

HOW TO COACH ABRASIVE LEADERS

A Refreshing Approach: Coach Them in or Coach Them Out
Content is based on the work of Dr. Laura Crawshaw

Definition: Abrasive Behavior

Any **interpersonal behavior** that causes emotional distress in coworkers sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning

Behavior that **rubs people the wrong way**

= **Unacceptable conduct**

Civil Conflict vs. Abrasive Behavior

- **Civil conflict:** opposing views generated by
 - Differing positions
 - Unpopular business decisions

vs.

- **Abrasive behavior:**
 - **Interpersonal interactions** perceived to be **disrespectful**
 - “Personality conflicts” are often the symptom of abrasive behavior by one or more parties

How many of these abrasive behaviors have you observed at work?

- Shouting
- Swearing
- Storming out of meetings
- Name-calling
- Ignoring/shunning
- Intimidation: glaring, snorting, etc.
- Over-control
- Sarcasm: hostile humor
- Public humiliation
- Maligning another’s character/reputation
- Inappropriate sexual comments or behavior
- Making threats
- Throwing objects
- Hitting objects
- Hitting people



Symptoms of Chronic Abrasion

- Continuing informal/formal complaints (**negative perceptions**) brought by coworkers, clients, patients, students, etc.
- Attempts by employees to transfer out of a department or avoid being transferred in
- Increased attrition, sick leave
- Covert cautions: *“Watch out for him- don’t get in his way”, or “Don’t get on her bad side – you’ll pay if you do.”*
- Excessive managerial time devoted to addressing employee distress.
- Leadership loses credibility: failure to intervene is interpreted as weakness, or worse, tacitly condoning the behavior(s)

WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

What Causes Abrasive (**Defensive**) Behavior?

*Anxiety in response to perceived threat:
They're afraid*

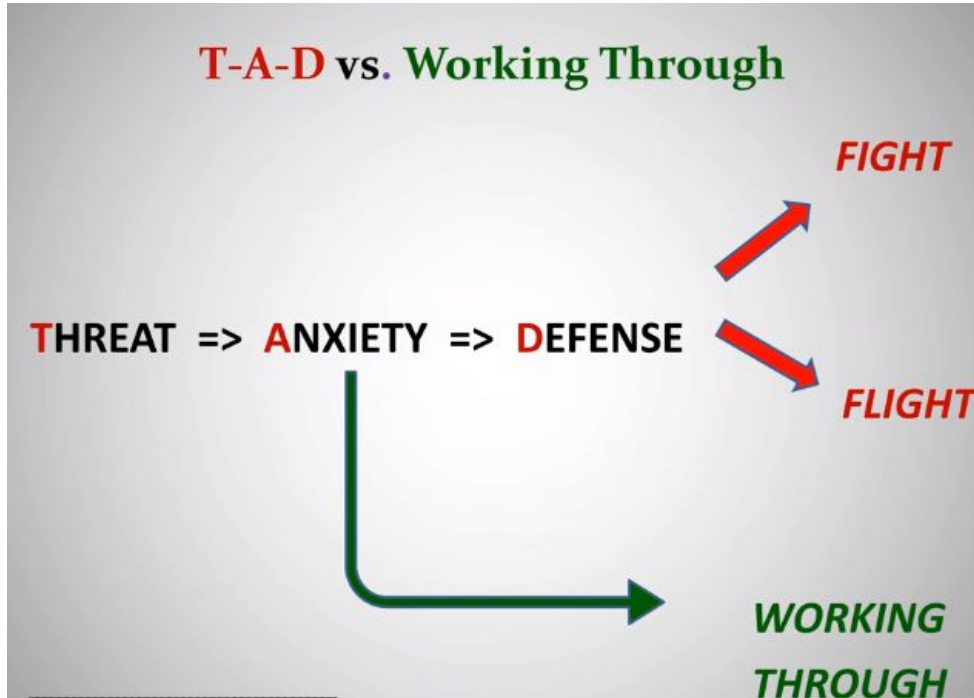


Acceptable (Professional) Conduct:

Treating others with respect
whether or not you respect them

- You don't have to like them, agree with them, respect them. You can despise the person.
- Unacceptable conduct with customers/clients/patients is dealt with more readily than unacceptable conduct with coworkers.

Another way:



The Third Option: Working Through



THREAT => ANXIETY =>

WORKING THROUGH
THREATENING ISSUE CALMLY

What's the source:

Other Contributors

- **Family interactive styles:** The individual may have grown up in a harsh environment where abrasive styles were acceptable and “normal.”
- **Cultural styles:** cultures vary in what might be considered acceptable vs. abrasive behaviors.
- **Some people hold the misconception that being direct excuses abrasive behavior:** *“I don’t believe in sugar-coating things.”*
- **Lack of training in working through issues:** unaware of effective non-abrasive alternatives, the individual, out of ignorance, defaults to the more primitive abrasive style, resorting to aggression (“fight”).
- **Many people focus solely on the deliverables,** unaware of the impact of their behavior. *“I’m here to get the job done, not to mess with all the touchy-feely stuff.”*

False assumptions about why leaders don't coach them in or out:



Research of truth why leaders avoid dealing with it:

Our findings: **Afraid, Hopeless & Helpless**

- Fear of being harmed or doing harm
- Fear of dealing with the individual's defensive response
- Focus on evidence vs. negative perceptions
- Belief that you are responsible for making people change
- Belief that people can't change
- Belief that the sole option to end abrasive behavior is termination

Management's (Flight) Defense Mechanisms

Rationalization:

- "It's just a personality conflict."
- "Nobody's perfect – including me."

Projection:

- "She's just got some difficult coworkers."

Minimizing:

- "He doesn't blow up that often."
- "It's just his style – that's just the way he is."

Procrastination:

- "It won't be long before she retires."

Differentiating Performance vs. Conduct

Performance:

- Execution of technical requirements of one's job

Conduct:

- Interpersonal behavior with coworkers, clients, patients, students, etc.

Abrasive behavior = unacceptable conduct

The Cost of not dealing with it:

What are the costs to your organization of not managing abrasive conduct?

- Chronic distress
 - including the time you spend processing distress
- Disrupted productivity, morale, motivation
- Attrition
- Contagion of abrasive behaviors
- Human suffering
- Perceptions of weak leadership/tacitly condoning abrasive behavior

MANAGEMENT • BACKBONE

- I am the guardian of my organization's mission and the employees who work to fulfill it. ►
- As such, it is my responsibility to promote performance and conduct that supports our mission & defend against unacceptable performance or conduct that threatens our mission. ►
- It is also my responsibility to provide a physically and psychologically safe environment for our employees who work to fulfill our mission. ►
- It is my responsibility to monitor and manage for acceptable performance and conduct. ►
- I have the right and responsibility to determine acceptable performance and conduct for my employees. ►
- If I don't do it, who will? ►
- My perceptions prevail. ►
- As a manager, I have a duty to act on my perceptions of abrasive behavior. ►



Determining Abrasive/Unacceptable Conduct

There is no definitive listing, and never will be.

Government of Australia definition of **workplace bullying**:

“repeated and **unreasonable** behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety.”

- **Unreasonable** behaviour means behaviour that a **reasonable** person, having regard for the circumstances, would see as **unreasonable**, including behaviour that is victimising, humiliating, intimidating or threatening.

Criteria

I have the right and responsibility to determine acceptable performance and conduct for my employees.

- Would you want your brother/sister/son/daughter to be subjected to this conduct?
- Are the negative perceptions disrupting organizational functioning?
- Is it in the abrasive individual's best interest to be perceived this way? Is it in the organization's best interest to ignore these perceptions?
- Don't be paralyzed by the question "Is this bullying?"

Acceptable (Professional) Conduct:

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You don't have to like them, agree with them, respect them. You can despise the person.

Unacceptable conduct with customers/clients/patients is dealt with more readily than unacceptable conduct with coworkers.

You pay people for acceptable performance and conduct.

How do you fix it

How do you manage performance?

- Determine performance expectations
- Evaluate performance
- If performance is acceptable, **recognize & reward**
- If performance is not acceptable, **intervene**
 1. Present negative perceptions of performance
 2. Set **limits and consequences** for continued unacceptable performance
 3. Offer help
 4. Monitor for improvement

Detecting Unacceptable Conduct

You perceive the unacceptable conduct:

DIRECT NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS



Others perceive unacceptable conduct and inform you:

INDIRECT NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS



Perceptions & Reality

- Your perceptions are your reality
- Employee perceptions are their reality
- The abrasive individual's perceptions are his/her reality

Perceptions are powerful

Negative perceptions can severely damage the source, the perceivers, and the organization.

Perceptions vs. Facts

- You can and should intervene based upon negative perceptions. You should hear "hearsay."
- If you wait to intervene on "facts/evidence" (via formal investigation), you've waited too long –**too much damage has been done.**
- Early intervention promotes positive resolution

If only indirect perceptions are available:

*"The **fact** is that I don't know and cannot know exactly what happened – I wasn't there when the incident(s) occurred. **But I do know one thing for a fact:** your coworkers perceive that they are being treated disrespectfully and these negative perceptions cannot continue."*

1. Explain Why You're Meeting

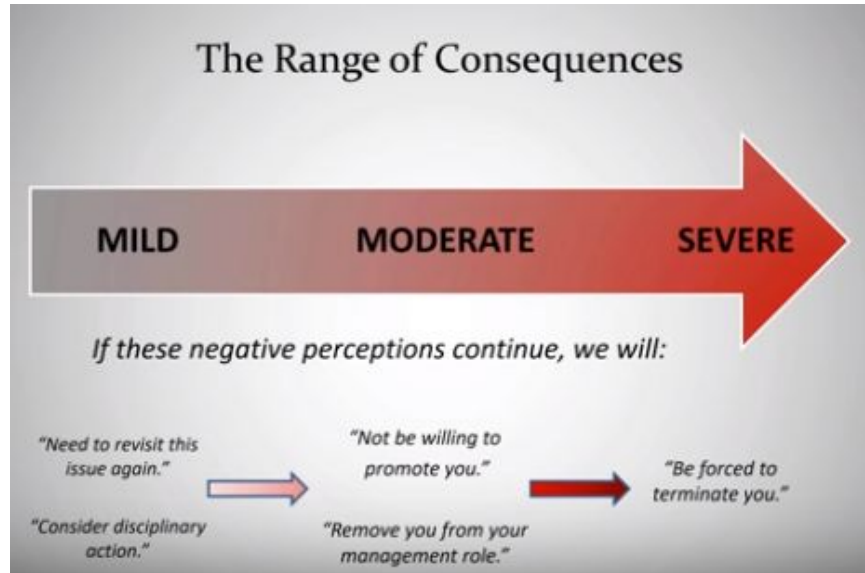
1. Describe the individual's value to you and the organization (*and don't bother intervening if they don't have any*).
2. Explain that you believe you owe it to him or her to clue them in – to make them aware of a **growing problem**.
 - *"I had a choice whether or not to talk to you about this, and I feel a responsibility to let you know about these negative perceptions."*
3. He/she is not the problem: negative perceptions about his/her interactions with others are the problem.
 - *"I don't want you to be perceived this way."*
 - *"These perceptions are doing you damage."*

2. Make Them Aware of the Negative Perceptions

- Describe the perceptions as specifically as you can:
 - *“I observed...you do/say...”* (DIRECT)
 - *“I heard.../ I was told...you did/said....”* (INDIRECT)
- Avoid generalities such as:
 - *“You are rude/harsh/aggressive/insensitive.”*
- Describe the impact on others:
 - *“The person felt they were treated disrespectfully.”*
 - *“People felt intimidated.”*

3. Make Them Care Enough to Want to Change: Set Limits & Consequences

1. Set **limits** for further negative perceptions:
 - *“This cannot go on.”*
 - *“I cannot have people feeling that they are treated disrespectfully.”*
 - *“These negative perceptions cannot continue.”*
2. Set **consequences** for further negative perceptions:
 - *“If this continues, I will have to(state consequence).”*



4. Offer Help

- Internal Mentoring by you or another skilled manager:
 - "I am here to help. Come to me when you encounter this kind of situation in the future and we can talk about how to deal with it more productively."
- EAP for stress-related issues

5. Monitor for Improvement

- Don't assume that change has occurred: find out **sooner** rather than **too late**
 - Touch base with those who voiced negative perceptions: "How are things going now?"
- Meet biweekly or monthly with the individual to review:
 - If the situation improves to an acceptable level, **reward and recognize.**
 - If the negative perceptions continue, move forward with **consequences.**

Rely on Your Spine and Heart

- *"We/I believe that you care deeply about your work and are dedicated to our success."*
- *"I want you to be successful here."*
- *"I don't want these negative perceptions to interfere with your effectiveness."*
- *"We want to invest in you."*

How to deal with denial and defensive

IV. Dealing with Defensiveness

Stand Firm



You are the guardian of your organization's mission.

It is your responsibility to present the negative perceptions, offer help, and monitor for change.

That's all you can do.

Make Him/Her Aware of the Negative Perceptions

- Describe the perceptions as specifically as you can:
 - *"I observed...you doing/saying...."* (DIRECT)
 - *"I heard that...you did/said...."* (INDIRECT)
- Describe their impact
 - *"The person felt they were treated disrespectfully."*
 - *"People felt intimidated."*
- Avoid labeling the person, e.g.:
 - *"You were rude/harsh/aaressive/insensitive."*

The Challenge of Indirect Perceptions

“ I didn’t do/say that!”
“That’s not true!”
“That absolutely did not happen!”

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Avoid “Fact Battles”: Your Perceptions Prevail

Don’t get pulled into defensive “**fact battles**” of “*what really happened*” or “*who’s really at fault*.”

Instead:



- “**The fact** is that I don’t know and cannot know exactly what happened – I wasn’t there when the incident(s) occurred.”
- “**But I do know one thing for a fact:** your coworkers perceive that they are being treated disrespectfully and these **negative perceptions** cannot continue.”

“Who said that?”
“Did Robert tell you that?!”

I cannot tell you who came to me.

They requested anonymity.

“Don’t I have a right to know who is saying these things about me?”

No, not when people request anonymity.

If you came to speak with me in confidence, I would not share it with others.*

*EXCEPTION: refer to legal requirements for mandatory reporting

“How am I supposed to get specifics if you can’t be more specific?”

Is there someone that you trust that could give you feedback on what they’ve observed, or heard from others?

“Don’t these people have the guts to tell me themselves?”

I encouraged the individual(s) to address this with you, but apparently this hasn’t happened.

I suppose if people felt comfortable approaching you, they would have. Apparently they don’t.

“You are doing this to me because you are racist/sexist.”

I am making you aware of these negative perceptions so that you have an opportunity to turn them around.

I want to offer you help to do this.

“You are the worst manager I’ve ever had. I can’t stand you and I can’t stand this place!”

From what you say, I may not be the right manager for you and this may not be the right place for you to work.

I’m not going to change, nor is this organization.

“I’m going to file a complaint against you – this is bullying!”

I see it differently.

I see it as my responsibility to make people aware when there are multiple complaints about their interactions with others, and to offer help to turn things around.

He/she threatens you or coworkers

Immediate separation from the workplace followed by:

- Suspension & counseling and/or specialized coaching if the employee is motivated to return
- Required fitness-for-duty authorization prior to considering return to work.

OR

Termination

What's the Payoff if you do this?:

Advantages of Intervention: Everyone Wins

- Suffering ends
- Coworkers are heartened that the formerly abrasive individual cared enough to work to change.
- Coworkers regard Management positively for intervening.
- Formerly abrasive employee is grateful for Management's willingness to invest in him/her and offer "second chance" through offered help.
- Management reduces potential for litigation, attrition, anti-leadership sentiment.
- Organization retains the formerly abrasive employee's expertise.

What if the abrasive individual can't change and must be terminated?

- Suffering ends
- Coworkers regard Management positively for intervening.
- Management reduces potential for litigation as they can demonstrate they intervened & offered help.
- Management has the peace of mind of knowing that they did everything in their power to remedy the situation.