

## Abrasive leaders taking serious toll

*Survey results paint picture of abrasive leaders trapped in their fallibility and fearful staff – along with frustrated and helpless HR professionals*

It's inevitable — somewhere along your professional path, you will encounter an abrasive leader. As such, you already have your own observations about the effects a harsh interpersonal style can have on the workplace.

If we are to solve the problem of abrasive leadership, we need to develop a better collective understanding of this important issue. And so, in collaboration with *Canadian HR Reporter*, I developed the survey published on page 1 of this issue.

We defined abrasive leaders as “any individual charged with organizational authority, whose interpersonal conduct is excessively harsh and causes distress in other workers, sufficient to disrupt the work environment.”

The questions focused on four spheres — the abrasive leader's conduct, the people affected by the behaviour, the organizational context and the cost.

A total of 257 HR professionals chimed in. The data they provided tells a story of abrasive leaders trapped in their own fallibility, fearful staff, senior leaders who turn a blind eye, organizations that lack effective mechanisms to prevent or deal with the problem, and frustrated and helpless HR professionals.

### What we learned

To start, what did we learn about the abrasive leader?

The vast majority of identified leaders occupied senior positions — 21 per cent were CEOs, 32 per cent senior executives and 23 per cent directors or equivalent.

Alas, the more highly ranked (and influential) the abrasive leader, the more protected he is — and therefore the more challenging it is to successfully intervene.

The male-female ratio of abrasive leaders was 60-40, respectively. If we consider that in most organizations, there are more males than females in senior positions, this 60-40 ratio suggests the possibility that, in Canada, female leaders demonstrate significantly more abrasiveness than their male counterparts.



### GUEST COMMENTARY

SHARONE BAR-DAVID

It is also likely gender stereotyping still leads to harsher judgment of women who behave in a “non-feminine” manner.

Some abrasive behaviors are more prevalent than others. Canadian abrasive leaders “often” or “very often/always” engage in over-control, overreacting to situations and people, micromanaging, playing favourites, being rude, blaming others to avoid embarrassment, belittling, humiliating, ridiculing and expressing anger at someone when mad about something else.

### Sexist, racist comments rare

What about sexual, racist or offensive comments and jokes? As it turns out, these behaviours were dramatically less prevalent. Two-thirds of respondents noted these behaviours occurred “never” or “rarely.”

Does this mean we have made real inroads in the area of diversity and anti-harassment, such that even harsh leaders refrain from these behaviours? Or is it perhaps a testament to Canada's pluralistic, tolerant nature? These questions clearly warrant further study.

Abrasive leaders tend to be good at what they do. They're often perceived as crucial contributors to an organization's success, so much so that 61 per cent of respondents noted the abrasive leader's talent and the perception he is irreplaceable is a major barrier

### ONLINE

## Download the full survey

You can download a free PDF copy of *Canadian HR Reporter's* survey on abrasive leadership at [www.hrreporter.com/abrasive-leaders](http://www.hrreporter.com/abrasive-leaders).

to eliminating the behaviour.

Furthermore, 75 per cent of respondents said abrasive leaders “often” or “very often/always” demonstrate respect with higher-ups but are abrasive with employees.

A combination of stellar aptitude with acute political savvy enables abrasive leadership to persist across sectors and provinces. If higher-ups don't observe the behaviour firsthand, they don't believe it exists or are uncomfortable addressing it in the face of little clear evidence.

As one person commented, “They don't see the behaviour, so they don't trust the stats.” In other cases, respondents lamented that those who do find the courage to bring forth concerns are labelled as troublemakers or deemed unreliable.

### Why are some leaders abrasive?

What drives a person to adopt an excessively harsh interpersonal style?

Granted, abrasiveness is sometimes motivated by a need for power and control. Some respondents referred to these leaders as psychopaths, sociopaths, Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde and narcissists. The literature and common language often label these leaders as bullies.

However, an overwhelming number of comments echoed my own observations over many years of working in this field — the major force driving domineering behaviour is, paradoxically, deep-seated insecurity.

In my experience, abrasive leaders worry about being perceived as incompetent and about their ability to deliver results in what they consider a highly perilous environment.

The anxiety and insecurity manifest outwardly in attempts to control the environment through behaviours others experience as harsh and distressing.

Organizations are living, breathing organisms and, as such, respondents' comments suggest abrasive leadership persists because, at every touchpoint, organizations fail miserably at creating safety valves that will prevent or arrest the behaviour.

They highlighted hiring practices that do not scan for abrasiveness, performance appraisals that don't measure the right things, promotions based solely on technical skills, managers who are expected to lead without any interpersonal skills training, rewards with no accountability for bad behaviour and flawed exit data collection systems.

Finally, HR departments were perceived as powerless or even siding with the organization when a complaint was brought forth.

### **Senior leadership – part of the problem?**

Senior leadership was repeatedly underscored as a contributor to the problem. Sometimes the senior leadership itself models bad behaviour and this profoundly shapes the culture and makes it nearly impossible to intervene at lower levels.

On other fronts, one respondent said, "The network of senior executives tend to turn blind eyes to poor people managers," and another said, "Addressing it takes great courage from senior leaders who are busy and are uncomfortable confronting an abrasive and confrontational person. They are also afraid of the heavy severance costs, as well as potentially damaging rumours and lost expertise if the abrasive person departs."

That sums it up — a blind eye, other priorities, lack of skills and courage, and fear of the cost.

### **How Canadians react to abrasive leaders**

Organizations don't implement effective safety valves because they don't have a realistic assessment of the costs and the risks. We asked pointed questions on this front,

and analyzed the survey's cost-focused data in a conservative fashion, using only the two most extreme categories of the five that participants could select for each question.

The top domains where the behaviour had "quite a bit" or an "extreme" effect in more than 60 per cent of cases were lower employee retention, increased stress and decreased team and individual performance. The loss of talent was repeatedly noted as particularly painful.

On top of that, there was also lost management time (61 per cent). Equally alarming, the category of "sabotage by affected employees" was noted as "moderate," "quite a bit" or "extremely" in 53 per cent of the cases. This is troubling when one considers what sabotage can lead to at a hospital, bank or high-tech company, for example.

On the other hand, there was a cluster of activities where the expenses were "very slight" or "not at all" — labour board expenses, human rights or labour standard complaints, arbitration costs, investigation costs and legal-related expenditures.

### **Fear and anxiety**

Based on this data, it's clear Canadians react to abrasive leadership mostly with stress, reduced performance, sabotage or quitting altogether. What they don't do is file internal or external complaints.

Employees don't complain because they are afraid. The prevalence and degree of this fear were palpable through numerous comments in the open-ended sections of the survey. As one said: "Employees are afraid to speak out and therefore don't submit complaints — rather, they take stress leave." When people are fearful, the business suffers: "Hiring became a revolving door process. Poor employment brand. Bad reputation."

### **Price tag**

To put a price tag on some of the costs, respondents were asked to assess the expenditures triggered by the conduct of a specific

abrasive leader and provided categories of dollar amounts, with the highest level being \$75,000 plus.

Looking at this highest category alone, the numbers relay the costs triggered by a single case are exponential — 31 per cent of respondents agreed lower retention, severance, retraining and outplacement costs fell within this category, and 15 per cent felt the same in the arena of absenteeism, stress leaves and health-care costs. Nearly one in five (18 per cent) reported that lower productivity and decreased individual and team performance cost more than \$75,000.

What about solutions? Numerous respondents were frustrated that no solutions were attempted at all. Others said solutions that were implemented were only partially effective. This is not surprising: Abrasive leaders possess a unique psychological makeup that is not well-understood and, therefore, solutions that are not specifically targeted to their uniqueness tend to fall short.

Indeed, even interventions such as performance feedback and progressive discipline were "somewhat effective" or "highly effective" in only 43 per cent and 40 per cent of cases, respectively. Executive coaching (38 per cent), 360-feedback (36 per cent) and feedback from HR (31 per cent) fared worse.

The matter of abrasive leadership is complex. A superficial glance could lead to the impression it is a single-person problem. But the survey reveals the many ways in which organizations create or enable the problem, often not offering the right help to the troubled individual, whose harsh behaviour is triggering distress and heavy costs.

Perhaps it is time to address the issues more effectively by using the rich data contained in this survey.

---

*Sharone Bar-David is president of Bar-David Consulting, a company offering solutions for creating respectful work environments and turning around abrasive leaders. She can be reached at [sharone@sharonebardavid.com](mailto:sharone@sharonebardavid.com) or visit [www.sharonebardavid.com](http://www.sharonebardavid.com).*