



Performance Advantage Systems

Actionable Intelligence for Leaders

7 Ways Organizations Deal UNSUCCESSFULLY with Abrasive Leaders

by

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Abrasive Leaders exhibit disrespectful, dangerous interpersonal behaviors. Their words and actions create friction - causing emotional distress, alienating co-workers and disrupting organizational performance.

Abrasive disrespectful behaviors can be **passive** (e.g. intimidating, micromanaging, ignoring, blocking opportunities, etc.) or **active** (e.g. verbally abusing, threatening, malicious gossiping, publicly humiliating, etc.) These behaviors can range on continuum from mildly irritating to severely disruptive.

Since Abrasive Leaders are not intending to cause harm – but rather merely get results – they are often *clueless* about the unacceptability and consequences of their own behavior (or tend to minimize it.)

Abrasive Leaders are not the only ones who misunderstand their behaviors - as co-workers also have incorrect assumptions about abrasive individuals:

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ABRASIVE'S	Common Assumptions	The Reality
AWARENESS	Fully aware of their impact	Little or no awareness
INTENT	To harm	To be viewed as competent
MEANS	Dominate	Defend against perceived threats
BEHAVIOR	Intractable	Treatable

These incorrect assumptions are the drivers of, what turns out to be, unsuccessful remedies. Typically, organizations are unsuccessful in rectifying the Abrasive Leader's disruptive conduct in the following 7 ways:

1) Provide feedback and encourage behavior change

While the feedback might well be accurate, the Abrasive Leader simply justifies and dismisses it. Common responses include such comments as – ‘*You don't understand that I've explained to Mary how to do this multiple times and she just doesn't get it – so yes, I get frustrated...but she needs to shape up right away.*’ Or, ‘*I've told you several times that we need to transfer Tom to Matt's team. Tom works too slowly to be in my team. He misses just about every deadline that I give him. He's gotta go! He's gotta go NOW!*’

2) Reprimand – give a slap on the wrist

As a follow-up to the feedback which did not work, neither will this. The Abrasive Leader simply dismisses the reprimand. They will usually acknowledge the reprimand and then continue to conduct themselves the way that they have been. If the situation is brought to their attention yet again, they once again ‘accuse’ their manager of not understanding and then RE-justify their behavior.

3) Send the Abrasive Leader to Training

Since the Abrasive Leader is not on the same page with others in the organization who complain about his/her behavior, s/he is reluctant to attend the training and then, when

there, is not fully engaged.

Additionally, the Abrasive Leader does not know what to focus on learning and changing/improving, and since there is no follow-up on how to apply what was taught in the training, the investment is not fruitful.

Perhaps, even more germane, the training does not address the root cause of the interpersonal ineffectiveness...which is a perceived threat to the Abrasive Leader's competence.

4) ***Provide Conflict Mediation or Anger Management Training***

These can address some of the behaviors but not the root cause of the behavior... which is a perceived threat to the Abrasive Leader's competence. As a result, the behaviors that are addressed will probably continue or resurface.

5) ***Implement Systemic OD Interventions***

The following types of interventions can address some of the behaviors, however, they may be costly, not timely, and they do not address the root cause of the behavior... which is a perceived threat to the Abrasive Leader's competence. As a result, the behaviors that are addressed will probably continue or resurface.

- Workplace Bully Policy/Code of Conduct
- Orientation and Awareness Training
- Clear, Confidential, Safe, Grievance Process
- Team Building Support
- Employee Survey
- Accountability and Responsibility Alignment
- Reorganization

6) ***Transfer Out of the Team***

Transferring the Abrasive Leader to another part of the organization where s/he feels more confident MIGHT temporarily alleviate (but not permanently eliminate) their abrasive behavior. And, if the behavior is not eliminated, then the co-worker distress and organizational dysfunction is simply being moved to another part of the company.

- 7) ***Do nothing and hope for the best!*** Since dealing with the situation is unpleasant and can be difficult, and the organization has tried to resolve the situation with no success, they now ignore it - as best as they can - because they don't know what to do.

Also, in many cases the Abrasive Leader possesses expert skills or knowledge that the company does not want to lose – so the human resources person and the Abrasive Leader's manager are afraid to mention anything to the Abrasive Leader for fear he/she will leave – and they may also be afraid of retribution from the Abrasive Leader.

What will change the behavior of an Abrasive Leader?

Abrasive behavior is learned - and to UNLEARN such behavior Abrasive Leaders need to gain insight into the cause of their behavior (fear), the specific destructive impact of their words and actions, and then helped to engage in new, positive, productive management/leadership skills and interpersonal behaviors.

These are intrapsychic issues which need to be addressed individually, with sensitivity, and privately.

Usually, through a series of focused coaching sessions we work with the Abrasive Leader until they clearly understand the impact of their abrasive behaviors, they are willing to make the needed changes, and do so until they are no longer generating any negative impacts. Consider these typical interventions:

A Senior Vice President within a Financial Services Company had always been a high performer with a string of significant business successes. He had a huge ego and lived in the command and control leadership mode. He was completely results oriented and did not treat people respectfully. He viewed people as there to serve him because his frame of reference was 'my way or the highway'. His **abrasiveness** resulted in increasing chaos in the organization. When he was assigned a project that required collaborating with people in different parts of the organization, three other SVPs refused to work with him – and they also refused to subject any people within their teams to work with him! At this juncture, the rubber had hit the road. His management advised him that he needed to dramatically change his attitude and behavior. Going forward he would be expected to achieve his results in a collaborative and respectful manner. This meant that all abrasiveness and discord needed to be replaced.

Initially, he and I met with his direct manager who advised him of the specific positive consequences of improved and sustained behavior - as well as the negative consequences of no behavior change or change that would not be sustained.

After I conducted in-depth interviews with a significant number of individuals with whom he frequently interacted, I delivered the feedback to him. He then decided which one of the themes in the feedback to begin addressing. We crafted a comprehensive strategy to mitigate or eliminate those abrasive behaviors, and we did this each time he began to address each of the themes in the feedback.

Clearly, the changes that were needed were difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, since he was just as focused on these needed improvements as he was when working on a business issue, he was successful. His intensity and courageousness carried him through this entire process.

The Vice President - Chief Marketing Officer within a multi-billion dollar national insurance company was brought in as a change agent to migrate the company from an insular to a customer-focused organization. She was an incredibly smart, dynamic, and fast-paced individual who lacked the patience and sensitivity to deal with those who were slower or 'just didn't get it'. And, since this organization was predominantly comprised of individuals who had never worked in any other company – including her CEO boss – her frustration level was always high. She needed to centralize disparate marketing functions, as well as create new ones, and to do this she needed to exhibit the same customer-focus within the organization that she was trying to bring to the organization. While she knew what needed to be done she did not necessarily know how to go about getting it done.

Working together, and using the results of several personality and behavioral assessments and feedback from key stakeholders, we brought to light the counter-productive behaviors that were getting in her way of **obtaining the needed buy-in for strategic decisions** and enhancing the natural resistance among those who were being directly impacted by the organizational changes.

We discussed new behavioral strategies that took into account her natural dynamic, fast-paced style and tendencies. We employed tools to help and broaden her behavior repertoire, build rapport, and align her with her stakeholders.

Initially, she, herself, was resistant to implementing these new ideas since she had previously been so successful in several Fortune 50 companies and saw no need to change herself. This resistance and inconsistent use of suggested new behaviors exacerbated the resistance among her stakeholders. Over time, as she achieved some successes with her new behaviors, she 'relented', doors opened up, and the needed buy-ins and culture change began to be realized.

How to Start the Abrasive Leader Change Process:

While this is a sensitive situation it is also a serious situation. As such, it needs to be handled both respectfully and decisively. To launch a resolution, I recommend:

The Abrasive Leader's Manager and HR **conduct a consequence conversation** with the Abrasive Leader. The purpose of the consequence conversation is to give the leader a choice – and therefore some degree of control – about how to permanently eliminate his/her abrasive behaviors.

More-often than not, the leader will select using a coach over trying to eliminate the behaviors by him/herself. The leader will then contact the designated coach that has been referred to him/her by HR. Ideally, this takes place within 24 hours.

A coach who specializes in coaching abrasive leaders then has an initial conversation to begin the coaching

The coaching – the **duration of which is usually six months** - then focuses on eliminating the *specific abrasive behaviors* specified by designated co-workers during confidential individual interviews with the coach.

We gauge the leader's progress at two points during the coaching, and set up a process to sustain the new behaviors after the coaching ends.

If you are aware of an Abrasive Leader in your organization, there is something you can do to start the process of change. Whether you are an HR manager or a direct manager of this person, please me for an initial conversation to discuss the situation and issues. I can be reached at 201.224.8848 or at SaraJane@PerformanceAdvantageSystems.com

I am the Founder and Managing Principal of Performance Advantage Systems and an Executive Leadership Coach specializing in coaching The Abrasive Leader and also helping Successful Leaders get to their next level of leadership effectiveness.