Founded in 2009
- Mission: To reduce suffering in the workplace caused by abrasive leaders
- Dedicated to research & training in the field of coaching abrasive leaders
- Method: Designed to increase empathy & resulting psychological insight
- Based upon Dr. Crawshaw’s research coaching over 400 abrasive leaders (including professionals such as physicians, academics, and attorneys).
Any individual charged with managerial authority whose **interpersonal behavior** causes emotional distress in coworkers sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning.

*They rub their coworkers the wrong way*
What They Do

1. Overreact
2. Over-control
3. Threats
4. Public humiliation
5. Condescension
Impact of Abrasive Leaders

- Center for Creative Leadership survey: 74% of successful executives had at least one intolerable boss
- Gallup survey: Main reason people quit
- Absenteeism
- Lowered morale/productivity
- Increased legal actions
- Retaliation: sabotage, homicide
Abrasive Leaders: Common Assumptions

- **Fully aware** of nature and impact of abrasive behaviors
- **Intent**: malevolent (to harm)
- **Means**: dominate (exert control) through aggression/intimidation
- Behavior is **intractable**: they cannot change
Abrasive Leaders: Research Findings

- **Little or no awareness** of nature and impact of abrasive behaviors – they’re clueless

- **Intent:** to “do what it takes to get the job done”
  - (They are defending against the threat of being perceived to be incompetent) - *they’re afraid*

- **Means:** dominate (exert control) through aggression/intimidation

- Behavior is **coachable**: the majority can change
What Adequate Leaders Do

- See a problem

- Explore cause of problem
  - Employee is unable
  - Employee is unwilling

- Address problem
  - Provide resources, training
  - Set limits & consequences
What Abrasive Leaders Do

- **See** a problem

- **Diagnose** incompetence
  - “stupid”, “lazy”

- **Attack** incompetence
  - Dominate through intimidating “threat displays” (bullying)
Bears & abrasive leaders just want to go about their business.

Their business is survival.

Dominance pays (superior “fitness” = survival).

They defend against threats to their survival, whether in the wild or the workplace, with aggression.

You’ll pay if you get in their way.
In the Wild: The Survival Dynamic

**THREAT** => **ANXIETY** => **DEFENSE**

(TAD© Dr. Laura Crawshaw)
TAD© Dynamic

THREAT => ANXIETY => DEFENSE

FIGHT

FLIGHT
At Work: The Survival Dynamic

THREAT $\Rightarrow$ ANXIETY $\Rightarrow$ DEFENSE

(TAD© Dr. Laura Crawshaw)
As Humans: The Third Option

THREAT =>

ANXIETY =>

WORKING THROUGH THREATENING ISSUE RATIONALLY INSTEAD OF RESORTING TO DEFENSIVE BEHAVIOR
TAD Dynamic vs. Working Through

THREAT => ANXIETY => DEFENSE

FIGHT

FLIGHT

WORKING THROUGH
A abrasive Leaders

PERCEIVE A THREAT TO THEIR COMPETENCE

=>

DEFEND AGAINST PERCEIVED THREATS WITH AGGRESSION
Lack *social sonar* (empathic capacity)

Don’t “read” emotions

Discount importance of emotions
How does management respond to abrasive leaders?

They take “flight”

Whence fleeth management?
To ➔ Department of Human Resources

HR!!!
Management’s (Flight) Defense Mechanisms

- **Rationalization:**
  - “It’s just a personality conflict.”
  - “Nobody’s perfect – including myself.”

- **Projection:**
  - “He’s just got some difficult employees.”

- **Minimizing:**
  - “He doesn’t blow up that often.”
  - “You’re making too much of this.”

- **Procrastination:**
  - “It won’t be long before she retires.”
Why don’t employers intervene?
Prevailing Theories about Employers

They’re evil

They condone it
Truthfully: Afraid, Hopeless & Helpless

- Fear of being harmed or doing harm
- Failure of past intervention efforts
  - Ineffective management training
  - Blocked by abrasive leader’s denial of behaviors
- Focus on evidence vs. negative perceptions
- Belief that people can’t change
- Belief that sole option to end workplace bullying is termination

Hope => Empowerment => Intervention
What Employers Have To Do

INTERVENE

- **Make them see** the impact of their behavior
- **Make them care** enough to want to change
- **Offer help**
Intervention Step 1: Make them see the impact of their behavior

- Employees should be evaluated on their technical performance and interpersonal conduct
- Detect & document chronic pattern of negative perceptions
- Present pattern of negative perceptions to abrasive leader as evidence of unacceptable conduct

“We’ve had a steady stream of complaints from coworkers about their experiences interacting with you – we don’t see this with other faculty (or administrators). This is not acceptable and cannot continue. We need to have you turn this around.”
Avoid “Fact Battles”

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

“The fact is that we don’t know and cannot know exactly what happened — we weren’t there when the incidents occurred. But we do know one thing for a fact: your coworkers feel they are being treated disrespectfully and this cannot continue.”
Intervention Step 2: Make them care enough to want to change

- **Set limits**
  - “The way you interact with others has to change.”

- **Set consequences**
  - “Failure to do so will result in...”
Intervention Step 3: **Offer help**

- **Individualized program:**
  - Internal mentoring
  - External specialized coaching
    (such as Boss Whispering©)
HR’s Role:

1. Detect & document chronic patterns of **negative perceptions**
2. Explore reports of abrasive conduct (aka **workplace bullying**)
3. **Intervene** with management
   - Make Management see that they can & should hold leaders accountable for acceptable conduct
   - Make Management care enough to set limits & consequences
     (predict future consequences of failing to intervene)
   - Offer hope and help

**EARLY INTERVENTION PREVENTS FUTURE DAMAGE**
How does specialized coaching work?
“Self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations .....

1. What are the negative perceptions?

2. What is causing them?

3. What strategies can we develop to eliminate these negative perceptions permanently?
Abrasive leaders lack psychological insight:

**Poor empathizers**

“I don’t get it. When I ask my team for input, no one speaks up.”

“Why do you think that is?”

- Theory 1: “They’re lazy”
- Theory 2: “They’re stupid”
"I’d like you to engage me as your co-researcher so that we can discover the exact nature of these damaging negative perceptions, and determine what generates them."

• “Once we do that, we can then work to develop strategies to eliminate these negative perceptions.”

• “This is a confidential process: I do not share our findings or work with anyone.”
Coach conducts Coworker Assessment to provide detailed feedback

- Coworkers are individually interviewed by Coach
  - Data is purged of identifying information & aggregated into themes ("Over-controls", "Doesn’t listen" "Publicly humiliates", etc.)

- Confidential feedback data is reviewed
  - Client learns exactly what he/she does or says that generates interpersonal distress (the negative perceptions)
  - Coach & Client determine which theme to address first
“He will dress people down with other employees present.”
“In a meeting he told one person they were worthless.”
“If someone makes a mistake, he’ll bring it up in meetings – he’ll say ‘How did you ever come up with a stupid idea like that?’
“If somebody says something that he perceives as contradictory, he enjoys humiliating you, like a cat toying with a mouse.”
“People are terrified to say anything – they just clam up”
Client learns to read and accurately interpret coworker behavior *(develop empathic accuracy)* using the T-A-D Dynamic

**THREAT => ANXIETY => DEFENSE**

**FIGHT**

**FLIGHT**
“I don’t get it. When I ask my team for input, no one speaks up.”

“Why do you think that is?”

- Theory 1: “They’re lazy”
- Theory 2: “They’re stupid”
- Theory 3: “They’re afraid! Now I get it: they’re afraid I’ll criticize them.”
What strategies could reduce the perception of threat?

- “If I have a problem with someone, I could address it behind closed doors.”
- “I can’t call people names.”
- “If I think someone has a stupid idea, I need to bring them around without making them feel stupid.”

Client shifts from **Attacking** to **Educating**
The Insight Cycle

1. Observe behavior
2. Test strategy
3. Develop strategy to reduce anxiety
4. Develop theory on nature of anxiety
5. Analyze behavior w/ TAD Dynamic©
Requires employer commitment
Averages 8-10 sessions
Demonstrable change by 3rd session
82% achieve acceptable level of conduct
Engaged in longitudinal research with the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT)
Advantages of Intervention: Everyone Wins

- Employee suffering ends
- Employees are heartened that formerly abrasive leader cared enough to work to change
- Employees regard employer positively for intervening
- Formerly abrasive leader is grateful for employer’s willingness to invest in him/her and offer “second chance” through coaching
- Employer reduces potential for litigation, attrition, anti-management sentiment
- Employer retains leader’s technical expertise
What if the abrasive leader can’t change and must be terminated?

- Employee suffering ends
- Employees regard employer positively for intervening

- Employer reduces potential for litigation because they can demonstrate they intervened.
- Employer has peace of mind of knowing that they did everything in their power to remedy the situation.
Preventing Workplace Bullying

1. Establish a code of (respectful) conduct
   - Provide physical and psychological safety in the workplace

2. Live the code

3. Enforce the code
America’s First Chief (Abrasive) Executive

“Every action done in company ought to be done with some sign of respect to those who are present” – George Washington
To download free article:
*Coaching Abrasive Leaders: Using Action Research to Increase Productivity & Reduce Suffering in the Workplace*

[www.bosswispering.com](http://www.bosswispering.com)

(on Research & Publications page)
Leadership's not a title. It's a behavior. Live it.

Robin Sharma

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