

Abrasive bosses: 3 serious organizational sins

It was time for Maurice to act. As director of HR, a number of people had approached him complaining about Frank, another director, whose harsh manner included emotional outbursts, yelling, public humiliation and liberal use of foul language.

Equipped with specific examples and data regarding unusual staff turnover levels in Frank's unit, Maurice requested a meeting with Kimberly, Frank's manager. After relaying his concerns, Maurice was scoffed at by Kimberly who declared the allegations "unfounded nonsense" targeted at "one of our best team players."

Abrasive managers can be found at any organization. If you haven't worked with one, you know one. Their conduct is characterized by behaviour similar to Frank's and it has profound effects on the work environment. Paradoxically, more often than not, these managers do not set out to harm others. Rather, they possess an unrelenting commitment to the organization and their intent is to perform at the highest level possible. But, on the ground, the manifestation of these intentions can be devastating.

A partner at a Toronto consulting firm described his experience with a senior colleague: "People would leave her room in tears. She'd shred them to pieces, often in front of others. But no one dared touch her because her sales were higher than anyone else's and the clients loved her. I was one of the lucky ones. She liked me, so I was spared the torment."

Indeed, abrasive managers who make it to higher positions are often extremely good at their job. Many are considered experts in their subject matter. At the same time, they are often referred to as "bully bosses" or "workplace bullies" but because they're hailed as high performers, the behaviour is allowed to persist.

A harmful trio

Why do organizations allow the abrasive behaviour to persist? Why don't they take action? The answer lies with three common culprits — fear, ignorance and denial.

Fear: When the manager is a stellar performer, there's the fear that if action is taken, he will pack up his Rolodex and take off, along with priceless expertise and institutional memory. One senior client



GUEST COMMENTARY

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once told me: "This vice-president is responsible for all our contract negotiations and everything he does directly affects our bottom line. He works magic with the numbers and finds hidden savings in sealed deals. The notion of him leaving is unthinkable."

This organization attempted to solve the problem in a typical manner — it minimized the negative impact of the abrasiveness by implementing complicated workarounds and minimizing the person's opportunities for human contact. These solutions made little sense from a business perspective but it was the only way to retain this person.

And, let's face it, fear can also be very personal. In many situations, the abrasive behaviour is directed both at staff and the manager's superiors. In these cases, the senior person is frightened of the personal and career repercussions any action might trigger. Therefore, doing nothing is the safest alternative.

Ignorance: It's surprising to see how often senior leadership practises blissful ignorance. And it's not just because they're too busy or have too many people to manage. Senior leaders cannot see the problem because the abrasive manager is often skilled at "managing up" while being otherwise harsh. Therefore, senior leadership sees no reason for concern and those who complain are perceived as inadequate and whiny. Besides, very few folks ever complain. After all, management's inaction leads staff to conclude the abrasiveness is sanctioned by the organization.

Denial: If you're in denial, you'll see nothing. But if you are not sleeping at the helm, there are lots of indicators that

point to potential problems. Even in situations where the abrasive behaviour is absent in relationships with superiors, there usually are telltale signs. These show up in the form of (formal or informal) complaints or candid exit interviews. Or the work unit shows unusual rates of transfer requests, increased sick leave, departures or lower employee engagement levels. All these should raise red flags and serve as important indicators something is fundamentally wrong in that unit and deserves closer examination.

Where the rubber hits the road

Fear, denial and ignorance are normal and understandable — but that doesn't justify burying your head in the sand. Even if the abrasive manager is simply trying to do a stellar job in the organization's best interest, harsh management is bad for business (those resignations, stress leaves and work-to-rule phenomena don't do much for the bottom line). It also exposes you to legal risks, especially in the increasing number of jurisdictions where harassment and bullying have been incorporated into health and safety legislation.

And if those are not sufficiently convincing arguments, this management style is bad for your organizational soul (putting people in harm's way and taking no action to stop it violates basic principles of decency and ethics).

Many believe abrasive managers can't change or the abrasive style is an inseparable element of the abrasive manager's success. These notions fuel fear and denial. And yet, abrasive managers can change in surprising ways and within a relatively short period of time. All you need is the right expertise and a deep understanding of what makes the abrasive leader behave the way he does.

But first, and most crucially, the organization has to be willing to step out of its denial, fear and ignorance and take a decisive stance. Without that, Kimberly will never take Maurice's concerns seriously.

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