

# Abrasive Leaders – Five Mistakes you’ve Made in Managing Them

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Here’s a fundamental truth: Abrasive leadership is tolerated - even rewarded – almost everywhere. And chances are that in the course of your career as a senior leader, you too have allowed it to happen on your watch.

Abrasive managers are often stellar (even brilliant) performers. If they weren’t, you wouldn’t keep them. However, their interpersonal conduct is excessively harsh. Often referred to as bully bosses, they exhibit poor emotional restraint, shouting, belittling, over-control and marginalizing. You can find abrasiveness across organizational cultures, sizes and sectors, even as you pride yourself on fostering a progressive and respectful culture.

If you’ve managed an abrasive leader, you’ve probably done some things right and obtained good results. Still, I invite you to consider: which of the following common mistakes did you make?

## **Mistake No. 1: You cherished false myths**

Chances are that in your dealings with abrasive managers, you subscribed to three common misperceptions that prevented you from analyzing the situation accurately and taking appropriate action.

First, you believed that the abrasive style was essential to the manager’s success. In other words, without the abrasiveness, the person would not maintain their effectiveness. Secondly: you convinced yourself that the manager was inherently incapable of changing (the old “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks” adage). Finally, you may have believed that those who complain about the manager’s style should acquire ‘thicker skins’, quit complaining and instead focus on real work. The reality is that none of these perceptions is true. But as long as you believed them, you enabled the abrasiveness.

## **Mistake No. 2: You ignored the real costs**

An abrasive manager’s conduct is bad for business. True, he or she may not intend to harm others. In fact, they’re probably highly committed to the organization and are doing their utter best to achieve top notch results. However, their rough style can trigger high staff turnover, increased sick and stress leaves, transfer requests, low morale, human rights or harassment complaints, union upset, legal or mediation costs, stifled innovation, and damage to your brand. Top that up with valuable executive resources wasted on dealing with the matter, and the cost becomes pretty hefty.

The trouble is that you (or those to whom the abrasive manager reported) may have ignored these costs. You focused on visible performance markers such as sales figures, and did not tabulate the hidden costs. You didn’t evaluate what the manager’s professional performance was worth compared with the price of his or her interpersonal conduct. Rather, you’ve acted as though these two spheres are divorced from each other.

## **Mistake No. 3: You turned a blind eye**

Granted, you may not have been fully aware of what was going on. But In situations where you did, you may have turned a blind eye. Perhaps it was because of the fear of losing this manager’s expertise (or Rolodex). Or perhaps you told yourself that the abrasive manager had the organization’s best interest at heart and therefore deserved the benefit of the doubt. Bottom line, you did nothing.

## **Mistake No 4: You rewarded the behaviour**

When you provided the abrasive manager with public recognition, performance bonuses, praise or a promotion, the underlying message was clear: “You’re doing a great job, keep doing exactly what you’ve been doing”. In essence, you condoned the problematic behaviour.

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## Mistake No. 5: You applied wrong solutions

In all fairness, you may have attempted to help the manager change. However, for the most part, the remedy you applied was only partially, or not at all, effective. Typical solutions include 360 feedbacks that in reality provide data that may not be sufficiently specific. Or you may have footed the bill for executive coaching, which failed because the manager in question had no motivation to change. Other times, you may have initiated a frank you’ve-gotta-change chat, but didn’t follow up with meaningful consequences. Conversely, you may have thrown indirect hints with the unfounded hope that the abrasive manager would magically decide to change.

## Getting it Right

For each of the above mistakes there’s an alternate option that offers a compelling win-win: turn around the abrasive manager’s interpersonal conduct, while also retaining them in your employ.

1. Quit believing in myths. In real life, most abrasive managers do have the ability to change. Furthermore, they can do so without compromise to their performance.
2. Calculate the real cost. Place a realistic price tag on the issue by mining available data and mapping the effects of the abrasiveness on hard indicators such as staff turnover levels, sick leaves and employee engagement survey results.
3. Stop measuring success solely on technical abilities. Rather, tie the abrasive manager’s performance to additional indicators as suggested in #2 above.
4. Address the issue head on. In doing so, you’ll be helping the abrasive manager, and protecting your culture and people too. Furthermore, you will reduce your personal liability should a lawsuit be launched by someone who was adversely affected by the manager’s conduct.
5. Apply abrasive-specific solutions. Instead of dead-end generic interventions, bring in solutions that are targeted specifically for dealing with abrasiveness.

A rough diamond can be turned into a polished gem. If you want to help an abrasive manager change, the place to start is with changing yourself. If you get it right, it sure will be worth it.



*Sharone Bar-David, LLB, MSW is President of Bar-David Consulting, a company offering REAL™ solutions for creating respectful workplaces. Bar-David Consulting now offers the REAL™ Program for Abrasive Leaders, a unique service designed to help turn around abrasive managers’ behaviour within a short period of time.*

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