
“ABRASIVE LEADER” SOLUTIONS

WHAT IS MEANT BY “ABRASIVE LEADER?”

An abrasive leader is any individual charged with managerial authority, whose interpersonal behavior causes emotional distress in co-workers, sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning. You may have received complaints of extreme micro-managing; employees feeling threatened or fearful of their jobs when they make mistakes or question suggestions; a communication style that belittles and humiliates others, sometimes through inappropriate humor; condescending behavior as if no one else is competent; and/or emotional overreaction through impatience and anger.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

- ✓ The topic is highly relevant! A 2021 survey by the Workplace Bullying Institute found that 30% of American workers have been bullied at work (48.6 million workers) and that most of the abrasive/bullying behavior is from bosses. An additional 19% witness the bullying, widening the impact.
- ✓ Intervening with abrasive/bullying behavior is challenging!
 - Most abrasive behavior isn’t illegal.
 - Abrasive professionals are often very smart, skilled individuals who are valued for their technical skills and the results they’re able to achieve.
 - The abrasive behavior can be difficult to describe in concrete terms.
 - Addressing the behavior directly can feel intimidating.
- ✓ Traditional interventions do not effectively address abrasive behavior; e.g.- sending the individual to communication or sensitivity training, recommending anger management counseling; mediation; and teambuilding.

A SOLUTION THAT WORKS: COACHING USING THE BOSS WHISPERING® METHOD

Addressing abrasive behavior in individuals require a different approach because it typically involves a high level of defensiveness and resistance from the person whose behavior needs to change, limited awareness or appreciation of how his, her or their behavior impacts others, ineffective interpersonal skills that have developed into habits over a long period of time and are difficult to change, potential resistance by other colleagues and staff to recognize when positive changes are made, and challenges for senior leaders to know how to positively support the desired changes while still holding the individual accountable for his, her or their behavior.

The Boss Whispering® method is an evidence-based coaching process¹ developed through extensive research with over 400 abrasive executives, managers, supervisors and professionals. The approach helps individuals quickly gain insight into the impact of their words and actions and develop non-destructive interpersonal strategies.

¹Process was developed by Dr. Laura Crawshaw, and is fostered through the Boss Whispering Institute

The approach consists of the following key steps:

I. Plan for Success: Among all Stakeholders

This step includes planning with the initiating sponsor (coachee's manager and/or HR) to clarify roles and expectations, organizational responsibility, success indicators, communication plan, and to agree on how to implement the action plan. The person to be coached is then brought into the picture to hear the same messages and to help plan a thoughtful communication to the team which is often the first step to positively influencing co-worker perceptions and asking them to assist in the new coaching development process.

II. Take the Blinders Off: Assessment and Feedback

Remember the amount of defensiveness and lack of self-awareness referenced on the previous page? This critical step involves confidentially collecting feedback from 8 to 12 co-workers (peers, direct reports, other colleagues) about what specifically the person says and does that is perceived as abrasive by others. The feedback is collected through one-on-one interviews, put into themes to protect anonymity, and then shared (only) with the person to be coached. The way the feedback is shared and debriefed allows the blinders to come off and the person begins to develop a precise understanding of what they do or say that causes the distress in others, and why this makes a case for them changing their style. This step is the launching pad for prioritizing what to focus on in the coaching sessions. Especially if the coachee is a senior leader, the coachee is asked to complete the DiSC on Catalyst and/or the Hogan Leadership Assessment.

III. Coach for Change

Coaching begins as weekly 60-90 minute sessions, and then usually tapers in frequency after the 1st month. The coaching helps the client understand what may be generating the negative perceptions and implement actions to eliminate those negative perceptions and prevent their return. In managing the negative perceptions, the client actually begins to understand the causes of their abrasive behavior and change their behavior to healthier, respectful interactions. Members in the organization will often start to recognize changes by the third coaching session. The quantity of coaching sessions is dependent on a number of factors, and tends to occur for at least three months. At times, coaching can continue for up to six months, particularly if weekly coaching sessions at the beginning were not possible.

IV. Pulse Check Evaluation: Reassessment and Feedback

This typically occurs after approximately four to six months of coaching. The objectives of the pulse check are to gauge progress through the perceptions of the original pool of feedback givers, identify any remaining rough spots, and to determine if further coaching is needed, and if so, in what areas.

V. Fine Tune and Sustain

When we reach desired success indicators, we ensure that there is a continuing feedback system in place and mutually close the process. This step usually includes a closing meeting with the person being coached and the sponsoring manager.

HOW DO YOU ASSESS WHETHER TO MOVE FORWARD WITH A COACH, DO NOTHING, OR TERMINATE EMPLOYMENT?

A coaching process, particularly one which also involves soliciting feedback from others, is an investment in time and effort. Here are some factors to consider for your decision:

- ☐ How widespread are the nature of the complaints, e.g. – is it just one or two people, or is there a larger impact from the abrasive behavior where doing nothing will be particularly damaging to organizational functioning? What is the cost associated with repeated investigations of ill treatment and potential legal action?
- ☐ What other strategies have you tried, such as giving direct feedback, coaching, progressive discipline; and how well did they work? If you haven't yet tried these strategies, Holmes Street Leadership can help coach you through them.
- ☐ In an ideal world, do you want to keep the employee? What is that person's skill level and ability to get results? If highly competent at getting work done, yet incompetent (or less competent) at working with others to get it done, the Boss Whispering method is a great solution.
- ☐ How much would it cost to replace the person, including recruiting, time to fill, and fully training a replacement?
- ☐ What are the costs of the same behavior continuing (such as ill will from other employees and customers, turnover, absenteeism due to stress, low productivity)?
- ☐ What are the potential benefits from a successful turn-around, in employee engagement, satisfaction, productivity, etc.?
- ☐ How do your organization's values influence the decision? For example, if they express a strong commitment to valuing employees and healthy, respectful interactions, you will show alignment with the values by taking action that holds the abrasive leader accountable for certain standards of behavior and providing all reasonable support for the abrasive leader to change.

Ready to begin? Contact Holmes Street Leadership today for a no-obligation consultation:



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