


A COACHING METHOD THAT WORKS

ABRASIVE LEADERS + HOW TO STOP THEM



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Ask any target of workplace bullying whether the behavior was intentional or not, and they will tell you it was. The target will tell you the person who bullied them was laser-focused on ruining their lives. They may even tell you the person who bullied them was a psychopath.

Ask one of the many academic researchers who study workplace bullying about intentionality, and they may not be so sure. For decades, the body of literature around this topic has claimed that people who bully were evil predators who intentionally set out to exterminate their coworkers, reminiscent of the evil wolves in fairy tales who delighted in devouring innocent grandmothers, children, and assorted little pigs. However, much of that literature was based on the targets' perspective, and academics are starting to realize that's not so useful in understanding "the why" behind this behavior.

In short, we really don't know why people who bully do so other than through the eyes of targets. Through five case studies from my own coaching practice, I will offer some insight. I will also provide some knowledge on how to help them change.

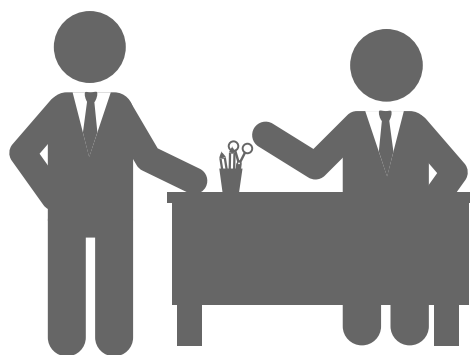
Throughout this eBook, I will use the phrase abrasive leader; it's a much better phrase than workplace bully because it focuses on the leader's behavior, rather than intentionality. We only know what this behavior feels like to others (i.e., abrasive), but we don't necessarily know the facts of why these leaders behave the way they do.

I encourage you read this eBook with an open mind. Remove what you think you know about workplace bullying and abrasive leaders. And, enjoy!

Sincerely,

Catherine Mattice, MA, SPHR, SHRM-SCP
Award-winning speaker and author, consultant,
and "Boss Whisperer"





WHY ARE ABRASIVE LEADERS SO ABRASIVE?

First, you should know that I am certified in coaching abrasive leaders specifically, through a program created by Dr. Laura Crawshaw, who has developed a highly regarded coaching method through her 40 years of coaching almost 500 abrasive leaders.

The first time I met Dr. Crawshaw was in 2011, at the International Association for Workplace Bullying and Harassment's conference in Cardiff, Wales. As I said before, academics have only been researching the reasons people engage in bullying behaviors through the eyes of targets, and when Dr. Crawshaw showed up at this conference people flocked to her. She had information that no one had ever been able to obtain – she had explanations from abrasive leaders on why they behaved as they did.

Crawshaw's method, which she calls Boss Whispering and which I use in my coaching practice, is focused on helping coaching clients see that their behaviors are perceived as overly aggressive, so they can then develop strategies to change those perceptions.

And therein inherently lies our first answer to the question of why. **ABRASIVE LEADERS DON'T SEE HOW OTHERS PERCEIVE THEM.** Someone may have shared with the abrasive leader several times over that their behavior is too aggressive, **BUT THESE INDIVIDUALS DENY IT OR MINIMIZE THE THE IMPACT OF THEIR BEHAVIOR.** When I first met Jack (all client names changed), for example, and asked him if he was ready to engage in coaching, he said, "I guess so. I can't believe I've been walking around here like an a**h*** for three years and nobody's told me. I wish they wouldn't have waited until I was about to be fired to let me know."

The thing is, Jack had been told, many times. People had transferred out of his department to get away from him, and there had been numerous conflict management meetings with a variety of staff. The problem was that his employer had not been able to get through to Jack, and we can guess he was **COMPLETELY LACKING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IF HE COULDN'T SEE** the look on people's faces when he cut them down or sensed how unhappy they were with his behavior.

Beyond lacking social and emotional intelligence, there are many other reasons abrasive leaders are abrasive. While I'm not an expert in psychoanalysis, I can offer up some patterns. For example, three of my coaching clients had **LEARNED TO BE AGGRESSIVE AS CHILDREN**, having grown up on the southside of Chicago, in Boston, and in New York City. What may be acceptable in those areas very well may not be acceptable in suburbs of Southern California, for example. Another had played college football and was emulating his coach's leadership style at work.

In addition, **THE ORGANIZATION MAY HAVE TAUGHT THE INDIVIDUAL TO ACT ABRASIVELY**. One client, Aaron, spoke many times of the abuse he received from his own bosses, and often wondered why he'd been singled out for coaching given that he was also mistreated. Another client, Jason, spoke of the previous organizational leadership with whom he'd risen through the corporate ladder, and believed that much of his past behavior was a result of their demands; and this was corroborated by many of his peers when I interviewed them. Further, a top sales person in her company, Linda, had been handsomely rewarded for the aggression and pushiness that facilitated her claim of that spot.

Abrasive leaders may also **BE AFRAID OF IMPERFECTION OR INCOMPETENCE**. For example, Aaron was "the golden goose" and his ideas were often sold for millions; the company relied on him for revenue. His boss often told him, "You are responsible for 5,000 paychecks," and the weight of that responsibility meant there was no room for error. As such, any mistakes on the part of others triggered his anxiety and resulting abrasiveness.

Jack was extraordinarily intelligent, and he could calculate whether planned steps for completing a project would fail or succeed. Problems arose when he would insist that another person's idea wouldn't work, but they pursued it anyway. When the idea failed, most would consider this learning, but my client saw it as a waste of time.

One reason Linda became the top salesperson was her ability to nurture her pipeline and sales – she never dropped the ball. However, that translated into micromanagement of coworkers and when a person didn't do exactly what she had so clearly specified it was frustrating for her. The thought of losing a sale was more than she could bear.

Donald, the leader relying on his football days for leadership inspiration, was also a top salesperson and a regional manager. At the end of each day, each market's sales numbers were published and Donald found himself angry if his market wasn't number one.

THESE STORIES HIGHLIGHT ONE CLEAR THEME – THE MAJORITY OF ABRASIVE LEADERS CARE IMMENSELY ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION'S, AND THEIR OWN, SUCCESS.

This is what makes them top performers, and may be why organizations won't intervene when faced with coworker complaints.

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO ABRASIVE LEADERSHIP

- Lack social and emotional intelligence
- Learned to act that way during childhood
- Learned to act that way from the organization
- Are afraid of imperfection and incompetence
- Care deeply about their own success and the success of the organization

WHAT MOTIVATES AN ABRASIVE LEADER TO ENGAGE IN COACHING?

I hate to say it, but **most of my clients were referred to me because they finally did something that pushed the envelope and the organization became desperate to avoid liability.**

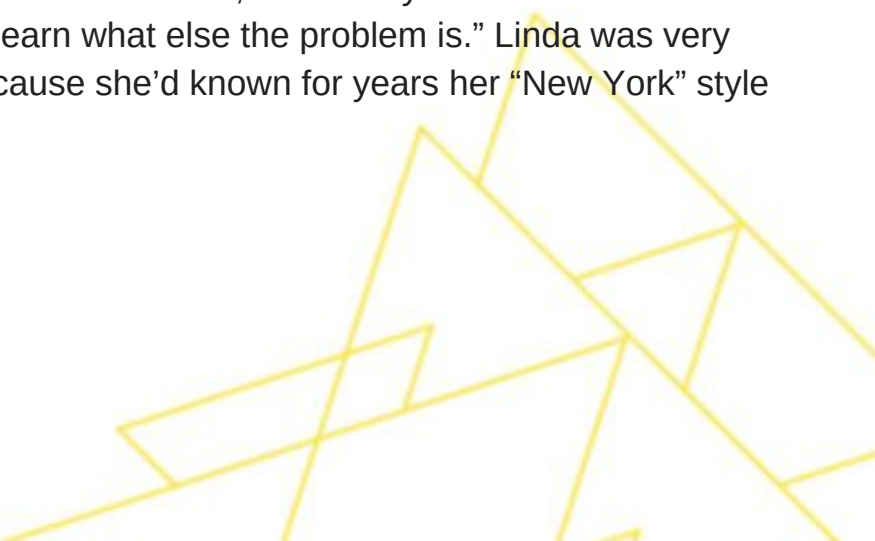
Aaron, who had yelled at people for years, for example, yelled so intensely at a subordinate that she suffered a panic attack and her tongue became so swollen she couldn't have responded if she wanted to. Linda and Donald had complaints about a hostile work environment filed against them, and though the investigation findings did not formally confirm harassment or discrimination, the organization knew something had to be done about their behavior.

When I tell people I coach abrasive leaders, I am often met with, "Those people will never change!" This attitude is due to the perception that abrasiveness is intentional, which those of us who specialize in the coaching practice of Boss Whispering have found not to be the case.

INITIALLY, ABRASIVE LEADERS ENGAGE IN COACHING WITH ME

BECAUSE THEY HAVE TO. The Boss Whispering method requires that the organization intervene and set consequences if the behavior doesn't change. For many, the consequence is termination of employment, but not always. As a salesperson, Linda was in a position where the more money she made the more resources the company provided. Her organization threatened to stop providing them, which would result in a dramatic decrease of personal income.

You might think it's surprising, **BUT WHILE MY CLIENTS ARE FEELING A LITTLE DEFENSIVE AT THE INITIAL STAGE, THEY ARE READY TO PARTICIPATE.** Jason said, "I know I'm loud, and I bet you'll hear that in the interviews, but I'm ready to learn what else the problem is." Linda was very excited to learn from me because she'd known for years her "New York" style had alienated people.



The Coaching Process

1

COLLECTING FEEDBACK

THE BOSS WHISPERING METHOD IS BASED ON MUTUAL EXPLORATION AND AIMS TO ANSWER THREE QUESTIONS:

- 1. WHAT ARE THE PERCEPTIONS OF YOU?**
- 2. WHAT CAUSES THOSE PERCEPTIONS?**
- 3. WHAT STRATEGIES CAN WE IMPLEMENT TO CHANGE THEM?**

Note that many organizations are not in a position to help the leader answer the first question as employers understandably cannot share highly specific information about the complaints or complainants, who have requested confidentiality.

In addition, coming from HR or a manager, it's all simply hearsay. The leader has their own side, they don't remember conversations that way, and it sounds like people are being a little too sensitive. As a result, the employer's efforts to intervene are met with denial and defensiveness.

Jack's manager actually broke down in tears when he told me about everything he'd tried. He felt like a complete failure as a manager when he realized he couldn't help Jack find new strategies, and was saddened to know he'd been unable to prevent the pain Jack had caused so many people. But Jack couldn't adapt new strategies because he, at that point, had no awareness of the specific words and actions that alienated coworkers, why his responses alienated them, or how to change his interactions to end the distress. In short, he lacked insight.

In the interest of answering the first question, I collect feedback from several peers and subordinates identified by both the client and the employer before coaching begins. First, I secure permission from the client to interview eight to ten people, with the client inviting them to participate in his or her coaching process.

I also secure the client's permission to interview coworkers who came to the employer in confidence with their concerns. The client understands that these perceptions are important to include, and that they will not know who these individuals are. They are referred to as "confidential add-ons" because of their past request for confidentiality.

2

DELIVERING FEEDBACK

Once the interviews conclude, I remove all identifying information and sort my notes into themes. It is important for clients to see the perceptions of their coworkers in their own words within those themes. The client and I review the feedback, which provides them with very specific information on exactly what they do and say that generates negative perceptions of their behavior.

As you can imagine, the feedback document is often 12-15 pages. The feedback document is confidential and the employer will not have access to it. Here are some examples of feedback I've obtained during interviews:

AGGRESSIVE COMMUNICATION

- He sends darts all the time to where I was fumbling over my words like crazy because of him
- I felt like I was in an abusive relationship – you know, they care and they're nice, and then they are “boom” and they freak out
- I've had 15 managers in my career and he's one of the worst – he has no people skills or management skills

INTIMIDATING

- It's about body language. When he shuts you down he stands up and he's forceful in his non-verbal communication. He raises his voice.
- He's loud and people tell me they're afraid of him.
- He shouted and it really shook some people.

MICROMANAGES

- He's a micromanager – and he gets too interested in details and knowing and dictating
- Maybe he just doesn't trust others – the process we use is supposed to empower others and he should be removing blockers and not getting in their way but he's a micromanager

DOMINATES IN CONFLICT

- You can feel it's, "no you're wrong because" rather than “here is how I see it.”
- He will push and push and push and he expects you to back down - he uses his tone to push and it goes to a bad place – his tone is saying, “I'm not backing down.”
- He'll argue against your idea in a way that doesn't feel like he's adding to the discussion but instead shooting down the discussion

DRIVES PEOPLE AWAY

- People go around him and don't invite him to meetings because they don't want him there
- Everyone that I work with avoids him, we have a special process so we can avoid him and the drama and this really hurts his effectiveness
- People alter their careers to not work with him
- A long line of people have left because of him

I'm sure you're wondering about the clients' reactions. Reactions are shock, denial, defensiveness, embarrassment, acceptance, hurt, sadness, or any combination thereof. They've had no insight into how their behavior affects others until now, and this information can be jolting.

Within a few days of the feedback session, we hold the first coaching session. At this stage, clients frequently state that the feedback has validity and they can understand it. Many even discuss how they've already begun to make changes in their behavior.

This leads me to the intrinsic reason clients are motivated to engage in coaching with me. Remember, abrasive leaders engage in abrasiveness because they fear incompetence and imperfection, and they've just received a rather long document describing just how incompetent and imperfect they are perceived to be in the art of relationship building. Wanting to ensure they are no longer perceived that way, they become motivated to learn.

Initially, abrasive leaders engage in coaching because they have to; coaching requires that the organization set consequences if the behavior doesn't change.

After receiving the feedback, the motivation to change becomes intrinsic. Abrasive leaders fear incompetence and imperfection, and they've received a document describing just how incompetence and imperfect they are at building relationships. Wanting to ensure they are no longer perceived that way, they become motivated to learn.

Donald, for example, explained on our very next call that he had complemented someone for a job well done earlier that day, even though in his head, "I wanted to tell him 'what the hell'? What's wrong with you?" He also stated, "I have to figure out how to win them over – I know we've lost a lot of people because of me and it hurt the environment and productivity. At the end of the day I want to be happy so I have to respect the happiness of those who report to me."

3

THE TAD DYNAMIC & THE INSIGHT CYCLE

THE TAD DYNAMIC

The Boss Whispering Method uses the **Threat – Anxiety – Defense (TAD)** Dynamic as a way to help clients gain insight into their own and others' behavior.

THREAT

ANXIETY

DEFENSE

The TAD Dynamic refers to something we all learned about in elementary school science class: **FIGHT OR FLIGHT**. During the first coaching session, I explain to clients that when we perceive a threat, the perception generates anxiety, and that ignites defense - or fight or flight (TAD).

The TAD Dynamic helps abrasive leaders see that they are fighting against perceived incompetence; perceived incompetence makes them anxious because it is threatening to their very existence. The TAD Dynamic also helps abrasive leaders see that their co-workers are anxious too, because they perceive the leader as a threat, and so engage in fight or flight as well. In fact, the feedback demonstrates these behaviors as coworkers talk about how they've reported the behavior to their manager (fight), for example, or avoided the leader altogether (flight).

THE INSIGHT CYCLE

The Insight Cycle helps the client answer the last two questions mentioned previously:

What is causing the negative perceptions, and what strategies can be developed to eliminate them?

As we look at the feedback document, we will choose a theme to start with. Over the next three or four months, we work through each theme and what can be done to eliminate the negative perceptions comprising it. Rather quickly, the client learns to ask and answer the questions of what caused the negative perceptions and what strategies can be implemented to eliminate them.

The Insight Cycle at Work

Aaron talked a lot about millennials, and how he couldn't understand why they never asked him questions. "I'm the smartest person here and everyone knows it. I don't know why they'd spend a week doing something wrong only to have me make them re-do it, when they could just come and ask me how to do it up front." I responded using the Insight Cycle, asking, "Why do you think they avoid ("flee") asking you? What do you think they are anxious about?" **From there, Aaron developed a list of reasons and ultimately came to realize they didn't ask questions because he made them anxious with his harsh tone and quick-to-reprimand-a-mistake leadership style, and so were engaged in flight.**

Through many conversations like these, **Aaron came to realize that he could work to reduce their anxiety so they will stop fleeing and start coming to him with questions.** For starters, he determined that when millennials did ask questions he got frustrated at the interruption, but on the other hand he wanted them to ask questions so as not to complete a task incorrectly. Therefore, one strategy was to approach the conversation as a time to coach and mentor, and a second was to focus on using a calmer tone of voice and more relaxed body language. Another strategy was to recognize employees for the good work they do, something he hadn't tried before.

As these strategies were implemented, Aaron could see changes in the way people interacted with him. "My body language is more relaxed. I can see I've relieved their anxiety and they are coming to me with questions now."

I knew Jack was getting it when we discussed the fear he ignited in meetings. When I asked him what people were so anxious about, he realized from his feedback that his habit of standing up in meetings was perceived as intimidating, **even though he did not intend this.** His resulting strategy was to stay seated, staying at their level. This is a simple example, **but highlights how far he'd come in recognizing that something so subtle could have such an impact.**

4

THE SECOND ROUND OF INTERVIEWS

After three or four months of coaching, a second round of interviews is conducted with peers to determine progress. At this point, the feedback shows where the client has made improvements as far as coworkers' perceptions, and in some cases, areas needing further focus.

Just as in the first round, interview notes are divided into themes and a document shared with the client. Below is some actual feedback for some of my clients.

INTERACTIONS ARE MORE POSITIVE, OR "NEUTRAL"

- It seems like he's trying to just have regular discussions and everything's pretty smooth and everyone's pretty happy
- I haven't felt him being condescending
- In the past he would smirk, almost as if he liked putting people down, but I haven't seen him do that lately
- He has been emailing the team and catching some bad mistakes, but the emails are appropriate and respectful
- We have more positive professional interactions
- The way he carries himself and the way he is, is better. He's not showing his emotions in a negative way

GIVES AUTONOMY

- He is letting people fail on their own and succeed on their own.
- If it is somebody else's problem he lets them take care of it and handle it
- Before he was the type of person who was nonstop – first to be at the office last to go home – micromanaging all the time. He's not doing that anymore.

CONTROLS EMOTIONS / TAKES TIME TO LISTEN

- Before we would say, "Wow he's really asserting his power right now" and now we don't feel like that – it feels so much more productive.
- He's been calmer – generally calmer – he's been more calm and more prepared.
- His temperament is more even keeled and it seems like he wants to listen.
- One time he started to raise his voice, and then he stopped and took a breath and said, "Sorry. Help me understand what you're saying." You could really see him working on self-awareness. I was impressed.

MORE COLLABORATIVE / NOT DOMINATING IN CONFLICT

- If he disagrees with your idea he'll say, "I see where you're coming from, and it has merit, but let's explore another idea"
- He's validating the other person's ideas and then offers up a diplomatic point of view, before he would just say that's not a good idea. But the validation is so much better now
- I was talking and he listened and he didn't interrupt me, and then he responded in a better way than I think he would have before.
- He asks a lot more questions about why did you do it this way or that way, or we're looking for feedback and he gives suggestions and asks questions all positively without any kind of disappointment or second-guessing what we've done.
- Before, let's say he wanted something done he would say, "Hey I need that done, this is what I expect and how I want it done." But lately now when he wants something done he says, "Hey let me show you how it's done." Then he will walk people through the process and show them how he wants thing.
- He is phrasing it better – it's more of a how can I support you to fix the problem rather than it's your fault because you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing.

By now the client has pretty well integrated the Insight Cycle, reflexively exploring why others behave as they do, now equipped with the lens of the TAD Dynamic.

Clients also learn to apply this process of exploration to themselves, spontaneously analyzing their own emotions to control defensive "fight" reactions while achieving their objectives.

A Triple Win

One absolutely fascinating (and ironic) fact, is that while everyone around is so afraid of the abrasive leader's behavior, the abrasive leader is afraid too. He or she lives in constant fear of being seen as incompetent. This is often experienced on an unconscious level, as consciously the leader may claim that they have superior competence and that others are flawed.

ABRASIVE LEADERS CAN CHANGE WITH THE RIGHT RESOURCES IN PLACE.

The employer must take a stand and hold absolutely everyone accountable to healthy and respectful behavior – even the high performers.

It is the employer's responsibility to provide a physically and psychologically safe workplace. Employers need to intervene with abrasive leaders by setting limits and consequences for abrasive behavior and offering help with a coach trained in this specialty. Failing to do so signals tacit acceptance of destructive leadership styles to employees, creating further distress.

In my experience, providing this help to abrasive leaders is a triple win:

- 1** Coworker suffering ends.
- 2** The formerly abrasive leader is grateful for the employer's willingness to invest in their development.
- 3** Organizational threats such as deteriorated morale and litigation end.

P.S. According to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), 75% of people do not report harassment to the employer for fear of retaliation. When you address legal behavior, such as abrasiveness or bullying, you are letting your employees know poor behavior will not be tolerated.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Catherine Mattice, MA, SPHR, SHRM-SCP is the Founder and CEO of Civility Partners. She is a Strategic HR Consultant who assists organizations in building positive cultures through HR practices. Catherine is a widely recognized thought-leader, and she is passionate about employers' responsibility to create the opportunity and environment for employees to thrive - it shows in her sheer number of conferences and publications. She has appeared on/in NPR, CNN, USA Today, Time.com and more as an expert, she has published articles in a wide variety of venues, and was a regular contributor to Forbes.com. Catherine's award-winning first book, **BACK OFF! Your Kick-Ass Guide to Ending Bullying at Work**, was hailed by international leadership-guru, Ken Blanchard, as, "the most comprehensive and valuable handbook on the topic." She's since written two more books, and is a LinkedIn Learning course author.

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