simply a matter of time to wait them out:

“Once he figures out he’s not going to be promoted, he’ll be out of here.”

“I don’t want her here—it’s only a matter of time until she leaves.”

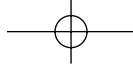
“One more incident and he’s out.”

Adequate bosses take the time to explore and thoughtfully address incompetence. As we’ve discussed, abrasive bosses don’t have that kind of time: “I don’t have time to be nice—nasty is faster.” If investing one’s time in aggression doesn’t kill off these perceived “good-for-nothings,” abandonment works almost as well—simply starve them of psychological and professional sustenance until they’re forced to seek survival elsewhere.

The View from Above

There’s no mystery about why subordinates fear to tread upon an abrasive boss’s dominance. But what about the abrasive boss’s superiors (here referred to as *management*)? What keeps management from handling abrasive bosses? What wild horses dragged management away from the task of setting limits on abrasive behavior that disrupts the smooth flow of operations? Don’t these managers (including human resource staff) have the power to rein in this destructive aggression? Why don’t they use it?

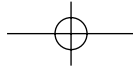
Here’s the answer, straight from this boss whisperer’s mouth: managers avoid handling the abrasive bosses who work under them because *they’re afraid*. Yes, it’s that same ol’ threat → fear →



defense dynamic in yet another incarnation. And unlike subordinates, these managers have a lot more to be afraid of. Their fears fall into two categories: the fear of *being harmed* by the abrasive boss and the fear of *doing harm* to the abrasive boss. I learned about these fears through observation and inquiry. I've interviewed many managers of abrasive bosses as part of the coaching process and heard an earful. I learned even more when I explored these fears with a group of managers. Years ago I was approached by a human resource specialist who was frustrated by the fact that her company's management avoided dealing with problem employees, including the abrasive bosses who reported to them. Her words to me were: "They just won't do it—they won't confront the individual until it's a crisis, and then they knock down my door trying to get *me* to deal with the situation. It's their job to manage their people—not mine. Could you provide a workshop that would train them to do it?"

I knew that if I trotted out the standard training approach (document carefully, provide feedback, set expectations, monitor for improvement), I'd be beating a dead horse. These managers didn't need training—they already knew *what* they were supposed to do. They needed management whispering—they needed to identify *why* they weren't doing it; they needed to develop insight into the fears that kept them from handling the abrasive bosses they were responsible for. To develop their executive insight, I applied the Socratic method by posing the following question: "Why don't managers confront an abrasive boss?" Note the phrasing—it would have been too threatening to ask why they were "afraid" to confront abrasive bosses, because fear is one of those taboo emotions at work, especially for management. Despite my careful third-person wording, these managers immediately responded in the first person, beginning with their fears of *doing harm* to the abrasive boss:

"He's turned this place around financially—I don't want to get on his case."



“He’s already got financial [or family or health] problems—I don’t want to add to his burden.”

“What if she cries?” (*A scenario dreaded by male managers.*)

“I don’t want to damage his morale—he’s our lead man on the new project.”

“I don’t want to hurt her feelings—she’s been loyal to me and works harder than anyone else.”

“He’s got some difficult people on his team—I don’t want to undermine him.”

“I’ve worried that he could go off the deep end—that he might kill himself.”

Surprised by that last comment? I was too, and I remain surprised at how often members of management voice fears that the abrasive boss will become self-destructive if confronted on his or her interpersonal incompetence. I believe these anxious managers unconsciously sense how closely the abrasive boss’s self-esteem is linked to his or her psychological survival. They’re frightened that they will upset this fragile balance if they strip the abrasive boss of that all-important self-image of super-competence. These fears of doing harm, once expressed, were followed by fears of *being harmed* by the abrasive boss:

“If he got pissed off and quit, we’d be in deep doo-doo.”

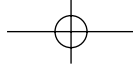
“Are you kidding? He’s the last person I want angry at me!”

“Chances are she’d accuse me of the same behaviors, and I’m not perfect.”

“Talking to him won’t help—it’ll just make things worse.”

“If I bring it up, she’ll take it out on the employees who complained.”

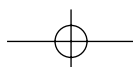
“If he quits, I’ll just end up having to do his job on top of mine.”



“I don’t know what he’d do—he’s the type that could go postal.”

I vividly recall one inexperienced management team that had been paralyzed by the threats of an abrasive middle manager. Her rough treatment of subordinates became evident soon after she was hired, and when her (male) manager addressed this in a reasonable manner, she cut him off, declaring she wouldn’t tolerate being undermined by a “bunch of men.” In the same breath she mentioned that she had sued a former employer for discriminatory practices. I arrived on the scene a few months later at the request of the corporate human resource department to assist with what HR staff termed “a communication problem.”

The place was a mess. The abrasive boss was riding roughshod over her subordinates, and their cries of distress to the management team were met with silence. What was going on? Why weren’t they handling the situation?! Repressing my impassioned gut reaction to this suffering, I instead deployed empathy to diagnose the underlying cause(s) of management’s paralysis. As I talked with each member of the team in an attempt to put myself in their shoes, I discovered they were shaking in their shoes. One confessed his terror at the prospect of handling this abrasive boss: “I can’t risk taking her on—I have kids to put through college and a mortgage to pay.” For a moment I didn’t understand what he was saying, but then it dawned on me that he was afraid of being personally sued. There it was again, the survival dynamic: threat (of suit) → fear (of financial annihilation) → defense (flight through avoidance). When they heeded my management whisperings and consulted their corporate legal department, they discovered (to their great relief) that they were indemnified from personal liability in carrying out their management duties. Only when they were freed from the threat of financial assault could they successfully set limits on the abrasive boss.





Management's Mechanisms of Defense

The Mystery of the Missing Managers was solved: superiors flee the task of handling abrasive bosses because they're afraid of doing harm *to* or being harmed *by* these aggressive individuals. And thanks to empathy, who can blame them? What managers in their right mind would want to throw themselves on the horns of this dilemma, only to risk being impaled? Faced with this threat, the superiors of abrasive bosses resort to *defense*, defined by biologists as any trait that reduces the likelihood that an organism (or part of an organism) will be consumed by a predator or wounded from attack (Cloudsley-Thompson, 1980). A biologist of the mind, Sigmund Freud viewed defenses similarly, referring to them as the "psychical correlative of the flight reflex" (1905/1960, p. 233). Like horses, bosses of abrasive bosses rely on flight, practically stampeding toward the door to avoid handling the threat of aggression. However, because they're paid to show up at work and can't physically flee the scene of abrasive bosses' interpersonal crimes, these managers run defense via three avoidance maneuvers: *denial*, *displacement*, and *delay*.

Denial

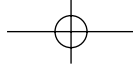
Denial is a handy-dandy defense mechanism. All you have to do is *deny the problem exists*. It's not hard to detect denial in managers of abrasive bosses. Listen in:

"He's just got some difficult employees."

"Her department is under a lot of pressure—things will improve."

"He doesn't blow up that often."

"He's not the first to lose it around here, and he won't be the last."



Each of the previous statements acknowledges the abrasive boss's behavior but at the same time denies the possibility that he or she has, or is, a problem:

“He’s just got some difficult employees.” (*He’s not the problem—his employees are.*)

“Her department is under a lot of pressure—things will improve.” (*She’s not the problem—the pressure is the problem.*)

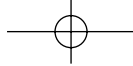
“He doesn’t blow up that often.” (*It doesn’t happen often enough to be a problem.*)

“He’s not the first to lose it around here, and he won’t be the last.” (*He’s not the problem—we’re the problem, and since we all do it, it’s not a problem.*)

Denial allows us to shift the problem onto other people (in this case, employees) or phenomena (“a lot of pressure”). Denial also allows us to redefine the criteria for the problem. “He doesn’t blow up that often” defines the problem as one of frequency versus force. I don’t know about you, but I can’t imagine an attorney defending a client against homicide charges by saying, “He doesn’t shoot people often enough for it to be a problem.” Denial also allows us to dilute the problem, by normalizing it as something we all do.

Displacement

Displacement is another popular flight strategy used by management to avoid intervening with an abrasive boss. More commonly referred to as the “head ’em up—move ’em out” strategy by horse whisperers, displacement of these unmanageable individuals can be achieved in a number of ways, including *transfer*, *isolation*, and *starvation*. Transfer (also known as the *geographic cure*) involves facilitating the transfer of an abrasive boss to another division or



department, where he or she can inflict injury on entirely new (and usually unwitting) populations. I am continually amazed by seemingly ethical managers who, devoid of guilt, sing the praises of their about-to-depart abrasive boss to the unsuspecting new department: “He brings a lot to the table” (*yeah, right*). Isolation consists of removing the abrasive boss from any supervisory responsibilities and relegating the offender to a role that demands minimal interaction with coworkers (also known as *solitary confinement*). Starvation refers to the practice of eliminating an abrasive boss’s sources of professional or psychological sustenance. This can be achieved by reassigning the boss to uninteresting, unrewarding, and conspicuously humiliating tasks in the hope of starving him or her out of the organization.

Delay

Delay is a less effective avoidance tactic because, unlike in denial, management is required to recognize that the abrasive boss is in fact a problem. But here’s the great thing about this particular defensive maneuver: it allows management to conclude, “Yes, we have a problem, but *it just might go away if we avoid confronting it!*” For example:

“We’re hoping things will improve after he gets through this divorce.”

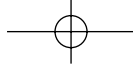
“We hear she might transfer to another division.”

“Things may look very different after the merger.”

“It won’t be long before he retires.”

“It won’t be long before I retire.”

In its more extreme manifestation, delay takes the form of unrealistic, desperate fantasizing, also known as the *pray-for-a-miracle* approach. Such prayers can range from the innocuous



(“maybe she’ll marry the guy and decide to quit”) to the malevolent (“please let him be hit by a beer truck”). Unlike denial, where we turn a blind eye to the problem, delay allows us to avoid handling the problem even though we see it. Unfortunately, delay is a time-limited defense strategy, as anyone who has lingered too long in the path of a bus will confirm.

Not all managers flee when faced with an abrasive boss: some take a stand and attempt to fight the problem by offering personal mentoring or referring the abrasive individual to a good executive coach. Others go with the more standard training options, ranging from generic leadership development approaches to anger management and team development seminars—all questionable as far as their effectiveness with abrasive bosses goes. When I surveyed *BusinessWeek*’s top-ranked U.S. executive education programs, none offered what one respondent referred to as “a charm school for assholes” (Crawshaw, 2005). In contrast, anger management courses for executives and physicians are proliferating, despite the lack of research to substantiate their effectiveness (Hollenhorst, 1998). And then there’s the revered “positive” approach to preventing and healing further abrasion: the trust-building workshop.

(Dis)Trust Building

I have a deep distrust of trust-building workshops. I have never been able to buy into the concept that a single, consultant-driven intervention could transform an agitated herd of employees into a unified team ready to pull whatever wagon they’re hitched to, much less tame an abrasive boss. My suspicions were confirmed when I was recruited into an executive position with a Fortune 100 company to run its national and international employee assistance programs. Acclimated to the spartan stratum of social work, I was thrilled to ascend to the glorious galaxy of corporate life, complete with corporate conventions at luxurious locales. My first experience in corporate team building took place at



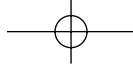
San Diego's fabled Hotel del Coronado. After the obligatory welcome speeches, we were herded out onto the beach (the same beach strolled by Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*) to build the bonds that bind.

These people were new to me—I'd never met any of them. Intent on conveying my newly minted corporate composure, I was careful not to betray my skepticism. I, along with my new comrades, listened attentively to the consultant's instructions: "I want everyone to stand in a circle, facing inward. And then one of you will stand in the middle of the circle, stiffen your body, and fall backward. This is a trust-building exercise: the objective is to trust your teammates to catch you as you fall."

We obediently formed our circle, and one woman of slight build volunteered to stand in the center. We braced to catch her. Facing me, she stiffened and fell back. And then it happened—I couldn't believe my eyes. The team members immediately behind her stiffened and stepped back. *Thwump!* She fell flat on her back, biting the proverbial dust (or in this case, sand). Silence prevailed—shocked looks were exchanged by all. Turning to the person on my left, I hissed, "*What the hell happened?*" His reply: "All I know is that no one likes her—she can be a real pain." My convictions regarding trust building were forever confirmed: trust can't be engineered—it has to be earned.

To Flee or Not to Flee

The same law holds for natural and corporate jungles: only the fittest survive. And to survive, inhabitants of these jungles operate according to the same survival dynamic: threat → fear → defense. This dynamic applies equally to abrasive bosses and to their subordinates, managers, and peers (I haven't commented separately on peers because I've found that they share management's same fears of doing harm to or being harmed by their abrasive colleagues). Each perceives threat, feels fear, and defends through fight or flight. As we've seen, abrasive bosses



go for the fight option, battling threats to their competence. As their coworkers, you have the same options—to flee (or at least lie low) or to fight the threat of psychological and professional injury inflicted by abrasive bosses. Many of you have developed significant expertise in the flight options, or you wouldn't be reading this book. You also know that these options aren't terribly effective in defending against the unfriendly fire of workplace abrasion. Whether you're a subordinate, peer, or manager of an abrasive boss, if you want to stop the suffering you'll have to squelch your impulse to flee and, instead, take a stand with the strategies presented in the coming chapters. But before anyone can be persuaded to take a bull or boss by the horns, one question must be answered: Why bother? Why risk getting gored if there's no hope? Why bother to climb into the ring if, as one manager assured me, "*They can't change*"?

