



## **The Abrasive Boss & Workplace Bullying: A Case for Conflict Resolution?** **By Dr. Laura Crawshaw**

Over the past two decades, I have been coaching, researching, and writing about abrasive bosses, here defined as any individual charged with managerial authority whose interpersonal behavior causes emotional distress in coworkers sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning. In brief, abrasive bosses *rub their coworkers the wrong way*. Their words and actions create interpersonal friction that can grate on subordinates, peers, and superiors, grinding away at trust and motivation. Abrasive bosses can inflict deep wounds and intense suffering in employees, and the pain of working with an abrasive boss is often experienced by the organization as well, eroding effectiveness and paralyzing productivity. Listen to the voices of the working wounded:

- *“He’s always talking down to people, interrogating them – Why didn’t you do this? Why didn’t you do that’ – he makes people feel like idiots.”*
- *“The best days at work are the days she isn’t here – that’s when we can breathe.”*
- *“I used to enjoy coming to work, but since he’s been hired, all I can think about is finding a way to get out.”*

Contrary to the common belief that bosses who engage in bullying behaviors are all sadists or otherwise mentally disordered, I have found that the majority are neither evil nor crazy: rather, *they’re afraid*. They have a deep need to be perceived to be competent (as do most of us), but if anything (or any coworker) threatens their self-perception of competence, they experience intense anxiety and defend against this threat to their competence with aggression – they attack: *“I struggle with people who can’t move ahead. I have the patience of a wounded rhino. I can’t deal with people who stand in the way of my vision.”* Consider the basic dynamic of survival: when an organism perceives a threat to its survival, it defends against that threat through fight or flight. Similarly, when abrasive bosses perceive a threat to their competence – to their ability to survive in the workplace – they opt for the fight defense: *“I don’t have time to be nice – nasty is faster.”*

My research has revealed the five most common aggressive behaviors that abrasive bosses exhibit in their crusade to conserve their competence: overreaction, overcontrol, condescension, public humiliation, and threats. All of these behaviors serve to intimidate, and abrasive bosses view these strategies as necessary and effective motivational tools: *“Sometimes you’ve got to push people to get them moving.”* At the same time, abrasive bosses are generally unaware of the nature and extent of the psychological injury they inflict on others. Time after time I have presented a client with the negative perceptions of their coworkers, only to see him or her sink

into shock: *“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.”*

Where did these bosses learn to apply the stick (vs. carrot) approach when they encounter anxiety-provoking threats to their competence, and how can they be so blind to they harm they cause? We don’t spring from the womb with a full repertoire of techniques to torment others, so how did they learn to respond in this manner? My clients provided some clues as they spoke of their early family and work experiences: *“We weren’t a touchy-feely family – I was expected to do what I was told, and if I didn’t, I paid the price.”* *“In the military people followed my orders – they don’t here.”* I learned that these individuals are empathically deficient: they have little or no ability to put themselves in another’s shoes and detect the effects of their aggression. We learn abuse (and empathy) from others, and when one grows up in a home or has early work experiences where emotions are devalued and competence is valued at all costs, one accepts this as the norm. Abrasive bosses don’t see the abnormality of their management styles because they experienced these styles in the normal course of their earlier development: *“My dad kicked my ass, and look where I am today – Vice President!”*.

Can abrasive bosses change? I’ve discovered that most can, but only after their employer intervenes and demands change. Management intervention involves three steps: 1.) making the abrasive boss see the impact of their unacceptable conduct, 2.) making them care enough to want to change, and 3.) offering help through specialized coaching, *“We’ve had a continuing stream of complaints from employees over their interactions with you. They feel they are being treated disrespectfully, and we can’t allow these perceptions to continue. If you cannot turn this situation around, we will be forced to take action. We want you here, but you’ve got to turn this around – we’re offering you coaching to help you work on this.”*

Abrasive bosses truly need help. Telling an abrasive boss to “be nicer” is like telling a drowning person to start swimming – accurate advice, but not particularly helpful. These individuals are at a loss as to how to motivate others without barking, biting, or otherwise bullying their coworkers: *“I’ve been told to soften up my communications, to be more polite. I’ve fought that, because I don’t believe in sugarcoating the truth.”* Once made aware of their destructive impact on others (and now themselves), they need to quickly gain insight into their defensive aggression and develop more positive management strategies. The method that I have developed from my research (Boss Whispering®) is specifically designed to achieve these objectives within 8-10 coaching sessions.

Is the abrasive boss an appropriate case for conflict resolution? Can traditional conflict resolution strategies resolve workplace bullying? Many employers automatically call for conflict resolution in these instances, but I believe that such approaches are contraindicated in the case of the abrasive boss. Certainly these individuals create workplace conflict, but striving to resolve these symptomatic conflicts does not solve the underlying problem of a chronically aggressive behavioral style, usually directed at multiple targets – anyone who threatens the abrasive boss’s self-perception of competence. I have spoken with some mediators who argue that coworkers can help to reshape their boss’s behavior through the mediation process, but I don’t believe that employees should be asked to shoulder this intimidating task. Instead, employers need to hold themselves and their managers accountable for providing a physically *and* psychologically safe working environment, intervene when unacceptable conduct is detected, and offer appropriate help. My views may rub you the wrong way, but I’ll risk the abrasive label in my mission to reduce suffering in the workplace.

Laura Crawshaw, Ph.D., (aka The Boss Whisperer), is the author of *Taming The Abrasive Manager: How To End Unnecessary Roughness In The Workplace* ( Jossey-Bass Management Series, 2007). More information on The Boss Whispering Institute is available at [www.bosswhispering.com](http://www.bosswhispering.com) .

Dr. Crawshaw received her master's degree in clinical social work from the Smith College School for Social Work and conducted postgraduate studies at the Seattle Institute for Psychoanalysis and the Harvard Community Health Plan.

She completed both MA and Ph.D. degrees in human and organizational systems at Fielding Graduate University, and founded the Executive Insight Development Group in 1994, **and the The Boss Whispering Institute in 2008.**

With over thirty years' experience as a psychotherapist, corporate officer, and executive coach, Dr. Crawshaw is known as The Boss Whisperer®, focusing her research and practice on the reduction of workplace suffering caused by abrasive bosses. Executive Insight's **Boss Whispering Institute** is dedicated to research and training in the field of coaching abrasive executives, and will offer its first seminars in 2009. Dr. Crawshaw is a member of the International Society for the Psychoanalytic Study of Organizations, the American Psychological Association, **the International Association on Bullying and Harassment at Work**, the Society for Human Resource Management, and the International Coach Federation. Dr. Crawshaw was one of the featured speakers on the Texas Live Blog Talk Radio show with ACR's Pattie Porter, the Texas Conflict Coach.