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TAMING ABRASIVE LEADERS

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了解特殊工時制度的規定

HR TOOLBOX

The Power of Body
Language



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Taming Abrasive Leaders

By Laura Crawshaw, Founder, The Boss Whispering Institute

- Abrasive leaders are aggressive because they are afraid of being perceived as incompetent.
- Intervention helps address this issue to ensure an organisation's healthy functioning.



“Abrasive” leaders are individuals charged with managerial authority who behave in a rough manner to their colleagues. Their harsh management styles alienate their co-workers and damage work relationships to the point of disrupting the organisation’s functioning. The five most commonly exhibited abrasive behaviours are over-control, threats, public humiliation, condescension and over-reaction.

Handling abrasive leaders is critical because the cost of their behaviour is high for a business. A 2003 Gallup organisation study based on some two million workers in 700 companies in the United

States found that poor supervisory behaviour was the main reason employees quit. Poor leadership also decreases employee morale and motivation resulting in absenteeism, lowers productivity, increases incidence of stress-related illnesses and sick leave, incidence of legal actions alleging a hostile environment or discriminatory behaviour, and retaliatory responses including sabotage and, in some rare cases, workplace homicide.

Abrasive leaders can be found in all industries, all types of companies and all cultures. The term can also apply to

professionals, such as physicians and attorneys, who may not have direct management responsibilities, but who still wield authority over others.

The source of abrasiveness

Abrasive leaders engage in bullying behaviours because they are afraid of being perceived as incompetent. Although they usually look confident, that exterior manifestation of confidence cloaks profound anxiety.

Take the employee who tells his/her manager that he/she has not completed a vital report needed for the next day’s management meeting. A good leader first explores the circumstances and asks why the report was not completed. He/she then works to solve the problem with calm and efficiency. An abrasive leader, in contrast, instantly diagnoses the problem as a result of the co-worker’s incompetence and attacks him/her aggressively.

Overcoming fear

It takes courage on the part of HR professionals to deal with abrasive leaders because the majority of them react defensively. Upper management avoids handling abrasive leaders because they, too, are afraid. They fear that:

1. the business will suffer from the abrasive leader’s reaction (“He/She’ll quit and we can’t risk that,” “What if he/she sues us for wrongful termination?”); and
2. hurting the abrasive leader (“I don’t want to hurt him/her – he/she’s been loyal to the company and works harder

than anyone else.”).

In addition, HR professionals usually do not intervene because they view the situation as hopeless (“We’ve talked to him/her, but things only improved for a few weeks. We can’t afford to lose that kind of technical expertise”). Yet, HR professionals and the management need to understand that the situation is not hopeless.

Different HR strategies

Instead of paying the price of lost productivity and human suffering or terminating a competent abrasive leader’s contract, HR professionals could take into account different approaches to this problem:

1. Assisting in recognising unacceptable behaviours

Addressing an abrasive leader’s unacceptable conduct is a second step. Indeed, abrasive leaders are unaware of, or minimise the nature and impact of their abrasive behaviour. “I don’t see why people are so upset. They should know that when I push them hard it’s nothing personal – it’s just business. The job has to get done,” said one abrasive leader. As indicated by this quote, many abrasive leaders do not see that their conduct impacts their co-workers’ emotions. Thus, they will become defensive if HR professionals confront them. Subordinates are reluctant to voice concerns for fear of adverse reactions and peers do not consider that it is their role to provide unsolicited feedback. The abrasive leader’s superior may not be aware of the distress experienced by those lower in the organisation’s structure, or may buy into the abrasive leader’s description of “whining, complaining employees.”

For instance, a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) complained that his senior management team sat silently

when he pressed them for ideas or reactions. When I asked why he thought they did not respond, he answered: "I don't know – they're either lazy or stupid." He made the standard abrasive leader's diagnosis of incompetence. He also was blind to the possibility (later confirmed through co-workers' interviews) that his management team did not voice their ideas for fear that the CEO would attack them.

Practically speaking, although recognising unacceptable behaviours might result in temporary improvement, HR professionals should still encourage staff to speak up – confidentially – about abrasive leadership.

2. Intervention for specialised coaching

Specialised coaching is an efficient strategy because it tackles the underlying causes of leadership abrasiveness. To quote an abrasive leader, "I have the patience of a wounded rhino – I can't stand it when people go slowly... I don't see how you treat people with respect when they're a bunch of idiots. How else am I supposed to get them to do what I want?"

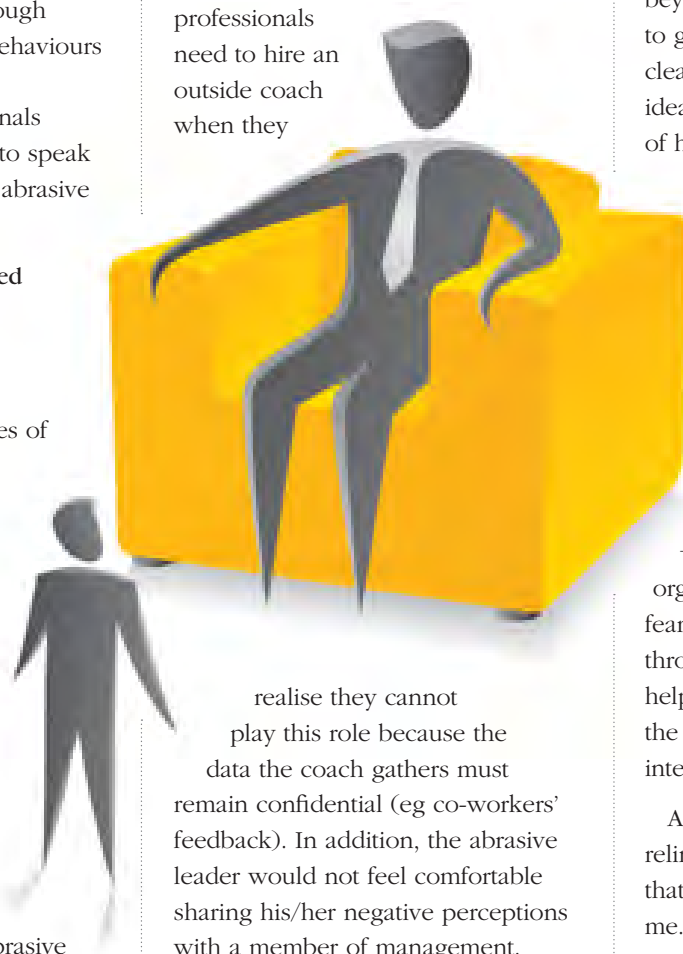
Intervention consists of a member of upper management (usually the abrasive leader's superior) and the HR manager sitting down with the abrasive leader to address his/her behaviour. They should first voice the value of that leader to the organisation. Then, they should set limits and explain consequences.

Intervention and a bit of management mentoring may be enough to correct the management

styles of young, inept managers who have not developed entrenched abrasive styles. Yet, in most cases, long-term abrasive leaders may need specialised coaching by an outsider to minimise the sense of subjectivity and bias.

(a) The coaching process

To correct more entrenched abrasive behaviour, the coaching process starts with establishing trust between the abrasive leader and the coach. HR professionals need to hire an outside coach when they



realise they cannot play this role because the data the coach gathers must remain confidential (eg co-workers' feedback). In addition, the abrasive leader would not feel comfortable sharing his/her negative perceptions with a member of management. Coaching an abrasive leader would also create a conflict of interest for HR professionals as they have to report any egregious behaviour to management. During the coaching process, HR professionals can monitor the abrasive leader's progress and improvement in employee morale and productivity.

Second, the coach is responsible for

helping the abrasive leader identify, analyse and eliminate the negative perceptions that threaten his/her professional career. Following the HR manager's intervention and referral, an abrasive leader voiced his anger and confusion: "I can't believe this – they're telling me that people have been complaining about me for a long time but no one ever said a word to me about it until now. Plus, they didn't give me any specifics beyond mentioning a few times I had to get tough with my team." It was clear that the abrasive leader had no idea where the negative perceptions of his management style were coming from or what caused them, and as a result, had no idea of how to address them.

Abrasive leaders hence need to develop insight into why others do not automatically perform as they wish. To do so, they are taught a basic principle derived from evolutionary psychology: the Threat → Anxiety → Defence dynamic. When an organism perceives a threat, it feels fear (anxiety) and defends itself through fight or flight. This concept helps the abrasive leader comprehend the interplay of emotions when interacting with co-workers.

Abrasive leaders also have to relinquish their unrealistic expectation that "everyone should be just like me." They need to learn how to monitor and manage their anxiety to gain control over their aggressive defence tactics against perceived threats to their competence. They need to read and accurately interpret how they are perceived by others and develop strategies to achieve their objectives with positive tactics. It is thus useful for the abrasive leader to understand his/her co-workers to determine the nature and causes of

Sample Discussion

these negative perceptions. The coach, on behalf of the abrasive leader, needs to set up short in-person meetings with each colleague to collect constructive feedback on the abrasive leader's behaviour, leadership capability and management style. Once the coach analyses the data and identifies feedback themes, the abrasive leader can justify his/her sometimes firm and direct leadership style and understands why some co-workers might want him/her to be more sensitive in his/her communications. Although such feedback is confidential, it is essential that the abrasive leader avoids intimidating his/her team and focuses on dialogue.

For instance, the simplistic and pejorative theories of the CEO quoted earlier on his team's silence (lazy, stupid) were replaced by the more insightful and accurate interpretation: his employees fled the threat of his harsh criticism by clamming up. Restraining his initial impulse to berate them for their silence (a fight strategy), the CEO chose instead to calmly explore the risks and benefits of team members' suggestions.

Demonstrable change in abrasive leaders' behaviour after coaching can be seen. Over 400 leaders in the past 18 years, 87% of abrasive leaders succeeded in bringing their management styles to an acceptable level after being coached.

HR professional: I want to start this conversation by letting you know that you bring great value to this organisation and we want you to move forward with us. Our concerns have to do with negative reports we're getting about your interactions with co-workers: I was told that you lost your temper with some employees and threatened their jobs.

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

HR professional: That's what was 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.

HR professional: You're right: I wasn't there, but I do know one fact: We have continuing reports from co-workers who feel that they are being treated disrespectfully. We can't have that here and I want you to turn around these negative perceptions.

Abrasive leader: I can't believe you're making this big of an issue 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.

HR professional: 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.

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

HR professional: We can't share that information with you because people asked for confidentiality. Frankly, they were afraid of how you'd respond. We'd like to offer you coaching with someone who specialises in resolving this kind of issue. 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.

(b) The outcome

This approach can yield positive results, namely:

- (i) co-workers' suffering ends and employees are heartened that the formerly abrasive leader cared enough to change;
- (ii) co-workers regard the HR manager positively for intervening and requiring respectful conduct;
- (iii) the formerly abrasive leader is grateful for the HR manager's willingness to invest in him/her and offer a second chance through coaching: "It means a lot that they cared enough to give me this opportunity," said one former abrasive leader after being coached; and

- (iv) the HR manager reduces the potential for litigation, attrition and anti-management sentiment, while retaining the leader's technical expertise.

In the end, it is a win-win situation for the employer, employees and the now-interpersonally competent leader.

Taming the abrasive leader

Leaders who resort to bullying exact a toll on the healthy functioning of the organisation. If the problem of abrasive leadership goes unaddressed, the toll will be heavier. Early intervention, through a confidential process that respects the concerns of both the abrasive leader and the co-workers, can solve this problem before it escalates into disruptive investigations and antagonistic relationships.



馴服專橫領袖

The Boss Whispering Institute創辦人Laura Crawshaw

- 專橫領袖由於害怕被視為力有不逮，性格表現急進
- 介入處理專橫領袖可確保機構健康運作

「專橫」的領袖是指那些掌握大權但無禮對待同事的人。他們苛刻的管理方式令同事疏遠他們，並破壞工作關係，甚至擾亂機構運作。五種較常見的專橫行為是：過度操控、威脅、公開羞辱、屈尊俯就及反應過度激烈。

處理專橫領袖非常重要，因為他們的行為對業務帶來龐大代價。蓋洛普於2003年對700家美國公司約200萬員

工進行一項研究，發現管理層行為失當是員工離職的主要原因。差劣的領導亦會降低員工的士氣和積極性，導致曠工、生產力降低、與壓力有關的疾病和病假情況增加、引發有關工作環境惡劣或歧視行為的法律訴訟，以及報復性反應，包括破壞行為和罕見的工作場所殺人案件。

專橫領袖見於各行各業、不同類型的

企業和文化。這個詞彙也適用於專業人士，例如醫生和律師。也許他們沒有肩負直接管理的職責，但仍然較其他人掌握較大權力。

專橫的根源

專橫領袖由於害怕被視為力有不逮，往往採取威嚇態度。雖然他們通常表現自信，但外在自信表現包藏著的卻是焦慮不安。



此外，人力資源管理專才往往對於這種情況感到無能為力，故不會介入（「我們已跟他/她談過，但情況只改善了數星期。我們無法承受失去這類技術專才」）。然而，人力資源管理專才和管理層均需要明白，這種情況並非全無希望。

不同的人力資源管理策略

人力資源管理專才可考慮以下方法，無需付出代價也可處理問題，既不會影響生產力和傷害他人，又不用與能幹的專橫領袖終止合約：

1. 協助認知令人無法接受的行為

處理專橫領袖令人無法接受的行為只屬於第二步。事實上，專橫領袖並不意識到自己的專橫行為，或試圖減輕自己專橫行為的性質和影響。有專橫領袖說：「我不明白為什麼他們這樣沮喪。他們應該知道，我鞭策他們並非針對個人，只為工作而已。工作必須要完成。」由此可見，許多專橫領袖並不認為自己的行為會影響同事的情緒。因此，如人力資源管理專才與他們對質，他們便會作出防範。下屬因害怕被仇視而不願表達憂慮，同輩亦不認為坦白提供意見是他們的職責。專橫領袖的上司可能並不知道機構內低層人士所受的窘迫，或會相信專橫領袖所描述「發牢騷、抱怨的員工」。

例如，行政總裁抱怨，當他催逼高級管理團隊提供意見或回應時，他們只沉默不語。問他為何他們沒有回應，他回答說：「我不知道——不是懶惰，就是愚蠢。」他的判斷就是專橫領袖對為何欠缺能力的定斷。而且，管理團隊害怕行政總裁會指摘他們，因此沒有說出自己的想法，行政總裁卻漠視這種可能性，其後與同事的訪談證實了這一點。

實際上，雖然認知令人無法接受的行為後，或會令情況暫時改善，人力資源管理專才仍然應該鼓勵員工在保密情況

下發表對專橫領袖的意見。

2. 以專門輔導方式介入

專門輔導是有效的策略，可解決領袖專橫的根源。引用專橫領袖的一句話「我的耐性猶如一隻受傷的犀牛——我受不了別人步伐緩慢……如果他們是一群笨蛋，我不明白怎能尊重他們。該怎樣做才令他們達到我的要求呢？」

介入人員包括上級管理人員（通常是專橫領袖的上司）及人力資源管理部門主管，他們會跟專橫領袖坐下來共同處理其行為的問題。他們應先向領袖表示他對機構的價值所在，然後設定界線，解釋後果。

對於失職但專橫管理作風尚未根深蒂固的年輕管理人員來說，介入和稍作管理指導也許足以糾正其管理作風。然而，對於長期表現專橫的領袖，大多數情況下或需要由局外人作專門輔導，盡量減低主觀和偏見的感覺。

(a) 輔導過程

要糾正根深蒂固的專橫行為，輔導過程開始時，領袖和教練之間便需建立信任。當人力資源管理專才意識到他們無法擔當這個角色時，便需要從外界聘請教練，因為教練收集的資料必須保持機密（例如同事的意見）。此外，要專橫領袖與管理人員分享負面看法，他/她會感到不自在。人力資源管理專才輔導專橫領袖時，必須向管理層報告任何過份行為，因而構成利益衝突。輔導過程中，人力資源管理專才可監察專橫領袖在提高員工士氣和生產力方面的進展和改善情況。

其次，教練負責協助專橫領袖尋找、分析和消除足以影響其職業生涯的負面看法。經人力資源管理部門主管介入和轉介之後，有專橫領袖充滿憤怒和困惑：「我簡直不敢相信——他們告訴我別人已對我抱怨了一段很長時間，但人人卻隻字不提，直到現在。而且，他們除提及有幾次我不得不對團隊採取強硬態

舉例：有員工告訴主管，他/她還未完成明天管理層會議所需的重要報告。優秀的領袖會先了解有關情況，詢問報告未能完成的因由。然後，他/她會冷靜迅速地解決問題。相反，專橫領袖則會立即斷定問題出於同事能力不足所致，並大力指摘他/她。

克服恐懼

大多數專橫領袖會自我防禦，人力資源管理專才需要勇氣應付他們。一般高層管理人員也逃避處理專橫領袖，因為他們同樣害怕。他們擔心：

1. 業務會受到專橫領袖的反應所影響（「他/她會辭職，我們不能冒這個險」、「萬一他/她控告我們不當解僱，那怎麼辦？」）；及
2. 會傷害專橫領袖（「我並不想傷害他/她——他/她對公司盡忠職守，也比任何人努力」）。

討論示例

度之外，並沒有提供任何細節。」顯而易見，專橫領袖不知道對其管理作風的負面看法從何而來，或者是什麼原因導致負面看法，所以他也不知道如何著手解決問題。

故此，專橫領袖需要深入了解為何別人不能如其所願，自動執行工作。要做到這點，便要教授他們從進化心理學衍生出的一個基本原則：威脅→焦慮→防禦動力。當生物感到受威脅時，會感到恐懼(焦慮)，並通過打鬥或逃跑以作防禦。這個概念可幫助專橫領袖理解與同事交流時情緒如何相互影響。

專橫領袖亦需要放棄「每個人都應該像我一樣」這般不切實際的期望。他們需要學習如何監察和管理焦慮，控制因感到本身能力受到挑戰而展示的具侵略性防範表現。他們需要洞察及準確地解讀別人如何看待他們，並訂立策略，以積極的方法達成目標。因此，讓專橫領袖了解同事，確定這些負面看法的性質和原因，實在非常有用。教練需要代表專橫領袖與每位同事簡短面談，就專橫領袖的行為、領導能力和管理作風收集具建設性的意見。教練分析數據並確定意見主題後，專橫領袖便可解釋他/她偶而強硬和直接的領導作風，並理解為何一些同事或會希望他/她溝通時較能察言辨色。雖然這些意見屬於機密，但重要的是可避免專橫領袖藉此恫嚇團隊，反而專注於對話。

例如，早前引述行政總裁因團隊沉默而作出簡單和輕蔑理論(懶惰、愚蠢)，

人力資源管理專才: 開始會談時，想先讓你
知道你為機構帶來很大貢獻，希望你與我們共同進步。我
們注意到一些關於你與同事交流的負面報告：有人告訴我，你對一些
員工發脾氣，並威脅他們崗位不保。

專橫領袖: 我從來沒說過。實情並非如此。

人力資源管理專才: 我們收到的報告確實如此。

專橫領袖: 啊！事情並非這樣 — 你當時並不在場。我並沒有凶喝他們 — 我只是明確指出，客戶不會容忍次等工作，事情必須有所改變。

人力資源管理專才: 你說得對 — 我當時不在場，但我知道一個事實，我們不斷收到同事報告，他們覺得不被尊重。我們這裡不容許這種情況，希望你因應這些負面看法作出改變。

專橫領袖: 你竟然無中生有、小事化大，令人難以置信！你根本不明白 — 我需要應付緊迫的期限和有限的預算，有時，你必須推動他們，使他們走得比所想更快。

人力資源管理專才: 事實上，其他經理同樣期限緊迫，預算有限，他們卻能夠把工作辦妥，沒有引起這些負面印象。

專橫領袖: 如果你不告訴我誰投訴，那我又如何處理呢？

人力資源管理專才: 我們不能告訴你，因為他們要求資料保密。坦白說，他們就是害怕你的反應。我們有意安排專責解決這種問題的教練，為你提供輔導。你可選擇接受與否，底線是如果這些負面印象繼續出現，我們不得不採取進一步行動。

其實可以較精闢和準確的解釋取代：員工選擇默不作聲，逃避被他嚴厲批評的威脅。行政總裁抑壓最初苛責他們沉默不語的衝動(戰鬥策略)，轉而冷靜地探討團隊成員的建議，研究當中的風險和效益。

輔導後，專橫領袖的行為出現明顯改變。87%專橫領袖(過去18年共有超過400名)經輔導後，成功地把管理作風改善至可接受的水平。

(b) 結果

這種方法可產生正面效果，包括：

- (i) 同事的痛苦得以結束，員工為前專橫領袖願意作出改變，感到鼓舞；
- (ii) 同事對人力資源管理部門主管介入並要求互相尊重的操守，持正面態度；
- (iii) 前專橫領袖對人力資源管理部門

主管願意投資於其身上，並通過輔導給予第二次機會，會心存感激。一名前專橫領袖經輔導後說：「他們願意給我這個機會，這點對我來說意義重大」；及

- (iv) 人力資源管理部門主管既減低訴訟、員工流失及反對管理層情緒的可能性，亦同時保留領袖的專業技術知識。

總的來說，這樣對僱主、僱員和具備人際關係才能的領袖而言，是雙贏結果。

總結

以恫嚇作為管理手段的領袖，對機構健康運作造成巨大負擔。如果不正視問題，負擔只會變得更沉重。以保密方式及早介入可顧及專橫領袖和同事的憂慮，並於問題惡化而導致具破壞力的調查和敵對關係之前，讓問題得以解決。

註：此乃中文譯本，一切內容以英文版本為準。