Therein Lies the Rub:
Strategies for Taming Abusive Yet High Performing Leaders

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Objectives

1) Identify the hallmarks, causes, and consequences of abrasive leadership in the workplace

2) Develop strategies, at organizational and individual levels, for dealing with abrasive leaders
What’s Your Experience with Abrasive Leaders?
The Abrasive Leader

• High-performer
  o Gets results
  o May be seen as indispensable

• Displays a pattern of conduct that causes emotional distress in coworkers
  o Damages relationships
  o Demoralizes constituents
  o Pollutes organizational culture
The Consequences for Recipients

- 48% intentionally decreased their work effort
- 47% intentionally decreased the time spent at work
- 38% intentionally decreased the quality of their work
- 80% lost work time worrying about the incident
- 63% lost work time avoiding the offender
- 66% said their performance declined
- 78% said their commitment to the organization declined
- 12% said that they left their job because of uncivil treatment
- 25% admitted to taking out their frustration on customers

C. Porath & C. Pearson (2013)– poll of 800 managers and employees in 17 industries
Critical Distinctions

• **Tough bosses**, unlike abrasive leaders, are typically seen as objective and fair, self-controlled, results-oriented, and organizationally-focused.

• The actions of **tough bosses** are generally seen as positive (interactive, mentoring, engaging in fair and honest conflict, etc.), whereas the actions of abrasive leaders are viewed negatively.

• Unlike **tough bosses**, abrasive leaders leave their people feeling disrespected.

• Abrasive leaders, like **bullies**, engage in patterns of bad behavior (unfairness, emotional outbursts, misuse of power and authority, etc.), with many of the same consequences.

• Unlike **bullies**, abrasive leaders typically do **NOT** have malicious intent, and there is no specified target.

_T. A. Daniel (2009)_
As Abrasive Leaders Describe the Experience

- The behavior was triggered by some kind of anxiety-provoking situation (e.g., co-worker error)
- The irritated reaction would escalate, leading to abruptness, raising voice, etc.
- This often led to compliance or withdrawal of the other person (inadvertently rewarding the abrasive behavior)
- In many cases, the abrasive leader would later feel remorse, and either apologize for, or justify/rationalize their behavior
- The behavior would recur, with little interference from others

L. Harrison (2014)—Phenomenological study of 12 executives formerly seen as abrasive
Why do they do it?

- Intention is to do what it takes to get the job done
- Often lack self-awareness of the real impact of their behavior
- Intense and driven, they are used to being successful
- Defense against being perceived as incompetent
- Promoted because they were strong individual contributors, not necessarily good leaders
- Work in an environment that values results, regardless of means
- Have not received any strong feedback from the organization, that they behavior needs to change

L. Harrison (2014)
What can you do about it?
Tame the Abrasive Leader

• Clearly describe the impact of their behavior
• Declare that their behavior is inconsistent with organizational values and will not be tolerated (identify consequences)
• Offer help and be proactively involved
• Look at organizational practices that may be contributing to the problem
• Assess whether the individual really wants to change
• Initiate coaching (internally or externally), with accountability

Evaluate Your Culture

• Do you hire and promote for civility?
• What kinds of behavior do you reward, penalize, and ignore?
• What kinds of behavior are accepted or even modeled at the top?
• What practices are in place to alert you to bad behaviors?
• How do you make it safe for people to report such behavior?
• Do you conduct exit interviews?
• Have you defined leadership norms? In writing?
• Is coaching offered? If so, how is that presented to the leader?
What makes a good candidate for coaching, and how patient should you be in expecting change?
Case Scenarios
Q&A
References


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