

## *Chapter Five*

# **WINNERS WHO BECOME LOSERS: ABRASIVE LEADERS**



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*LAURA CRAWSHAW*

DAVID WRIGHT (WRIGHT)

Today I'm talking with Dr. Laura Crawshaw, leading expert on abrasive leadership and founder of The Boss Whispering Institute, which is dedicated to research and training in the field of coaching abrasive leaders. Her groundbreaking research with more than four hundred abrasive executives, managers, supervisors, and professionals (including medical, legal, and academic) exploded the myth that so-called "bully" bosses intentionally set out to harm employees. Instead, she found the opposite—lacking the ability to read other's emotions, the vast majority of abrasive leaders are blind to the wounds they inflict. To put it bluntly, they lack psychological insight; they're clueless. Dr. Crawshaw translated her findings into a coaching method called Boss Whispering® that that helps these individuals quickly gain insight into the impact of their words and actions and develop non-destructive management strategies.

DAVID WRIGHT (WRIGHT)

Laura, welcome to *No Winner Ever Got There Without a Coach*.

You're here today to talk about winners who become losers—abrasive leaders. Tell me more.

LAURA CRAWSHAW (CRAWSHAW)

I'm talking about people who became leaders because of their technical competence—their ability to execute the technical tasks of their work. These people are the high performers, whether IT expert, brilliant surgeon, or top producer. They were promoted into leadership roles because of their outstanding technical competence. Here's where the problem arises; adequate leadership isn't solely reliant on technical competence. Adequate leaders (ranging anywhere from good to great) have to be able to move people in the right directions—to motivate them to do the right thing at the right time, which requires *interpersonal* competence.

Interpersonally competent leaders have enough emotional intelligence to know how to relate to coworkers in socially acceptable ways that promote stable working relationships and ensure the smooth flow of work. They're insightful enough to consistently interact in a manner that their coworkers perceive as respectful. These skills help them successfully maneuver themselves and their teams through the inevitable interpersonal rough patches present in any workplace, keeping emotional distress, and the resulting distraction, to a minimum.

Contrast these adequate leaders with leaders who don't have this capacity—who are, to put it bluntly, interpersonally *incompetent*, relying on aggression to motivate others and flog the work forward. At the Boss Whispering Institute, we call them *abrasive leaders*, namely, any individual charged with managerial authority whose interpersonal behavior causes emotional distress in coworkers sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning. This definition also includes professionals, such as physicians and attorneys, who may not have direct management responsibilities, but who still wield authority over others.

WRIGHT

Why do you call them abrasive leaders?

## CRAWSHAW

“Abrasive” is defined as *harsh or rough in manner*, and describes the characteristic interpersonal style of abrasive leaders. Simply put, they rub their coworkers the wrong way. Their behaviors, characterized by aggression, damage work relationships to the point of disrupting organizational functioning. Aggressive behaviors can range from mild offense to open attack. The words and actions of these individuals create interpersonal friction that grates on subordinates, peers, and/or superiors, grinding away at trust and motivation and ultimately disrupting the smooth flow of work. Abrasive leaders can inflict deep wounds and intense suffering in employees, who unwillingly find themselves in the ranks of the working wounded.

The pain of actually engaging in work (resulting from weak wages, bleak benefits, bad schedules, or tedious tasks) is not the pain I am addressing here, neither am I talking about the pain caused by leaders who cut programs, pay, or people based on business need. I’m talking about the pain suffered from direct contact with an abrasive leader—the emotional wounds sustained from their interpersonal aggression.

## WRIGHT

Why do you call yourselves Boss Whisperers?

## CRAWSHAW

Boss Whispering is a specialized method of coaching designed to help abrasive leaders rein in their aggressive workplace behaviors. Even though I didn’t initially refer to this specialty practice with this term, it roughly describes what members of the Boss Whispering Institute do. Much like the horse whisperer, who calms unmanageable horses, we work to tame the fears of incompetence that drive unmanageable managers to trample on their coworkers’ emotions.

I became a Boss Whisperer the same way that horse whisperers begin—by carefully observing horses (or in my case, bosses) and trying to understand why they behave as they do. This continuing research is based on more than four hundred cases of abrasive leaders, as well as thousands of hours of interviews with employees and employers over whom they’d ridden roughshod.

WRIGHT

Why should employers worry if they have a few abrasive leaders in their organization? As you said, they tend to be top performers—they get things done.

CRAWSHAW

Yes, but at what cost? The wounds of working with an abrasive leader are inevitably incurred by the employing organization as well, eroding effectiveness and paralyzing productivity. I could spend the rest of this interview citing statistics on the costs in terms of reduced motivation, attrition, absenteeism, and higher risks of litigation over harassment or hostile work environment, but I'll spare you. And who pays for untold hours of lost productivity as coworkers focus on their wounds instead of the tasks at hand?

These aren't the only costs paid by the employer for tolerating abrasive leadership, which, in its more severe forms, constitutes workplace bullying. If the employer doesn't address the problem, employees will wonder why. *"Why don't they do something about him [or her]? This behavior shouldn't be allowed—we shouldn't have to live in fear of getting hammered every day."* If organizations don't take action to address this problem, they will be viewed as not caring about their people, or even worse, as tacitly condoning destructive management behaviors.

WRIGHT

Some leaders truly believe that they need to bark and bite occasionally to keep people on their toes.

CRAWSHAW

Good leaders don't have to tear chunks out of their coworkers to get the job done. They don't have to bark because when they speak, everyone around them listens very carefully and takes them very seriously. And why is that? Because good leaders are respected for their inherent positional authority, and if their authority is not respected, good leaders will set limits and consequences on unacceptable performance or conduct in a very civilized manner by enacting the organization's formal disciplinary process. *"You know where you stand with him. He sets clear expectations, and if you're not meeting them, he will let you know right away. He doesn't get angry"*

*like other bosses I've had. He calmly makes it clear that below-par work isn't acceptable, and that if it doesn't improve, he'll have to take further action.*" Leaders who operate at this level command tremendous respect because people live in fear not of the leader, but of failing to meet the organization's performance expectations.

WRIGHT

Are abrasive leaders ever justified in resorting to interpersonal aggression?

CRAWSHAW

My answer is no. I am frequently challenged on this point by individuals who insist that aggression is justified. "*Sometimes you have to kick ass when the heat is on—you can't afford to screw up.*" One surgeon I coached made this case, arguing that he needed to shout, throw surgical instruments, and kick doors to get his assistants to perform adequately. Like most abrasive leaders, he was blind to the actual impact of his aggression, which only served to unnerve his team, leading to more errors.

David Rock's *Your Brain at Work* eloquently presents recent neuroscientific confirmation that in response to threat, blood flow is diverted from other parts of the brain, impairing analytic thinking and problem solving. Putting it mildly, I wouldn't want to be the patient on that surgical team's operating table. Adequate leaders find ways to correct inadequate performance without having to bark, bite, or go for the jugular.

WRIGHT

But isn't it unrealistic to believe that we should all get along all of the time—that we should all like each other and "make nice"?

CRAWSHAW

Absolutely—conflict in the workplace, as in life, is inevitable. And it's clear that we aren't necessarily going to like everyone we work with. The key is how conflict is handled, and how we interact in the course of addressing our differences. I'm simply saying that your chances of resolving a conflict are increased if you treat people respectfully. Behaving in a civilized manner allows us to work through conflict without the injury and unnecessary roughness that characterize abrasive leadership styles.

As an example, air traffic controllers observe a code of professional conduct that calls for communicating with pilots in emotion-free monotones, for the safety of the flying public. Controllers and pilots both understand the value of communicating with composure—wild behavior has no place in the wild blue yonder. Employers should require this same code of professional conduct, which I define as *treating others with respect whether or not you respect them*. Don't buy an abrasive leader's argument that *"Employees have to earn my respect before I'll treat them with respect!"* What employer can afford to wait that long?

## WRIGHT

Tell us more about the abrasive behaviors.

## CRAWSHAW

I've coached more than four hundred abrasive leaders throughout the past thirty years, and discovered that the five most commonly exhibited abrasive behaviors are over-control, threats, public humiliation, condescension, and overreaction. I think these behaviors are best described through the voices of coworkers I interviewed:

### **Over-control:**

*"It's all command and control—it's always 'just do it.' There's no discussion or input."*

*"She's a total micromanager. She treats us like kids instead of adults. I've got a babysitter for a boss."*

*"He has the power and he never lets you forget who is king—his department is his domain."*

### **Threats:**

*"He's the 'my way or the highway' type."*

*"She told someone that if they didn't like the way she ran things, she'd be happy to write them a reference."*

*"He enforces through fear—it's 'shape up or ship out.'"*

### **Public Humiliation:**

*"He yells at people and belittles them out where everyone can hear."*

*“She will tell you what she thinks you’re doing wrong—right in the hallway—in front of others.”*

*“He can be really intimidating. Everyone is afraid of getting hammered in front of the group—they clam up.”*

**Condescension:**

*“She always talks down to people like she’s the only one who knows anything.”*

*“He’s famous for rolling his eyeballs or snorting in contempt.”*

*“He prides himself on his demonstrating his brilliance. He enjoys putting you in your place, like a cat toying with a mouse.”*

**Overreaction:**

*“He makes snap judgments. He makes assumptions and leaps to conclusions without investigating.”*

*“When you try to tell her about a problem, she jumps the gun and blames us.”*

*“He’s easily angered, and it can be directed at anyone. He forgets it an hour later, but the target remembers it forever. He has inflicted deep personal wounds.”*

Lack of respect is the single common denominator unifying all of these abrasive behaviors. As one employee put it, *“When you come to work, you leave your self-respect at the door and hope to pick it up on your way out.”*

WRIGHT

So why do they engage in these bullying behaviors?

CRAWSHAW

Because they’re afraid—yes, afraid. I know that sounds strange, because they don’t look like they’re afraid. They may look supremely confident as their intimidating behaviors inspire fear in those around them, but that exterior manifestation of confidence cloaks profound underlying anxiety.

If you look at most of what’s written in what I call the “bully boss” literature, you’ll find that the common belief is that abrasive leaders engage in these behaviors because they are mentally or morally disordered. There are legions of books and articles asserting that abrasive leaders are

morally disordered (“evil,” “snake,” “predator”) or mentally disordered (“psychopath,” “narcissist,” “sadist”) or both. From the very earliest abrasive coaching clients, I did not find that to be the case. Instead, I discovered that the vast majority of abrasive leaders are *afraid*—afraid of being perceived as incompetent. They, like all of us, want to be perceived as competent, but if anything threatens that perception, they experience intense unconscious anxiety and attack the perceived threat.

## WRIGHT

What do you mean by “threat”?

## CRAWSHAW

Let me explain with a basic example. When a mouse sees a cat, it feels threatened. Why? Because it’s afraid of being annihilated by said cat. What options does a mouse have to defend itself? Flight—it can run away. And if mice were equipped with tiny machine guns, they could fight.

It all boils down to this basic rule of nature: When an organism perceives a threat, it feels fear or anxiety and defends itself through the fight-or-flight response. I’ve dubbed this the *TAD* (Threat-Anxiety-Defense) *Dynamic*. This dynamic applies not only to physical threats, but psychological ones as well. When faced with a psychological threat (e.g., criticism of one’s ideas), our most primitive instinct is to fight or flee. Luckily, we’ve evolved parts of the brain that, when functioning, enable us respond to threats in a civilized manner, calmly working through the threatening issue.

Take the employee who tells you that he or she hasn’t completed a vital report on time. You need that report for tomorrow’s management meeting. An adequate leader will first explore the circumstances. Why wasn’t the report completed, and what will it take to get it done in time? Is it because relevant information wasn’t provided by another department, or because the employee didn’t prioritize well enough? Adequate leaders hear of a problem, explore the root causes of the problem, and then work to solve the problem, all with calm efficiency. Abrasive leaders, on the other hand, hear of a problem, instantly diagnose the problem as coworker incompetence, and attack the problem—with aggression. They reflexively conclude that *any* problem is the result of coworker incompetence, which in turn threatens their self-image of competence. This threat must be



defended against, and the primitive response to this perceived threat is the aforementioned *fight* option.

Listen to this abrasive leader: *“My greatest fear is the fear of failure, of not executing, of being revealed as a fraud, incapable of doing what I’ve been given—the fear that I am not a good leader. Don’t ever put me in a position where I can fail. I have done a good job. If I feel threatened in any way, shape, or form, I will come out swinging. This is survival.”*

Through the years, I learned that most abrasive leaders are neither evil nor insane; they are fearful of perceived threats to their competence that could jeopardize their workplace survival. This realization became instrumental in the formulation of the Boss Whispering method. Sigmund Freud pioneered this understanding of human defense against psychological threat, which is now supported by research confirming that individuals in positions of power can become aggressive when they feel incompetent—the result of a threatened ego.

## WRIGHT

I remember a manager in a company where I worked who was incredibly impatient and demanding. He had bright people working for him, but if they didn’t get it exactly right (in his opinion), he’d go after them. He would get so frustrated: *“Why don’t they see what needs to be done? How can they be so stupid!”*

## CRAWSHAW

You’re describing exactly what I’m talking about. Most abrasive leaders work under the assumption that everyone should be exactly like them—everyone should know as much as they do, be as bright as they are, think as quickly as they do, and so on. If you were able to hire clones of yourself, then you would have a team that could do everything exactly as you would. Unfortunately for these leaders, human cloning has yet to be perfected, so they will inevitably be burdened (as they see it) with coworkers who are not capable of functioning at their level of competence.

Adequate leaders understand this, and if they do detect incompetence, they see it as their role to at least try to develop that employee before considering demotion or termination. Abrasive leaders don’t. They simply attack, viewing aggression as noble and necessary: *“Sometimes you’ve got to kick people to get the job done.”*

WRIGHT

So if you have an abrasive leader under you, what are you supposed to do? Should you institute a respectful workplace policy?

CRAWSHAW

Instituting a respectful workplace policy is a good first step, but it won't solve the problem of abrasive leadership. You can write all the policies you want, but the key lies in holding employees accountable for conducting themselves in a respectful manner.

WRIGHT

Are you saying that if you've got abrasive leaders who ignore the policy, you should confront them and tell them to shape up?

CRAWSHAW

That's a good second step, but in most cases simply talking to the individual won't work, or you may only see a temporary improvement before the abrasive leader reverts back to destructive behavior. Why? Because abrasive leaders are blind to the nature and impact of their abrasive conduct—they don't see the error of their ways, and will predictably become very defensive if you attempt to confront them.

Abrasive leaders are generally blind to the pain they cause, and this condition is often compounded by deafness as well. Most hear very little about their conduct from others, essentially functioning in a feedback vacuum. Subordinates are understandably reluctant to directly voice concerns for fear of adverse reactions, and peers normally don't see it as their role to provide unsolicited feedback. The abrasive leader's superior may not be aware of the distress experienced by those lower in the organization's structure, or may buy into the abrasive leader's description of "whining, complaining employees."

WRIGHT

Even without feedback, how could they possibly be blind to the fact that they're treating others disrespectfully and doing damage in the process?

## CRAWSHAW

When I first started coaching abrasive leaders, I asked the same question. Over time, I realized that some simply didn't see their impact on others, and therefore didn't understand that the impact was injurious (they were blind *and* ignorant). The remainder saw some impact, but had no idea of the nature or degree of pain they'd inflicted. *"I don't see why people are so upset. They should know that when I get on their case it's nothing personal—it's just business. The job has to get done."*

The first condition is the more common; many abrasive leaders don't see that their behavior has any impact on coworkers' emotions. They don't see that their behavior is in any way related to how others respond to their management style.

Let me give you an example. A past client of mine, a CEO, complained to me that his senior management team sat silently when he pressed them for ideas or reactions. When I asked why he thought they didn't respond, he answered: *"I don't know—they're either lazy or stupid."* True to form, he reflexively made the standard abrasive leader's diagnosis of incompetence. In his eyes, they didn't speak up because they were slothful or simpleminded. He was totally blind to the possibility (later confirmed through coworker interviews) that his management team didn't voice their ideas for fear of being attacked by the CEO. He didn't see that his tendency to harshly criticize any input he disputed influenced his team's emotions, instilling fear. Unable to see the effect of his threatening presence, he had no possibility of comprehending the crushing effects of his intimidating style on team communication.

I was astounded to discover that these leaders, who possess high cognitive (technical) intelligence, were profoundly lacking in emotional intelligence, defined by Daniel Goleman as the *ability to monitor and manage one's own emotions in order to monitor and manage the emotions of others*. Contrary to the belief that they calculatedly concoct strategies to inflict harm on others, I found that the majority of these leaders were *clueless*—they lacked emotional insight.

## WRIGHT

So what's an organization to do with leaders who engage in workplace bullying?

## CRAWSHAW

As I see it, an employer has three choices:

- Do nothing and pay the price of lost productivity and human suffering.
- Isolate or terminate the abrasive leader for damage control.
- Set limits and consequences, and offer help through coaching. Boss Whisperers term this option *intervention*.

## WRIGHT

That's an interesting term. Is it similar to the intervention process used with substance abusers to get them to accept help?

## CRAWSHAW

Yes. When I worked as an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) counselor in Alaska, I received training in this process, which consisted of friends, family members, and often the employer, presenting their perceptions of the negative impact of the substance abuse to the chemically dependent individual. This method was developed by Vernon Johnson to break through the intense psychological denial characteristic of chemical dependency.

Caringly confronted with these negative perceptions, the abuser was given the options of seeking help or suffering the consequences of losing both family and employment. It proved an effective way of taking the blinders off and getting the person to see the need to change. Only after many years of coaching employers to intervene with abrasive leaders did I realize that I'd incorporated this process into the Boss Whispering method.

## WRIGHT

How does intervention translate into the workplace?

## CRAWSHAW

It starts with a member of upper management (usually the abrasive leader's superior), and often a human resources representative, sitting down with the abrasive leader, first voicing the value of that leader to the organization, and then setting limits and consequences. Here's an example:

Employer: *We wanted to meet with you today to discuss concerns that have arisen. I want to start this conversation by letting you know that you bring great value to this organization—you've done a lot to contribute to our success. Our concerns have to do with negative reports we're getting about your interactions with coworkers. I was told that you lost your temper with some employees and threatened their jobs.*

Abrasive Leader: *I never said that. That's not what happened.*

Employer: *That's what was reported to us.*

Abrasive Leader: *Well, that's not what happened—you weren't there. I didn't shout at them—I just made it clear that our customers won't tolerate second-rate work, and that things have to change. That's the fact.*

Employer: *You're right, I wasn't there. The "fact" is that I don't know and cannot know what happened. I wasn't there. I do know one thing for a fact: We have continuing reports from coworkers who feel that they are being treated disrespectfully—this isn't the only one. We can't have that here, and I want you to turn these negative perceptions around. I want you here for the long haul, and I don't want these negative perceptions to keep you from being a success.*

Abrasive Leader: *I can't believe you're making this big of a deal out of nothing! You don't understand—I've had to deal with tight timelines and limited budgets, and sometimes you have to move people faster than they want to go.*

Employer: *The fact is that other managers have the same tight timelines and limited budgets, and they're able to get the job done without generating these negative perceptions. We're getting a steady stream of complaints about your management style, and I strongly suggest you turn this around. Things can't go on this way.*

Abrasive Leader: *So how am I supposed to deal with these complaints if you won't even tell me who they're coming from?*

Employer: *We can't share that information with you because people asked for confidentiality. Frankly, they were afraid of how you'd respond. We'd like to offer you coaching with someone who specializes in helping resolve this kind of issue—someone who can help you learn more about the specific concerns and work with you to address them. It's entirely your choice to accept the offer of coaching, but the bottom line is that if these negative perceptions continue, we'll have to take further action.*

WRIGHT

You're talking tough love. This sounds like the ultimate difficult conversation.

CRAWSHAW

You're right, and it takes courage to have that conversation because most abrasive leaders will get defensive. They're now going to perceive *you* as the threat, the ultimate threat to their self-image of competence and professional survival.

WRIGHT

Does this come easily to upper management, or do they have reservations about intervening?

CRAWSHAW

Historically, employers have tended to avoid intervening. Here again, the common belief is that organizations don't set limits and consequences for abrasive conduct because they, too, are evil and don't care about the people who work for them. That may be the case in some instances, but more often than not, upper management avoids dealing with the abrasive leaders in their employ because they're afraid. Yes, they, too, are afraid.

I've found that these anxieties fall into two categories: the fear of being harmed by the abrasive leader (*"He'll quit and we can't risk that," "What if he sues us for wrongful termination?"* and so on) and the fear of doing harm to the abrasive leader (*"I don't want to hurt her, she's been loyal to me and works harder than anyone else"*). Organizations also fail to intervene because they view the situation as hopeless: *"We've talked to him [or her], but things only improved for a few weeks. We can't afford to lose that kind of technical expertise—what else can we do?"*

Sending abrasive leaders off to seminars in "effective communication" or "dealing with difficult people" is notoriously ineffective, because abrasive leaders don't perceive themselves to be abrasive, or, if they do, they believe the ends justify the means. They'll be the ones sitting in the back row of the classroom, resentfully wondering why they've been, as one of my clients put it, *"forced to waste time with all of this touchy-feely bull\*\*\*\*."*

Employers need to understand that the situation isn't hopeless, and they aren't helpless. If they can summon the courage to intervene and

motivate the abrasive leader to change his or her management style by enacting limits and consequences, specialized coaching can bring about dramatic and permanent improvement. Admittedly, intervention is easier said than done, and I recommend that organizations work with a specialist coach who can help them navigate the predictable defensiveness they will encounter.

WRIGHT

If leaders in an organization are hesitant to intervene, what would you tell them they stand to gain by doing so?

CRAWSHAW

In addition to eliminating the costs and risks of tolerating abrasive leadership, upper management stands to gain the lost respect of their employees. I've seen it over and over again—well-intended but intimidated managers who fail to intervene with an abrasive leader are viewed by employees as tacitly condoning the abuse: *"They let this stuff go on all the time. They don't do anything about him [or her] because they don't care anything about us—they only care about making a buck."*

WRIGHT

Does intervention work? Is it enough to get them to change?

CRAWSHAW

Intervention and a bit of management mentoring may be enough to correct the management styles of young, inept managers who haven't developed entrenched abrasive styles. I can certainly look back on my career and remember when a kind boss pulled me aside and gently informed me that telling customers that he was the most disorganized person in the office wasn't the wisest course—I never did it again. However, intervention alone is not enough to solve the problem of chronically abrasive leadership.

This may come as a bit of a surprise because most management books will tell you that all you have to do is tell people what they're doing wrong, and then they'll immediately and spontaneously start doing the right thing: *"Set clear expectations, and if those are not met, inform the employee that he [or she] needs to address and resolve performance problems."* That may

work for performance problems, but it doesn't work for conduct problems. Even if you were able to penetrate abrasive leaders' defensiveness and get them to listen to what they're doing wrong, the sad fact is that *they will have no idea of how to do it "right."* To quote a past client, *"I have the patience of a wounded rhino—I can't stand it when people go slowly. I don't see how you treat people with respect when they're a bunch of idiots. How else am I supposed to get them to do what I want?"* They can't behave in a better way because they know no better way; they need help.

WRIGHT

What kind of help?

CRAWSHAW

That's where the Boss Whisperer comes in—abrasive leaders have a lot to learn. They ignore the importance of detecting and managing emotions in the workplace and, as a result, they wreak emotional havoc. They need to develop insight into why others don't automatically perform as they do, and relinquish their unrealistic expectation that "everyone should be just like me." They need to learn how to monitor and manage their own anxiety to gain control of their aggressive defense tactics against perceived threats to their competence. They need to read and accurately interpret how they are perceived by others, and develop strategies to achieve their objectives with carrots rather than sticks.

WRIGHT

How is that done?

CRAWSHAW

Boss Whispering begins with the establishment of a trusting relationship between client and coach. The coaching is conducted in a context of absolute confidentiality—no information regarding the content of coaching conversations is shared with the employer. This reduces the client's anxiety that the coach might be functioning as a "spy" of the organization, there only to investigate and report on the leader's failings.

Second, the coach presents himself or herself as an ally of the abrasive client, there to help the abrasive leader identify, analyze, and eliminate the negative perceptions now threatening his or her professional survival.



I remember once meeting with a client after the employer had intervened with him. He expressed his anger and confusion: *“I can’t believe this—they’re telling me that people have been complaining about me for a long time, but no one ever said a word to me about it until now. Plus, they didn’t give me any specifics beyond mentioning a few times I had to get tough with my team. What is going on? What am I supposed to do?”* I was struck by his confusion, and suddenly had a vision of someone plagued by enormous horseflies. I shared this image with him:

*From what you’re telling me, your employer told you that there are lots of negative perceptions about you—about your management style. You don’t know where these negative perceptions are coming from, you don’t know what caused most of them and, as a result, you have no idea of how to get rid of them. They keep buzzing around—the old ones don’t die off, and they seem to be multiplying. And on top of it all, these negative perceptions do you damage. They’re like horseflies—they bite, and when they bite, they take a chunk out of you. They’re sucking the lifeblood from your career and they’re damaging your reputation, your credibility and, from what you indicated, even your ability to survive at this company. You don’t understand where these negative perceptions come from or how to get rid of them—permanently—so that they don’t come back to bite you.*

*That’s where I come in. I see it as my job to help you understand and eliminate these negative perceptions, to manage them out of existence. My objective is to help you become more effective than you already are, without paying the price you’re paying right now.*

The coach then asks the client to engage in research: *In order to address this situation, there are three questions we need to answer:*

- *What are the negative perceptions?*
- *What causes them?*
- *What strategies will eliminate them permanently, never to return?*

*To find the answers to these questions, I’d like you to engage me as a co-researcher. I’d like to interview your coworkers to determine the exact nature of these negative perceptions, after which we’ll be able to analyze their origins and build strategies to eliminate them.*

WRIGHT

This approach is unusual. Don't you have to get the leaders to acknowledge that they're abrasive before they can change?

CRAWSHAW

No, you don't. You only have to get them to see that they're *perceived* to be abrasive, a fact they cannot refute after the employer's intervention. Most coaches make this exact mistake—they believe they have to get the abrasive clients to “confess” to their management “crimes” before any progress can be made. This prosecutorial approach will only provoke vigorous defense and destroy any hope of progress.

WRIGHT

What happens next?

CRAWSHAW

This offer to engage in research is very appealing to abrasive leaders, for they understandably want to know more about why they're being accused of interpersonal incompetence. Once the negative perceptions are collected by the coach through coworker interviews, the data is purged of identifying information, categorized into themes, and then presented to the client.

This is the moment when the blinders come off. This revelation of how the abrasive leader is perceived is inevitably shocking and embarrassing. Leaders who initially perceived themselves to be forceful by virtue of their emotional eruptions now see the perceptions describing their “temper tantrums” and “childish outbursts.” They see the anger, resentment, and ridicule that their abrasive styles generate, and they see how much this focus on negative behaviors detracts from their desired self-perception of competence. Faced with the force and magnitude of negative perceptions, clients look to the coach for help: *“How do I turn this around? How can I get people to do what I need done without being perceived this way?”*

WRIGHT

Where does the coaching go from there?

CRAWSHAW

Once the leader understands the exact nature of the negative perceptions, we turn our attentions to the next research question: What causes them? Remember the CEO who couldn't get his team to speak up in management meetings? To those of us with a modicum of insight, it's perfectly clear that they perceived his critical style as a threat, creating anxiety and their resulting "flight" reaction—retreating into silence.

To those lacking insight, it's a mystery. How could I get these abrasive leaders to see what I saw? How could I help them develop this insight?

I decided to break with tradition and share a basic trade secret of psychology, discovered by Freud, with my coaching clients: When an organism perceives a psychological *Threat*, it feels *Anxiety*, and *Defends* itself through fight or flight. I simply shared this Threat→Anxiety→Defense (*TAD*) Dynamic, pointing out that all members of the animal kingdom (including their coworkers and themselves) operate according to this psychodynamic. By sharing this concept, I found they could comprehend the powerful interplay of emotions in their interactions with coworkers. They were quickly able to see how their anxiety provoked fight and flight reactions in others, realizing that everyone, including the leader, defends against threats to professional survival.

Equipped with this insight, coach and client then work collaboratively to examine and interpret situations in the light of the TAD Dynamic. Why doesn't the CEO's team speak up? His initial simplistic, pejorative theories (lazy, stupid) are replaced by the more insightful (and accurate) interpretation: they flee the threat of his historically harsh criticism as clams do—by clamming up.

Once this insight is integrated, clients begin to see their role in generating negative perceptions and begin to see a way to stem the tide *by reducing the perception of threat*, by generating strategies (with the coach's help) that incorporate positive, rather than negative motivational tools.

Restraining his initial impulse to berate them for their silence (a fight strategy), the CEO instead elected to refrain from attacking offered input, instead using it an opportunity to calmly explore the risks and benefits of team members' suggestions. In doing so, he reduced the possibility that he would be perceived as a threat.

Another abrasive leader, frustrated about his team's resistance to a change he wanted to implement, was now able, using the TAD Dynamic, to explore and analyze their resistance: "*I asked them why they were fighting this—what they were afraid of. It was amazing. They told me they were afraid*

*of being blamed if the project failed. I immediately told them that I would take the blame, not them. I told them they didn't need to worry about that."* Here, we see the emergence of emotional intelligence—a leader reducing the perception of threat to calm the fears fueling his team's defensive resistance.

WRIGHT

It's clear that Boss Whispering is designed to calm the fears that drive these abrasive leaders to trample on the people they work with. How did you come up with this method?

CRAWSHAW

Through trial and error. I first discovered that these cognitively brilliant people were, to put it gently, emotionally *unintelligent*—they were clueless about interpersonal dynamics. I struggled with how to help them develop insight into human behavior, and found myself telling stories of fearful mice and threatening cats and the fight/flight defenses that protect physical and psychological survival. Sharing this basic law of nature (resonating through psychoanalytic theory, evolutionary psychology, and neuroscience) yielded surprising results. They "got it," and they used this insight to develop nondestructive, adaptive management strategies. These leopards evolved new spots.

Abrasive leaders want to be successful, and when their habitat (organization) demands not only technical, but also interpersonal skills, I've found that with specialized coaching, the majority have the instincts, intelligence, and insight to adapt, survive, and thrive. They are very appreciative of what they learn through the coaching process.

WRIGHT

Does it work?

CRAWSHAW

It works very quickly. We tell organizations that they should see demonstrable change by the third coaching session, and coaching is usually concluded within eight to ten sessions. Our research at the Boss Whispering Institute indicates that 87 percent of referred clients succeed in bringing their management styles to an acceptable level. We are now

conducting longitudinal studies with RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology) University on long-term implications to both client and employer.

WRIGHT

This strikes me as a fairly positive approach.

CRAWSHAW

It is. The benefits are many. Coworker suffering ends and employees are heartened that the formerly abrasive leader cared enough to work to change. Employees also regard the employer positively for intervening and requiring respectful conduct.

In turn, the formerly abrasive leader is grateful for the employer's willingness to invest in him or her and offer a second chance through coaching: *"It means a lot that they cared enough to give me this opportunity."* Finally, the employer reduces the potential for litigation, attrition, and anti-management sentiment, while at the same time retaining the leader's technical expertise. It's a win-win for employer, employee, and the now-adequate leader.

WRIGHT

And if it doesn't work? What if the abrasive leader doesn't make progress?

CRAWSHAW

Not everyone is able to change, and in the rare instances when leaders cannot change and must be isolated or terminated, their employers will be able to make that determination sooner rather than later, sparing their organizations years of pain.

Employers also have the peace of mind of knowing that they did everything in their power to help the individual leader, at the same time upholding their duty to provide a respectful workplace. It is leadership's responsibility to protect and promote the health of the organization so that it can survive to fulfill its mission. Employers go to great lengths to provide a physically safe workplace to protect employees from physical harm. I also believe it is an employer's duty to provide a psychologically safe workplace, to protect those same employees from psychological harm.

WRIGHT

So you're saying that for an organization to win, it has to develop winners with technical *and* interpersonal competence.

CRAWSHAW

Exactly.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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With more than thirty years' experience as a psychotherapist, corporate officer, and executive coach, Dr. Crawshaw founded The Boss Whispering Institute, which is dedicated to research and training in the field of coaching abrasive leaders. Pursuing her mission to reduce individual and organizational suffering caused by workplace bullying, Dr. Crawshaw trains coaches, consultants, and conflict specialists worldwide in the practice of Boss Whispering®. Dr. Crawshaw is the first to conduct research directly with abrasive leaders and their employers.

Dr. Crawshaw's book, *Taming the Abrasive Manager: How to End Unnecessary Roughness in the Workplace* (Jossey-Bass, 2007), presents her findings on why abrasive leaders resort to interpersonal aggression with coworkers, why they deny their destructive impact, and what individuals and employers can do to effectively get these bosses to behave in a civilized manner. Dr. Crawshaw holds degrees in clinical social work and organizational behavior and speaks internationally at workplace bullying, management, and coaching conferences.

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