

Keynote Address: “Sad, Angry, & Hopeful: Reflections From The Front.”

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Abstract

The realm of workplace bullying is fraught with emotions, including the suffering experienced by targets, the defensiveness of abrasive leaders, and the anxieties of organizations who employ them. Dr. Laura Crawshaw, founder of The Boss Whispering Institute, will share her reflections on the psychodynamics of workplace bullying and their potential influence on practitioners and researchers who seek to solve the problem.

From her perspective of coaching perpetrators and consulting with their employers, Dr. Crawshaw will offer her reflections on the dynamics of anxiety underlying bullying behaviors, drawn from psychoanalytic theory, neuroscience, and her own clinical observations, followed by a discussion of the limiting beliefs and emotions that threaten to impede our progress in this field.

Thank you for the honor of inviting me to share my reflections with you today.

As a researcher and practitioner on the front lines of workplace bullying, I am sad to see the suffering and confusion it causes. I am angry at those who demonize rather than empathize, who arrive at conclusions without attempting to walk in the shoes of all parties involved in this suffering. And finally, I am hopeful that we can acknowledge and abandon our limiting beliefs, and instead rely on curiosity and objectivity to explore the phenomenon of workplace bullying from the perspectives of target, bystander, employer, and perpetrator.

I am thankful that I knew nothing about so-called bully bosses when I first encountered them over 30 years ago in Alaska. I worked as a psychotherapist in Alaska’s first employee assistance program (EAP), providing counseling to troubled employees of over 500 employers who contracted for this confidential service. It was here that I first encountered what I now refer to as *abrasive leaders*. *Abrasion* is generally defined as the process of wearing down by means of friction, injury, or irritation; an apt description for the emotional erosion experienced by those who work under, over, or with an abrasive leader. *Leader* refers to any individual charged with organizational authority. This definition also includes professionals such as physicians, attorneys, and academics, who may not have direct management responsibilities, but who still wield authority over others.

When I started coaching abrasive leaders in 1980, I was unaware of the small but growing body of literature asserting that these individuals were evil predators who intentionally set out to exterminate their co-workers, reminiscent of the evil wolves in fairy tales who delighted in devouring innocent grandmothers, children, and assorted little pigs. If I had read and accepted the big bad bully tale as fact, I never would have entertained the possibility that they could be helped to improve their management styles. Beyond that, I

would have feared for my own safety, as taming savage beasts is a perilous profession: would not the same hold for taming savage leaders?

I do not use the term ‘bully’ when referring to these interpersonally destructive individuals, for it implies intent to harm. In the course of life’s interactions, we may cause suffering to others intentionally or unintentionally, and may or may not be aware of the impact of our words or actions. To label a leader whose conduct creates suffering a bully implies that they intend to cause harm, and thus must be fully aware of the impact of their hurtful behavior. Instead, I refer to these individuals who are charged with authority over others, as abrasive leaders, or *abrasives*, a term describing only the effects of their behavior, without inferring cause. We know that abrasive leaders rub their co-workers (whether subordinates, peers, or superiors) the wrong way. We do not necessarily know the facts of why.

Initially trained as a psychotherapist to help people address their own or other’s destructive behaviors, I worked from a clinical stance of objectivity, with respect for the individuality of my patients, paired with intense curiosity regarding the emotions that motivated their behaviors. Later, as an executive coach, I applied this same stance as I encountered abrasive leaders in my coaching practice. Unencumbered by any preconceptions, I asked them to join with me in a process of mutual inquiry that could help us understand the meaning and impact of their destructive interpersonal conduct, hopefully resulting in management approaches that no longer left a trail of working wounded in their wake. I did not believe they were hopeless, nor did I believe I was helpless to help them.

From my very first encounters with abrasive leaders I was filled with curiosity. Did they see themselves as abrasive? Were they aware of the destructive impact of their behaviors? Were they aware of the negative perceptions their behaviors generated? Where did they learn these behaviors, and why did they elect to use them? What, if anything, would motivate them to relinquish their aggression in favor of less destructive management styles? And, if they chose to change, what would help them achieve and sustain interpersonal competence?

In the course of the coaching conversations that now span 30 years, I explored these questions with my clients, gathering data that helped me learn why these individuals chronically resort to aggression, and what can be done to help them change. Only later did I come to understand that this mutual exploration of these issues constituted action research, defined as a process in which the validity and value of research results are tested through collaborative knowledge generation between coach and abrasive to increase fairness, wellness, and self-determination.

In my early years of coaching I observed that when upper management or Human Resources provided only general feedback such as “You’re too hard on people,” abrasive leaders characteristically denied that they were abrasive, or minimized their impact on others. “I’m not too hard on people – my employees are the ones who can’t handle direct communication!” or, “I can be tough at times, but that’s my job.”

Early efforts to use standardized 360-degree assessments were patently unhelpful, as they provided only very general feedback, depicting low scores on the abrasive’s ‘ability to create an effective team’ or ‘ability to develop trust with co-workers.’ Contemplating these ratings, abrasive leaders were at a loss to decipher how their words or actions had led to these poor evaluations: “I don’t see why they scored me so low.” In brief, they were clueless, and from this discovery I realized that my clients could not possibly understand what behaviors they needed to change until they had data on the exact behaviors that their co-workers found objectionable.

It soon became clear that my clients did not see themselves as others saw them, and vigorously defended their perception of themselves as both technically and interpersonally competent. Seeing this, I chose a

different path: instead of getting pulled into debating whether or not they were abrasive, I instead offered my client an appealing proposition:

“You have told me that you don’t understand why your employer is demanding that you change your management style- that you don’t have specific information on the complaints people have made about you. I can help you with this. I would like you to engage me as your co-researcher, to interview your co-workers and discover exactly what these negative perceptions are and what causes them. That data will give us an opportunity to develop strategies to eliminate these negative perceptions so that they never again interfere with your professional effectiveness.”

With this approach, the coach does not require the client to acknowledge that they are abrasive; to “confess” to their “management crimes”. Instead, it points out the incontrovertible fact that the client is perceived to be abrasive and offers the hope of eliminating these negative perceptions. This approach allows the abrasive leader to experience the coach not as a threat, but as an ally. I should add that this approach is effective only when the client is under direct pressure from the employer to change - when failing to achieve an acceptable level of interpersonal conduct will lead to negative consequences, such as isolation or termination.

Abrasive leaders’ reactions to the lengthy, highly detailed lists of negative perceptions secured through these coworker interviews (and purged of identifying information), reinforced my initial impression of their blindness to the perceptions of others. As these blinders came off, the leaders voiced shock and bewilderment at the nature and degree of their destructive impact on others. “I can’t believe that people think I’m out to get them. I’m just trying to get the job done - it’s nothing personal.” Second, they appeared to have little or no insight into why their behaviors alienated others. “Calling someone’s idea stupid doesn’t mean that I actually think they’re stupid - why would they take offence at that?” In summary, they were astonished by the number and negativity of the perceptions, and were especially confounded by coworkers’ accusations that they caused distress out of malicious intent. “The hardest thing to deal with in all of this feedback is the perception that I don’t care about people - that I want to hurt them. I care about people, but we’ve got a job to do.”

As we worked together to understand the origins of these negative perceptions and the interpersonal dynamics that generated them, these abrasive leaders related their own frustrations in trying to achieve their work objectives. As they spoke, it became clear that these individuals reflexively experienced any perceived co-worker incompetence as a direct threat to their own competence: “I struggle with people who can’t move ahead as quickly as I think they should be able to. I have the patience of a wounded rhino. I can’t deal with people who stand in the way of my vision.” They defended against this perceived threat to their professional competence with aggression: “I have trouble when people put blocks in front of me. I am ruthless; I hang them out to dry.” Additionally, abrasive leaders viewed their use of aggression as both necessary and even noble to achieve organizational goals: “Sometimes, you’ve got to kick people to get them moving - I want this organization to succeed.”

As coaching progressed, clients came to understand the crucial importance of monitoring and then managing their own and other’s emotions in the workplace. Emotional intelligence is another term for the capacity to read and manage one’s own and others’ feelings, as Goleman (1998) states: “...so that they are expressed appropriately and effectively, enabling people to work together smoothly toward their common goals” (p. 92). Finally, I was continually struck by the rapidity with which these abrasive leaders realized that riding roughshod over co-workers’ emotions constituted interpersonal, and ultimately, managerial incompetence. This disturbing realization immediately motivated them to change.

These experiences controverted the aforementioned popularly held belief that abrasive leaders are predatory creatures who are intent on doing harm, are fully aware of the impact of their actions, and inflict

interpersonal wounds as a result of impaired moral or mental functioning. These coaching clients did not view their impersonally aggressive behavior as unacceptable or abnormal. Instead, many would relate that they either grew up with such behaviors in their families, or learned them in earlier work experiences, and considered aggression to be the optimal and only strategy to achieve performance objectives.

Having coached over 400 abrasive leaders, on only two occasions have I encountered individuals who manifested symptoms of sociopathy. They stood out almost immediately as they contemplated their feedback, one dismissing the negative perceptions expressed by co-workers as “worthless”, the other elaborating on the pleasure she took in tormenting her male co-workers (suggestive of sadistic tendencies). Both found ways to avoid the coaching process, one by leaving the company, and the other by seeking protection from a superior whose own professional survival was entirely dependent on her technical competence.

Compare these two ‘big bad bullies’ to the preponderance of abrasive leaders who reacted very differently when they learned of the negative perceptions held by their co-workers. They expressed shock: “I can’t believe people see me this way.” They expressed remorse: “I never meant to hurt anyone – I was just trying to get the job done.” They were mystified: “Why would they take my words so personally?” They were embarrassed: “It’s humiliating – this perception that I lose control – that I throw temper tantrums.” And to my continual astonishment, they changed their behavior in order to change these perceptions: “I don’t blow up anymore- it doesn’t solve anything.”

These findings are phrased as generalizations, and I am the first to acknowledge that these coaching encounters with abrasive clients do not constitute formal research that could yield conclusive empirical data on this population. In view of this, one could look upon these reports as yet another tale, not of big, bad wolves, but of highly anxious humans, blindly defending against those whom they perceive as threats to their workplace competence and professional survival.

Defensive behavior follows a fairly predictable course in all members of the animal kingdom, humans and wolves included. When an organism perceives a physical threat, this perception generates fear (anxiety) which mobilizes the target to defend against this threat through fight or flight. For the benefit of my clients, I described this dynamic of threat→ anxiety→ defense as the *T-A-D* dynamic. With his theory of the ego and mechanisms of defense, Sigmund Freud proposed that this same dynamic applies to the psychological realm. Here, when a human perceives a psychological threat, this perception generates anxiety, which in turn mobilizes the individual to defend against the threat through the mechanisms of fight or flight). “He was always barking at employees, implying that they were stupid or worthless. Some would fight back and try to defend themselves, with no success. Others would just clam up – they’d withdraw.”

Fortunately, humans have evolved higher level brain functions that allow us to respond to threat not with defense, but by *working through* – Freud’s term for restraining one’s primitive defensive responses and instead relying on higher-level reasoning to work through problems. This ability to control emotion and work through threatening issues characterizes what I term *adequate leaders*. Psychologically secure, they do not perceive threats to productivity as threats to their self-competence. Unfortunately, abrasive leaders are insecure leaders, reflexively responding to perceived threats to their professional competence with the “fight” defense mechanism: with interpersonal aggression.

These interpretations of abrasive leadership behavior derived from psychoanalytic theory and evolutionary psychology are further supported by neuroscience research, which examines brain activation in response to threat. Two findings have emerged from this research: first, from Gordon (2000), that much of our

motivation driving social behavior is governed by an overarching organizing principle of minimizing threat and maximizing reward. Further, Eisenberger et al. (2003) discovered that several domains of social experience draw upon the same brain networks to maximize reward and minimize threat as the brain networks used for primary survival needs. Neurologically, social needs are treated in much the same way as survival needs, and social threats are defended against to preserve social survival. To quote David Rock (2009):

When a leader is self-aware and able to manage his or her anxieties, it gives others a feeling of safety even in uncertain environments. It makes it easier for the employees to focus on their work, which leads to improved performance. The same principle is evident in other groups of mammals, where a skilled pack leader keeps members at peace so they can perform their functions. A self-aware leader modulates his or her behavior to alleviate organizational stress and creates an environment in which motivation and creativity flourish. One great advantage of neuroscience is that it provides hard data to vouch for the efficacy and value of so-called soft skills. It also shows the danger of being a hard-charging leader whose best efforts to move people along also set up a threat response that puts others on guard. (p. 10)

Researchers Fast & Chen (2009) explored when and why these so-called “hard chargers” end up harming other people. Their research examined this theory that aggression among the powerful is often the result of a threatened ego. Their findings suggest that power paired with self-perceived incompetence (experienced as ego threat) leads to aggression, mirroring my clinical observations. My understanding of this threat-anxiety-defense dynamic underlying abrasive behavior proved instrumental in the formulation of the Boss Whispering coaching method.

In Boss Whispering, this T-A-D psychodynamic is shared with abrasive leaders as a conceptual framework to help them gain insight into their aggressive treatment of co-workers. Looking through this interpretive lens of psychological defensiveness also gave abrasive leaders insight into why coworkers resisted their initiatives. They came to see that coworkers engaged in defensive fight or flight behavior not because they were stupid, slothful, or insolent (the leader’s earlier primitive theories), but because they were threatened by the abrasive leader’s aggression. Only by taking the perspective of their coworkers could these abrasive leaders gain sufficient insight to construct non-abrasive strategies to achieve their work objectives.

This coaching method is based upon the premise that taking another’s perspective (otherwise known as the exercise of empathy), can generate insight. In this approach, abrasive leaders are asked to put themselves in the psychological shoes of coworkers to see how the leader’s words and actions could be perceived as threatening. This method evolved from my determination to listen carefully to my abrasive clients and attempt to walk in their psychological shoes. In doing so, I gained insight into their struggles to survive and thrive in their work habitats, which they perceived to be fraught with threats to their competence that they warded off with defensive aggression.

Why not also attempt to put myself into the psychological shoes of victims of workplace bullying in the hope of gaining insight into the “big bad bully” perspective they held? Applying this approach in the context of wolf research, it dawned upon me that victims of wolf attacks could understandably draw very different conclusions about wolf behavior than conclusions drawn by wolf researchers. Victims could report that they had been singled out for attack by the wolf, targeted as the victim with the intent to harm. Victims could also conclude that wolves commit terribly destructive acts. All of these observations are true, and it is conjectured that fairy tales involving big wolves were based upon the realistic danger posed by these predators. The wolves in these tales are depicted as calculating and malevolent – as forces of evil. They do bad things, and therefore must be bad.

Researchers of wolf behavior hold a very different perspective. They hold that wolves attack and do harm not because they are bad, but because they are defending against threat to their survival, namely, starvation. I envisioned talking with these wolves (as I had talked with abrasive leaders), and suspected that if they could talk, they would sound much like my clients: “Yes, I can bark and bite – I’m known to chew on others, but they understand it’s strictly business -nothing personal. Let’s face it – it’s a dog-eat-dog world.’ Research of wolf behavior reveals that their aggression toward victims is borne not out of evil, but as defense against threat to physical survival. I suspect that further research on abrasive leaders may support similar conclusions; that their aggression serves as a defense against perceived threat to professional survival, and in the majority of cases, is not enacted with the primary intent to harm, but to survive. These insights, gained from perspective-taking, do not excuse or absolve destructive behavior, but strive to explain it.

How, then, do we account for the scenario in which one person is singled out for extreme aggression? I propose that we term this phenomenon *focused bullying* in contrast to generalized bullying - bullying displayed toward multiple individuals. Listen to this tale, related by an employee of an abrasive executive:

The executive engaged in a variety of abrasive behaviors with his subordinates, including shouting, public humiliation, and over-control, an example of generalized bullying. In an effort to enlighten her boss, this employee gently explained to him that his motto “Believe or Leave” did not, as he believed, motivate his team, but was perceived as a threat that only served to reduce morale. ‘Looking back, I knew that was the turning point – the moment he decided I wasn’t “on board” and needed to go. From that point on, he singled me out and did everything he could to drive me out. After I left, I learned that his plan was to replace me with a past colleague of his who “never gave me any trouble and never would.”

Here we see generalized bullying intensify into focused bullying, focused on those employees who are perceived to pose a greater threat to the abrasive leader. They may have directly challenged the leader, failed to fulfill the leader’s expectations, or in the case of this unfortunate employee, pointed out the leader’s interpersonal incompetence in an effort to provide insight. For these insecure abrasive leaders, perceived extreme threats to one’s professional survival must be annihilated, or, as we say in the business habitat, terminated. The targeted employee must be driven out of the pack to ensure the leader’s continued dominant status.

Stepping into the victim’s perspective helped me understand the intensely hostile stance of those who have been subjected to abrasive leadership behavior. It also explained why I felt like such a lone voice in the wilderness of workplace bullying, as I proposed that the majority of abrasive leaders do bad things not out of malevolence, but as a defense against perceived threat. Again, this theory is offered not as an excuse, but as an explanation. Although there are legions of victims of perpetrators, there are woefully few researchers of perpetrators, for understandable reasons. Since abrasive leaders do not perceive themselves to be abrasive, they would not tend to volunteer to be research subjects. Employers too would be understandably reluctant to respond to a researcher’s request for access to that company’s abrasive leaders: what company wants to publicize its inability to solve the problem of workplace bullying?

As we contemplate these contradictory tales of big bad bullies and insecure, defensive leaders, it is important to acknowledge that we are still in the dark as we seek to find solutions to workplace bullying. The bully-busting genre of books is strong on describing symptoms, but simplistic as far as offering solutions. Employers are instructed first to establish anti-bullying policies, and are then admonished to avoid hiring abrasive leaders. Finally, if one such leader should somehow infiltrate the organization, he or she is to be terminated immediately upon detection. I am unaware of any screening tool that reliably

predicts abrasive behavior in humans; if such an instrument existed, one would think it would be universally applied prior to finalizing today's employment or marital contracts.

Little empathy is displayed for employers who fail to take these measures. They are portrayed as depraved masterminds of abuse, caring only about profit and nothing about employees. In this portrayal, prosecuting and penalizing these organizational offenders will compel them to exterminate their big, bad wolves on sight. Unlike wolves, terminating abrasive leaders will not lead to their extinction, as they will only go on to cause distress in future employment situations. Legislation cannot provide a complete solution to the problem of workplace bullying, as redress occurs only after the trauma has occurred, and the inevitable financial and psychological costs of this process risk further traumatization of victims.

Most civilized societies have chosen to address other forms of abuse through a tripartite approach of prevention, intervention, and protective legislation. In the realm of child abuse, prevention consists of policy development to ensure the safety of children, as well as education for at-risk parents. Intervention takes many forms, including removal of the child to a safe environment, and specialized counseling for abusive parents. Protective legislation prosecutes and isolates parents who cannot be rehabilitated. Here, perpetrators of child abuse are researched with clinical objectivity, producing best practices in intervention. We do not see books entitled *Toxic Tot Tormentors* or *Baby Bashers and their Prey*, nor do we call abusive parents "Baby Bullies", for in the field of child abuse there appears to be an understanding that we cannot help perpetrators if we demonize them. It is my hope that workplace bullying researchers and practitioners will exercise this same approach of unbiased curiosity, clinical objectivity, and a commitment to take the perspective of all parties involved in the suffering we struggle to solve. Only by striving to put ourselves in the psychological shoes of targets, bystanders, perpetrators and employers can we hope to find effective solutions to this problem.

As we contemplate tales of big, bad wolves and abrasive leaders, I would like to ask listeners to consider another tale, one that offers one solution to workplace bullying. Imagine workplaces in the here and now, where employers have declared that all employees shall be provided with physically and psychologically safe work environments. These employers do their best to hire technically and interpersonally competent individuals who are both productive and treat others with respect. Because these employers lack magical powers to predict who might display abrasive behavior in the course of work, they are alert for any reports of disrespectful conduct voiced by employees, and do not hesitate to take these negative perceptions seriously. These employers do not wait to intervene until a formal complaint is filed, but instead proactively respond to any threats to a respectful work environment. They understand that they must manage not only technical performance, but also interpersonal conduct. This technique, which we term *intervention* and teach to employers, involves informing the abrasive leader of the proliferation of negative perceptions regarding his or her management style and holding that individual accountable for eliminating these negative perceptions.

Intervention begins with a member of upper management (usually the abrasive leader's superior), and often a human resources representative, sitting down with the abrasive leader, first voicing the value of that leader's technical expertise, and then setting limits and consequences for unacceptable conduct. Here's an example:

Employer: We wanted to meet with you today to discuss concerns that have arisen. I want to begin this conversation by letting you know that you bring great value to this organization—you've done a lot to contribute to our success. Our concerns have to do with negative reports we're getting about your

interactions with coworkers. I was told that you lost your temper with some employees and called them idiots.

Abrasive Leader: I never said that. That's not what happened.

Employer: That's what employees reported to us.

Abrasive Leader: Well, that's not what happened—you weren't there. I didn't shout at them—I just made it clear that our customers won't tolerate second-rate work, and that things have to change. That's the fact.

Employer: We want you here for the long haul, and we don't want these negative perceptions to keep you from being a success.

Abrasive Leader: I can't believe you're making such a big deal out of nothing! You don't understand—I've had to deal with tight timelines and limited budgets, and sometimes you have to move people faster than they want to go.

Employer: The fact is that other managers have the same tight timelines and limited budgets, and they're able to get the job done without generating these negative perceptions. We're getting a steady stream of complaints about your management style, and I strongly suggest you turn this around. Things can't go on this way.

Abrasive Leader: So how am I supposed to deal with these complaints if you won't even tell me who they're coming from?

Employer: We can't share that information with you because people came to us in confidence. Frankly, they were afraid of how you'd respond. We'd like to offer you coaching with someone who specializes in helping resolve this kind of issue—someone who can help you learn more about the specific concerns and work with you to address them. It's entirely your choice to accept the offer of coaching, but the bottom line is that if these negative perceptions continue, we'll have to take further action. This can't go on.

In this tale we see employers intervening on abrasive conduct to prevent further distress and disruption to the smooth functioning of the organization. At the same time, these employers offer help in the form of specialized coaching, and monitor the leader's subsequent interpersonal conduct. If an acceptable level of interpersonal conduct is achieved, suffering ends and all parties live happily ever after. Employers maintain productivity and avert the risk of bullying litigation, while employees appreciate their employers' early intervention, and are heartened by the leaders' willingness to change. These now interpersonally competent leaders also express gratitude for their employers' willingness to offer help instead of immediately moving to termination, and look upon the coaching process as an enjoyable and empowering experience. However, not all tales (fairy or otherwise) have happy endings. What about those instances when leaders fail to benefit from coaching and must be terminated? In these rare cases, employee suffering ends, and employers will rest assured that they did (and, in the case of litigation, can demonstrate they did) everything in their not-so-magical powers to help these abrasive leaders resolve the situation successfully.

This particular tale is a true tale. It takes place not once upon a time, nor in a land far, far away: it is a living reality experienced by organizations worldwide that seek out coaches specifically trained to work with abrasive leaders. Thanks to my ignorance of tales about big, bad bully bosses and the supposedly evil organizations that employ them, I and my colleagues are able to offer one method to help abrasive leaders

relinquish their destructive management strategies and increase their interpersonal competence. I look forward to the evolution of this and other approaches designed to address the problem of abrasive leadership. We are humans, not wolves, and we can all be abrasive at different times and under different circumstances. Only by maintaining an objective stance and working hard to accurately take the perspective of all parties involved in the phenomenon of workplace bullying can we hope to discover effective ways to address the symptoms with true solutions.

Thank you again for this opportunity to share my thoughts. In closing, I offer this final reflection:

“You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view - until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

-Atticus Finch, from Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*

NOTES

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