

Dealing with a star performer who's a jerk

Question: One of our most brilliant managers is also a little abrasive — a jerk, for lack of a better term. He does a great job and gets results, but runs roughshod over people in the process and doesn't really care what other people think. What are some tactics for managing this type of star performer?

Answer: Let's call a spade a spade. The only reason this manager is free to behave in an abrasive fashion is because he is allowed, enabled and possibly even incentivized to do so. Had someone in the organization set clear boundaries and held this person accountable long ago, things would never have reached this point.

Contrary to popular myths, abrasive leaders are neither "jerks" nor evil. They are humans trying to do their best in a world they perceive as exceedingly perilous, where they believe their competence and good standing are threatened daily by people who are incapable or unmotivated, people who slow them down and prevent them from achieving their objectives. When they sense such threats, their anxiety skyrockets and with it comes the impulse to self-defend through some form of attack.

If someone submits a poorly edited report or is slow to learn a new system, these "jerks" perceive their goals or competence to be at risk. They deal with this anxiety by lashing out, making a belittling comment or contemptuous facial expression, or engaging in excessive micromanaging, to name a few common reactions.



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TOUGHEST HR QUESTION

I often hear "They are bullies," "They ought to know better" or "This person causes suffering, knowingly and intentionally."

But my experience working with abrasive leaders in a coaching capacity has taught me that oftentimes they are utterly unaware of their use of certain problematic phrases or their own negative, non-verbal behaviours. And even if they are aware that they are using these words or facial expressions, they truly cannot see how their behaviour can be perceived as threatening or debilitating. In short, they suffer from significant blind spot issues.

So what should an organization do if it wants to retain this manager while eliminating the problematic behaviours? Try the following steps (note that while the strategies below are manager-focused, they are also effective for non-managers):

Acknowledge organizational blind spots. Much like the abrasive leader, the organization has blind spots and anxieties that lead it to take no action or the wrong action.

The most common organizational blind spot is expressed right in the reader's question: "He does a great job and gets results." Well, is that really true? He may achieve results but let's look at the (not so hidden) collateral damage. When people feel they are "run roughshod," fear, worry and anger affect their ability to concentrate and perform at their best. They make mistakes, they lower their commitment to the organization that fails to protect them and instead of working, they spend hours commiserating with colleagues. They engage in under-the-radar sabotage. They play it safe to avoid ridicule.

Add to that sick leaves, transfers, workarounds, departures of good people, complaints, HR and management time spent on dealing with all the above, and exposure to legal risks — and the notion of "He does a great job" becomes highly dubious. It might be worthwhile to quantify these costs before moving forward.

Confront organizational fears. Organizational decision-makers are afraid of confrontation so they bury their heads in the sand. Or they're afraid of losing their star performer so they have "frank discussions" that fail to set clear boundaries and consequences. The organization needs to acknowledge its fears and move beyond them.

Set clear boundaries. Initiate a focused discussion (or discussions) with the abrasive leader over a pre-defined and short period of time, in order to:

• **Remove the blinders.** The abrasive leader needs to understand how

his behaviour affects others, the work environment and the brand itself. Describe the problem behaviours in a precise fashion, the concrete impact they are having and the risks these behaviours pose. Remember that the manager may not be aware of either his behaviour or its impact.

• **Set clear parameters.** Make it crystal clear the abrasive behaviour must stop.

• **Outline the consequences of not changing.** The person needs to grasp that his job is on the line. Without this clarity, sustainable change is less likely to happen.

• **Obtain commitment.** The manager needs to agree to change. If he does not commit, then the organization will need to make some tough choices.

• **Follow up.** Support the manager through the change in whatever way is necessary, including close involvement by the abrasive manager's own manager in the form of regular and frequent monitoring of progress, support and guidance.

If done well, this path should solve the problem. However, sometimes the abrasive behaviours are too deeply ingrained, possibly learned in childhood or early on in the person's career. In such cases, a referral to specialized coaching can be most helpful.

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