

Solving the Problem of the Abrasive Leader

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www.bosswhispering.com-----Presented by Lynn Fraser, Director of ADR, FEC

The logo for The Boss Whispering Institute is a horizontal stone-like banner with a decorative, scalloped top edge. The text "THE·BOSS·WHISPERING·INSTITUTE" is carved into the banner in a serif font, with small dots separating the words.

THE·BOSS·WHISPERING·INSTITUTE

- 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).

Abrasive Leader

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)

Laws of the Wild & the Workplace

- 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

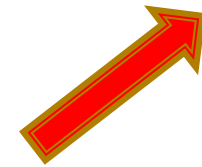
In the Wild: The Survival Dynamic

THREAT => **A**NXIETY => **D**EFENSE

(TAD© Dr. Laura Crawshaw)

THREAT => ANXIETY => DEFENSE

FIGHT



FLIGHT

At Work: The Survival Dynamic

THREAT => **A**NXIETY => **D**EFENSE

(TAD© Dr. Laura Crawshaw)

As Humans: The Third Option

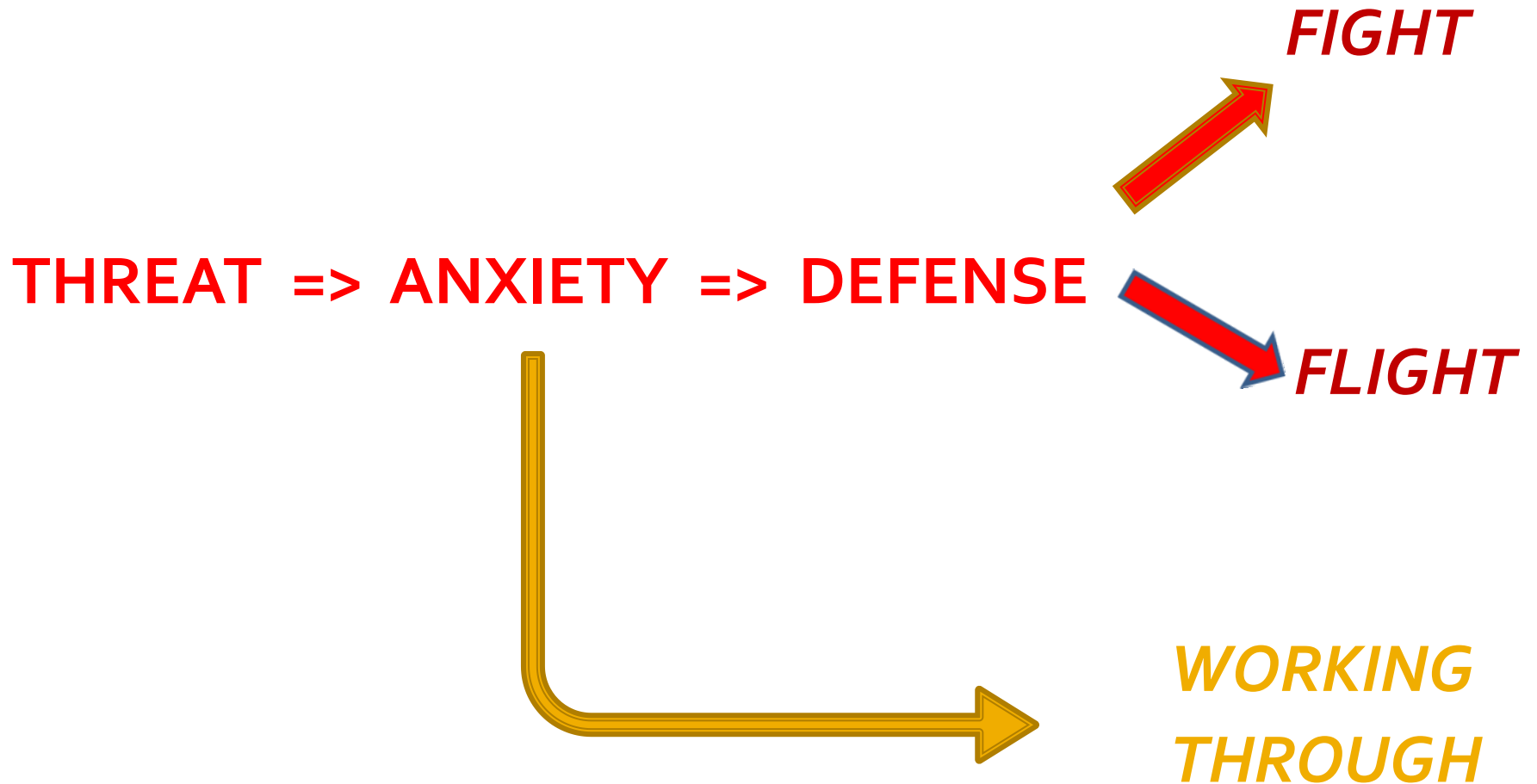
THREAT =>

ANXIETY =>



**WORKING THROUGH
THREATENING ISSUE
RATIONALLY INSTEAD OF
RESORTING TO DEFENSIVE
BEHAVIOR**

TAD Dynamic vs. Working Through



Abrasive Leaders

PERCEIVE A

THREAT

TO THEIR

COMPETENCE



DEFEND

AGAINST

PERCEIVED

THREATS

WITH

AGGRESSION

Blinder Than Bats: Why They Don't See

- 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?

Boss Whispering[©] = Action Research

"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"

Boss Whispering© Step 1:

Coach moves quickly to establish **trusting alliance** with Client

"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."*

Boss Whispering® Step 2:

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

THEME: “Publicly Humiliates”

- *“ 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”*

Boss Whispering[©] Step 3:

Client learns to read and accurately interpret coworker behavior (*develop empathic accuracy*) using the

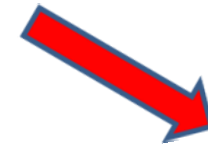
T-A-D Dynamic

©

THREAT => ANXIETY => DEFENSE



FIGHT



FLIGHT

Abrasive leaders gain psychological insight

"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."*

Boss Whispering[®] Step 4:

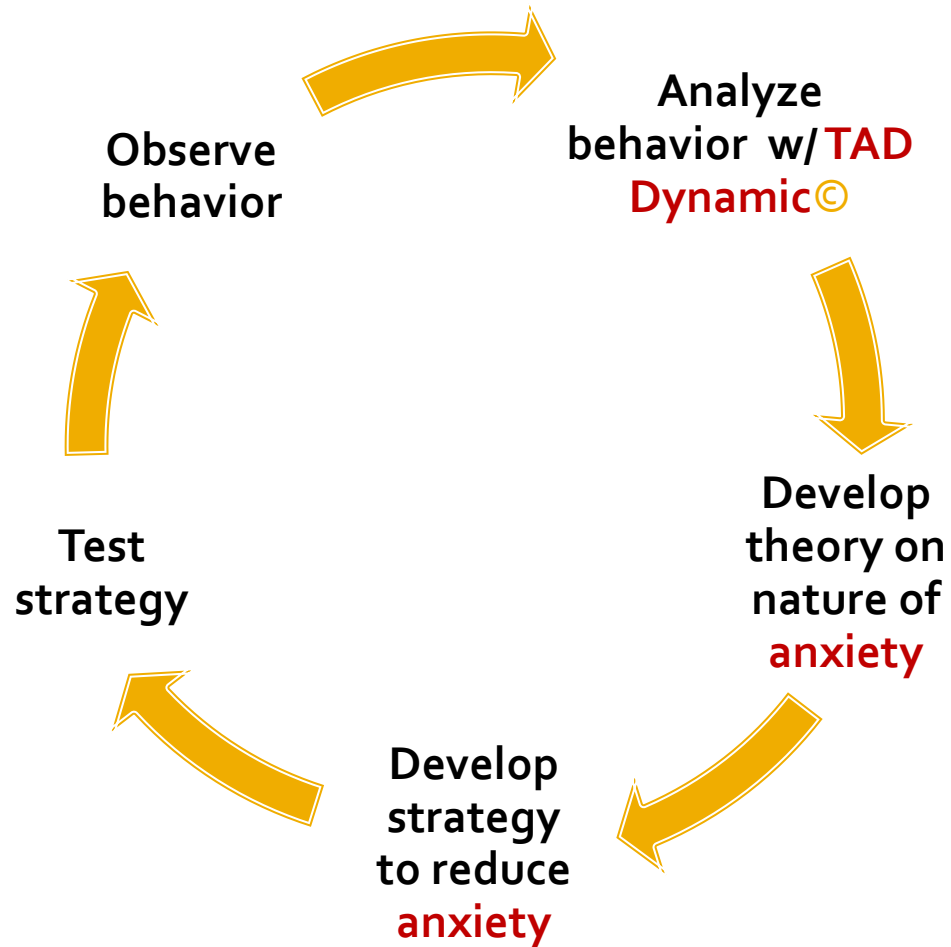
Developing & Testing Insightful Strategies

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



Boss Whispering[©]

- 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.bosswhispering.com

(on Research & Publications page)

**Leadership's not a title.
It's a behavior.
Live it.**

Robin Sharma