COACHING ABRASIVE EXECUTIVES:
EXPLORING THE USE OF EMPATHY IN CONSTRUCTING LESS
DESTRUCTIVE INTERPERSONAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

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by

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Abstract

This study explores the theoretical bases of an empathically-grounded coaching method designed to help abrasive executives construct less destructive interpersonal management strategies. An abrasive executive is defined as any individual charged with managerial authority whose interpersonal behavior causes emotional distress in coworkers sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning.

Cases of three abrasive executives coached in the use of empathy were analyzed in relation to sociobiological and psychoanalytic conceptualizations of threat, anxiety, and defense, as well as the construct of emotional management, drawn from emotional intelligence theory. This analysis and the explication of the coaching method was then integrated with findings from empathy research to construct a theory of coaching abrasive executives.

Abrasive behavior is understood to be the executive's maladaptive defense against the threat of unconscious self-perceptions of inadequacy. Incessantly striving to demonstrate superior adequacy through *super-competence*, perceived coworker incompetence is inaccurately interpreted and attacked as

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resistance to the *SuperManager's* quest for perfection. Executives were coached to use empathy (perception and accurate interpretation of behavior) to gain insight into the psychodynamics of their workplace interactions and the counterproductive consequences of an aggressive management style. This concept was conveyed through the interpretive lens of threat, anxiety, and defense encountered by the executive struggling for survival in an intensely competitive business environment.

Insights gained by the executives were used to develop interpersonal management strategies reflecting increased emotional intelligence and decreased aggression. These findings stand in contrast to bullying and mobbing theories which hold that abrasive executive behavior is both intractable and malevolently motivated. Further research is needed to develop and demonstrate the effectiveness of interventions designed to reduce workplace suffering caused by abrasive executives.

Keywords: abrasive executives; leadership abuse; executive coaching; coaching method; bully; workplace abuse; workplace bullying; workplace harassment; workplace incivility; workplace mobbing; empathy; insight; organizational psychodynamics; interpersonal organizational behavior; interpersonal management competence; emotionally intelligent leadership; workplace emotional intelligence

This study is dedicated to:

My wonderful parents without whose love, humor, and insight I would

not be who and where I am today

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Laura Markos, whose empathic guidance brought me to a love of writing

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My dear friends who supported me throughout this journey

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Those residents of the animal kingdom who allowed me to share in their

worlds, especially members of the species *Ursus horribilis*, *Canis lupus*, and Itchy

and Foo Paw of *Canis lupus familiarus puggus* whose soft snores provided the

background music for my labors.

Ä

Finally, this dissertation is dedicated to the three courageous executives

who consented to participate in this study. I bear them my deepest respect and

gratitude for the insights they offered, insights that I will carry forward in my

work to reduce suffering in the workplace.

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The players all played at once without waiting for turns, quarrelling all the while, and fighting for the hedgehogs; and in a very short time the Queen was in a furious passion, and went stamping about, and shouting, "Off with his head!" or "Off with her head!" about once in a minute. Alice began to feel very uneasy: to be sure, she had not as yet had any dispute with the Queen, but she knew that it might happen any minute, "and then," thought she, "what would become of me? They're dreadfully fond of beheading people here: the great wonder is, that there's any one left alive!"

-from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (Carroll, 1865/1941)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I have always been interested in the reduction of emotional suffering. Child of a psychiatrist and hospital volunteer, I trained in clinical social work and practiced psychotherapy to help others find release from emotional pain. Before this I studied animal behavior for my bachelor's degree in zoology. In 1980, I joined the clinical staff of an employee assistance program (EAP) in Alaska, providing counseling to employees of contracted corporations. It was here that I learned about the intense emotional suffering experienced by employees who work for or with abrasive executives.

I founded the Executive Insight Development Group, Inc. to coach abrasive executives. Over the past 10 years of practice, I have drawn upon my learning as a student of animal behavior, human behavior, and organizational behavior to develop a method to help these executives reduce their abrasive behavior, increase their effectiveness, and ultimately, reduce suffering in the workplace.

I must also confess that I have a poor conscious memory. I learn through integration of theory and practice, and in this process theory tends to sink into the shadow world of the unconscious. As a practitioner, I have had the experience of *feeling* that I know what I am doing, while at the same finding myself unable to readily articulate the theoretical basis for my practice ("*Looks good in practice, but does it work in theory?*"). I am engaging in this dissertation research to discover, explicate, and explore the theoretical bases for the use of empathy in coaching these individuals and the application of a conceptual framework of threat, anxiety, and defense in the coaching process. This conceptualization draws upon my past studies of ethology (animal behavior), my training in psychoanalytic psychotherapy (also known as ego psychology), my personal experience as an executive, and my professional experience as an executive coach responding to suffering in organizations.

Abrasion is generally defined as the process of wearing down by means of friction, injury or irritation (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). In the course of my work as an employee assistance counselor and as an executive coach, I encountered employees' hearts and souls that had been eroded away by the continuing emotional distress experienced in their interactions with abrasive executives, resulting in reduced motivation, alienation from the workplace, and oftentimes diminished enjoyment of their personal lives.

I was asked to work with the executives who caused this suffering. I treated them as I did all of my clients—with empathy—and over the past 10

years evolved a psychoanalytically-informed approach to coaching this population to reduce emotional suffering in the workplace.

I am interested in examining the use of empathy as a means to reduce suffering in the workplace: suffering experienced not only by the executive's coworkers, but also suffering experienced by the executives themselves as they struggle to manage people and circumstances.

Background and Purpose of the Study

Few of us have escaped the experience of working for a bad boss. *Bad* can refer to either technical or interpersonal incompetence, the latter manifested in abrasive behavior. *Abrasive behavior* can consist of any behavior between the executive and coworkers that creates emotional distress sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning. Examples of abrasive behavior include, but are not limited to: rudeness, downgrading or demeaning another's capabilities, public ridicule and disrespect, swearing, overwork, over-control (micromanagement), concentration on subordinate's weaknesses, social isolation, neglect, threats, intimidation, deception, unfair or unrealistic demands, abusive language, insults, bribes, criticism, name calling, unjustly withholding a deserved reward, physical maltreatment, setting up subordinates to fail, withholding needed favors such as time off, blocking subordinate's access to opportunities, indecisiveness and unrealistically high or unfair expectations (Bassman & London, 1993). Abrasive (also referred to as *aversive*) behaviors can manifest in a pattern over a period of

time, and are declared disruptive because of the perceived cumulative effects of the behavior (Kowalski, 2001a). Occasionally a single instance of abrasive behavior may prove egregious enough to merit identification as destructive. There is no business standard for abrasion that can be uniformly applied to all workplace behaviors, as different organizational cultures embrace differing standards of acceptable behavior.

Current workplace research has focused on interpersonally-aggressive abrasive behavior, also termed *bullying* or *mobbing*. Managers have been identified as constituting the majority of perpetrators of workplace aggression (McCarthy, Sheehan, & Wilkie, 1996; Savva & Alexandrou, 1998). A 2000 study of superior-to-subordinate aggression in the United Kingdom concluded that close to 2.5 million U.K. employees considered themselves as having been the victims of managerial aggression in the previous 6 months (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). The Center for Creative Leadership reported that 74% of successful executives in three *Fortune* 100 corporations reported that they had had at least one intolerable boss (Lombardo & McCall, 1984).

The purpose of this study is to explore how empathy is used in a coaching process intended to help executives construct less abrasive management strategies. As a theoretical dissertation, my goal is to explore and develop the theoretical framework informing this coaching method for abrasive executives. This work was undertaken in the interest of developing theory rather than demonstrating causality.

Significance

Abrasive executive behavior has the potential to destroy individual well-being and organizational effectiveness. The costs can first be calculated in terms of work disruption. Abrasive executive behavior can impact productivity to the point of paralysis; examples of companies, departments, and projects devastated by abrasive leadership are legion. A recent Gallup Organization (2003) study based on queries of some 2 million workers at 700 companies found that poor supervisory behavior was the main reason employees quit. A study of 5,300 employees from the public, private, and non-profit sectors conducted by the University of Manchester (Hoel & Cooper, 2000) led researchers to estimate that workplace aggression contributed to a loss of 18 million working days per year in England.

Costs of organizational disruption include attrition of valued employees (Pearson, Andersson, & Porath, 2000), decreased morale and motivation resulting in lowered productivity (McCarthy, Sheehan, & Kearns, 1995), higher incidence of stress-related illnesses (Quine, 1999) and substance abuse (Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty, & Freels, 2001), increased legal actions based on hostile environment or discriminatory behavior (Leymann, 1990), and retaliatory responses such as sabotage (Laabs, 1999) and homicide (McLaughlin, 2000). In the course of my Alaska EAP work, I found that it was not unusual for clients to present at our offices terrified by homicidal ideation toward a boss. In the course

of crisis counseling they expressed relief over relinquishing the firearms so often carried in Alaskan vehicles.

The cost of workplace abrasion to individuals can be calculated in terms of professional, financial, and emotional survival. Promising careers can easily be derailed with the arrival of an abrasive executive. Employees may be driven to quit in order to distance themselves from the source of their suffering. And they will take this action in full awareness of the potential severe financial ramifications of their decision.

Families may experience a ripple effect from victims who become estranged or aggressive at home (Beasley, 1997). The direct emotional costs are equally negative; I will never forget the employee whose morale had been so eroded by a micromanaging superior that he contemplated suicide each day on his drive to work.

<div align="center">The Coaching Method</div>

The majority of abrasive executives are referred for coaching by their employers rather than self-referral. Referred executives are sufficiently valued for their technical skills to merit retention; however, their organizations have determined that their abrasive behavior is disrupting operations to an unacceptable degree.

The coaching method under study consists of assessment of and feedback to the executive on coworker perceptions of the executive's abrasive behavior,

followed by coaching and periodic retrieval of coworker perceptions, termed *pulse checks*.

Assessment begins with the first meeting with the referring parties, followed by the first meeting with the prospective coaching client (the abrasive executive). In these initial meetings with organizational representatives and the executive, the coach explores each party's perceptions of the referral, describes the process, and secures authorization to proceed.

The executive and the referring parties are then asked to compile a list of coworkers at all organizational levels to be interviewed by the coach. Each feedback contributor is interviewed individually and asked to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the executive's management style. These data are then purged of identifying information and aggregated into themes in preparation for the feedback meeting.

In this meeting, the coach provides the executive, and only the executive, with a summary of feedback themes describing coworker perceptions of the nature and degree of impact of the executive's abrasive behavior. (With the assistance of the coach, the executive then prioritizes the abrasive behaviors discussed in the feedback to determine which behavior will first be addressed in the coaching process. Upon completion of the assessment and feedback phases, coaching begins). Coaching is conducted in a confidential manner; no information regarding the client is shared with the employer or coworkers without the client's express consent.

The above provides a brief and rather mechanical description of the phases of the coaching process (which will be explicated in greater detail in Chapter 4), but does not address the question of what exactly occurs following feedback, the actual coaching process. Let me now confess: I winged it, literally, with no flight manual or training beyond that gained through life experience and my studies of animal and human behavior.

Another term for "winging it" is improvising; generating a response based on one's prior knowledge and or experience. Prior to embarking upon this work, I must also confess that I held a number of beliefs that deeply influenced my early practice decisions. First, as the daughter of a psychoanalytic psychiatrist I grew up believing that the key to changing behavior lay in understanding behavior, in gaining insight into the emotions motivating the behavior. Second, I believed that treating people badly was not the most effective means of motivation (carrot trumps stick) and learned from my physician father's Hippocratic stance to, above all, do no harm.

From these beliefs and from my psychotherapy training, I determined that in order to help these individuals keep their jobs I would have to gain insight into why they engaged in abrasive behavior. To do this, I would have to refrain from moral judgment of their behavior, which could only serve to alienate me from them. This, at the time, was my understanding of *empathy*: suspending moral judgment in order to understand another's behavior: in other words, maintaining a caring stance so as to preserve the ability to be helpful. Finally, I

confess now that I had a covert motivation beyond helping the abrasive executive improve their management style: I wanted them to stop harming others.

The work began. I started by asking my clients questions about how, when, and why they engaged in abrasive behavior so that I, the coach, could develop insight into the emotions motivating their behavior. Fascinated by the questions that occurred to me regarding their behavioral styles, I presented these questions to my clients, and we strove to answer them. What motivated them to behave abrasively? Where did they learn these behaviors, and why did they elect to use them? Did they see the negative impact of their behavior on others, and the costs to themselves? What precipitated the abrasive behavior? Did they feel they had control over it? What, if anything, would motivate them to change to a less destructive interpersonal management style?

By asking these questions, I entered into what I later learned to be an action research process with my clients. *Action research* has been defined as research in which the validity and value of research results are tested through collaborative participant-professional (in this case, client-coach) knowledge generation and application processes in projects of social change that aim to increase fairness, wellness and self-determination (Greenwood & Levin, 2000). "Action research ignores the boundaries between disciplines when they restrict effective understanding and action and advocates crossing the boundary between academia and society as a basic principle of operation" (p. 94).

As a psychotherapist, I had developed deep respect for the individuality of my patients, and trusted that this process of inquiry characteristic of action research and psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy would help in understanding the emotions underlying these executives' dysfunctional behaviors. I applied this same respect and curiosity to my coaching clients, hoping that a process of mutual inquiry would help us both to understand the meaning and impact of their abrasive behaviors, and ideally lead to management styles that caused less suffering in coworkers.

Beyond inquiring into the behavior of my clients, I found myself asking my clients to inquire into the behavior of their coworkers. I asked them to observe their coworkers' behaviors in response to the executives' own behaviors, to develop hypotheses on the emotions motivating these behaviors, and to test their hypotheses in future interactions with their coworkers. I encouraged them to do this by suspending moral judgment in order to understand others: my early definition of empathy. I found myself suggesting that they put themselves into their coworkers' psychological shoes to better hypothesize about the emotions motivating their behaviors. In other words, I found myself asking my clients to conduct research to gain insight into their coworkers in the same manner I was striving to gain insight into these executives.

Effective research requires a capacity for objectivity. I quickly learned that these executives, like psychotherapists, would have to monitor and manage their subjective emotions to maintain the objectivity necessary for their research. I

found myself communicating this concept by acquainting my clients with the core construct of emotional intelligence theory: emotional management. I also found myself providing information on the psychodynamics of defense, and was aware of a growing tendency to draw analogies with survival strategies in the animal world.

This, then, was the early flight pattern that emerged from "winging it," a coaching method for these abrasive executives. After approximately 3 to 4 months of coaching, I would secure the executives' permission to re-interview their coworkers to determine if others perceived a lessening of abrasive behavior and experienced less suffering. These *pulse checks*, as I termed them, were repeated approximately every 3 to 4 months until the coaching engagement concluded. As my years of practice progressed, so apparently did my technique, evidenced by positive results in these pulse checks. Reports from organizational authorities and coworkers indicated that the executives' behavior improved to an acceptable level within an average of 6 to 8 months of coaching. I was doing something, and it seemed to be working, but what, exactly, was I doing, and why? I determined to answer these two questions in this dissertation: first, to satisfy my curiosity, and second, to construct a theoretical model of coaching abrasive executives that will, I hope, prove to be of value to both researchers and practitioners.

Research Objectives

This study was undertaken to research the theoretical bases of a coaching method intended to help abrasive executives construct less destructive interpersonal management strategies; to consciously analyze and explicate the elements of a method of coaching that I had been intuitively constructing over the past 10 years. In addition to an exploration of theory related to the method, data from three selected coaching cases are analyzed to illustrate the theoretical building blocks used in the construction of this coaching method.

The primary research question addressed in this study is: How is empathy used in a coaching process to help executives construct less abrasive management strategies? Executives who generate interpersonal distress in their efforts to attain organizational objectives must learn to regulate the emotions that lead to their abrasive behavior, and to develop new, non-abrasive management strategies to achieve their goals. This exploration of the use of empathy in coaching abrasive executives is undertaken with the intent of constructing new theory to reduce suffering in the workplace resulting from abrasive executive behavior.

The coaching method under study assumes that abrasive executives are, in fact, capable of empathy. This study examines this assumption, along with the following questions:

- Why do these executives chronically engage in abrasive behavior?
- Do these executives consciously intend to cause interpersonal harm?

- Are these executives aware of the nature, degree, and costs of their abrasive behavior?

- How are these executives motivated to strive to reduce their abrasive behavior?

- What role does the use of empathy play in these executives' capacities to decipher emotions that motivate coworker behaviors?

- Does the development of insight lead to the construction of less destructive interpersonal management strategies than those originally utilized by these executives?

Operational Definitions

An *abrasive executive* is here defined as any individual charged with managerial authority whose interpersonal behavior causes emotional distress in coworkers sufficient to *disrupt organizational functioning*. In this definition, *executive* refers to all levels of authority, from team leader to chief executive officer; disruption of organizational functioning is defined below.

Coaching is defined here as a mutual process between client and coach to explore and discover improved ways of functioning to achieve the client's objectives. The coach contributes expertise based on research and experience, while the client brings personal and professional goals, experiences, and perceptions to the process. Coaching occurs primarily through ongoing dialog between coach and client, who engage in developing strategies for goal

achievement, while at the same time analyzing impediments to progress. The coaching sessions described in this study last 90 minutes each, and intervals between sessions range from 1 to 4 weeks, depending on the client's progress. Coaching sessions may be conducted at the workplace, at the coach's office, or (following in-person assessment) by telephone, depending on the executives' needs and geographic circumstances.

Coworker refers to all employees of a given organization, including superiors, peers, and subordinates.

Disruption of organizational functioning is defined here by manifestations such as, but not limited to: expressions of emotional distress on the part of employees, reduction of performance in coworkers, complaints to superiors and/or human resources, attrition of valued employees, or harassment or hostile environment lawsuits. *Disruption* is assessed and determined by responsible superiors and/or organizational human resources representatives.

Empathy is here defined as *the process of perceiving and interpreting (inferring) emotions in others and oneself.* Empathy and the aforementioned sociobiological and psychoanalytic constructs of threat, anxiety, and defense are discussed in greater detail in the literature review.

Executive coaching incorporates the general principles of coaching, and is distinguished from other types of coaching by a focus on improving the performance of individuals in their executive roles, thereby enhancing organizational functioning. Executive coaching may focus on a variety of skills

and behaviors, including leadership skills, attainment of performance objectives, and interpersonal behaviors. Coaching abrasive executives involves working with individuals to reduce or eliminate the abrasive behaviors that disrupt organizational functioning, thereby impairing executive effectiveness.

Insight is defined here as the accurate interpretation of emotions, the correct discernment of the specific content of one's own or others' feelings.

Assumptions and Limitations

The coaching method under study assumes that abrasive executives are, in fact, capable of empathy. This study assumes that these abrasive executives are able to understand concepts of empathy, emotional monitoring, emotional management, threat, anxiety, and defense. The study also assumes that abrasive executives are able to report their emotional responses during the coaching process fully and honestly.

This study acknowledges several limitations. The study was conducted using my own coaching background, process, practice, and cases with abrasive executive clients; while the coaching process developed and used is fully described herein, the process is nevertheless intersubjective and other coaches or psychotherapists may have differing results.

Limitation due to sample: The study was conducted using the cases of three U.S. executives and thus may not be generalizable to all executives and/or organizational cultures worldwide. All three executives in the cases used were

middle-aged, Caucasian males, further limiting generalizability across gender, race, and age. In addition, specific and detailed data collected in interviews with the executives' coworkers during the coaching process were excluded from the study to protect the executives' anonymity.

Limitation due to research design: Finally, as this is a qualitative study, the findings may be subject to other or additional interpretations. Further studies addressing these methods, choices, and limitations are welcomed.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This chapter begins with a review of the literature on abrasive executive behavior in both the popular and scholarly literature, followed by a survey of strategies currently employed to intervene with this population. Emotional intelligence theory and training is explored for its relevance regarding emotional management in the workplace. This is followed by an examination of theories regarding the etiology of abrasive executive behavior. To explore the theoretical bases of the coaching method under consideration, the chapter then proceeds to an examination of sociobiological and psychoanalytic perspectives on defensive behavior, followed by review of the literature on empathy, empathic response, and the relation of empathy to leadership.

Abrasive Executive Behavior

An *abrasive executive* was defined above as an individual charged with managerial authority whose interpersonal behavior causes emotional distress sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning; disruption is determined by responsible superiors and/or human resource representatives. This definition encompasses professionals with managerial authority such as physicians and attorneys who are not considered organizational executives in the traditional sense.

Examples of abrasive behavior given by Bassman and London (1993) include, but are not limited to:

> unrealistically high or unfair expectations and holding hostage needed favours, such as time off. Abuse may take the form of public ridicule and disrespect, overwork (which devalues personal life), over-control, concentration on subordinates' weaknesses, deception, unfair or unrealistic demands, abusive language, insults, bribes, criticism, name calling, unjustly withholding a deserved reward (such as a promotion or pay increase), and physical maltreatment. Further, abuse may involve setting subordinates up to fail, blocking subordinates' access to opportunities, unfairly taking credit for subordinates' work, and/or downgrading or demeaning other' capabilities. Abusive behaviours may have legal ramifications include sexual harassment and discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, handicap, race, religion, age or other characteristics unrelated to job capabilities and performance. (p. 18)

Essentially, any behavior perceived as abrasive in daily social interaction can constitute abrasive behavior in the workplace; the means by which one individual can incur emotional distress in others are limitless. Kowalski (2001a) elaborated on abrasive behaviors, referred to as *aversive* behaviors, indicating that they can range from extreme forms (violent acts such as physical abuse, murder, and rape) to the more mundane. Mundane behaviors include: rudeness, gossiping, swearing, failing to control bodily functions, chronic complaining, narcissism, excessive reassurance-seeking, teasing, hurting other's feelings, ostracism, conflict, deception, not listening, intentional embarrassment, neglect, spreading rumors, violating confidentiality, betrayals, using the silent treatment, moodiness, criticism, jealousy, forgetting commitments, incompetence, contempt, defensiveness, and sabotage.

Kowalski (2001b) noted that abrasive (he termed them *aversive*) behaviors include both acts of commission and acts of omission. Although most descriptions of abrasive behavior focus on aggressive acts of commission, acts of omission (such as neglect and forgetting, reflecting passivity) can prove just as abrasive as acts of commission. For the purposes of this dissertation, abrasive styles that primarily involve acts of commission will be referred to as *aggressive abrasive*; abrasive styles that primarily involve acts of omission, *avoidant abrasive*. An executive with an aggressive abrasive style commits acts (e.g., yelling, public humiliation) that cause abrasion, whereas the executive with a avoidant abrasive style produces emotional distress by failing to act (e.g., avoiding decisions, ignoring others' requests).

Many abrasive interpersonal behaviors that occur in isolation are easily tolerated, quickly forgotten, and forgiven: "Repeated relational transgressions, however, are quite another matter, because aversiveness increases with the frequency of aversive behaviors" (Kowalski, 2001b, p. 301). The term *social allergen* was coined to refer to abrasive behaviors that produce unpleasant reactions in others:

> Just as the physical response to a single exposure to a physical allergen, such as dust, is relatively minor, so the emotional and social response to infrequent exposure to a social allergen, such as teasing, is often negligible. However, repeated exposure to social allergens produces a social allergy that Cunningham, Barbee, and Druen (1997) defined as "a reaction of hypersensitive disgust or annoyance to a social allergen" (p. 191). (Kowalski, 2001b, p. 300)

Abrasiveness is a matter of perception, for a behavior that one person perceives to be amusing may be regarded as hurtful and demeaning by another (Kowalski, 2001b). Research on the differing perceptions of the parties involved shows that perpetrators minimize the negative impact of their behavior, view the behavior more benignly, perceive the behavior as rationally motivated, and consider the consequences of the behavior to be minimal (Baumeister, 1997; Besag, 1989; Leary, Springer, Negel, Ansell, & Evans, 1998).

Research indicates that most people who inflict distress do not intend to hurt others; in Leary et al.'s (1998) study, over 80% indicated that they had no intention to hurt others' feelings, and that the hurt had been accidental or the result of inconsiderateness and insensitivity. Miller (2001) noted that people engage in abrasive behaviors out of sheer ignorance, lacking awareness of the appropriate relational rules (Metts, 1994), or because of some type of social skill deficit on the part of the perpetrator (Miller, 2001).

Finally, abrasive behaviors injure relationships because they lead to inferences of relational devaluation (Kowalski, 2001b). Victims of repeated abrasive behavior tend to experience negative emotion in response, because they perceive that the abrasive individual does not value them (Leary, Koch, & Hechenbleikner, 2001).

> This idea of changes in relational evaluation explains why the relational transgressions of close others are typically more hurtful and more noticeable than those of strangers or acquaintances. Generally, we desire the approval and acceptance of close others more than of strangers. Thus,

we are more likely to be hurt by indications of relational devaluation from close, as opposed to distant others. (Kowalski, 2001b, p. 304)

In summary, abrasive behavior is defined in the eyes of the beholder: interpretation of which behaviors are abrasive is idiosyncratic. Abrasive behavior can take aggressive or avoidant forms. Chronic abrasive behavior increases the possibility that recipients will feel devalued. On the other hand, most perpetrators of abrasive behavior do not intend to cause harm, minimize the impact of their behavior, and view their actions as the products of rationality.

Descriptions of Abrasive Executives in the Popular Literature

Descriptions of abrasive executives in the popular literature share strikingly similar characteristics. Typically, books and articles on the subject are written in a highly adversarial tone, portraying the executive as the evil antagonist of the workplace battlefield. Titles are highly dramatic and inflammatory as in these examples: *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey* (Hornstein, 1996)*, Crazy Bosses* (Bing, 1992), *Corporate Hyenas at Work: How to Spot and Outwit Them by Being Hyenawise* (Marais & Herman, 1997).

 Such authors have referred to their books as combat guides (Felder, 1993), survival guides (Hornstein, 1996), battle tactics (Kramer, 1985) or bullybusting strategies (Namie & Namie, 2003). They continue with the colorful metaphors, referring to the executive as crazy (Bing, 1992), toxic (Reed, 1993), predator,

sadistic, brutal (Hornstein, 1996), tyrant, corporate hyena (Marais & Herman, 1997), or jerk (Lloyd, 1999).

The books proceed to authoritative definition and classification of the offending individuals, either by type of individual or type of behavior. Descriptors are inevitably colorful, simplistic, and pejorative. The abrasive executive is variously described as follows:

- The Angry Screamer, The Saccharine Snake, The Space Case, The Invalidator, The Cold Shoulder (Felder, 1993)

- Commander, Mild Slick, Slave Driver, Peter Pan, Judge, Don Juan/Senorita Juanita, Father Knows Best, Flash, Stoney Superboss (Kramer, 1985)

- The Screamer, The Amnesiac, The Multitasker (Mackenzie, 2003)

- Bully, Paranoid, Narcissist, Bureaucrazy, Disaster Hunter (Bing, 1992)

- The Self-Involved Toxic Executive, The Toxic Disorganizer, The Fiscally Abusive Toxic Executive, The Valueless Toxic Executive, The Addicted Toxic Executive (Reed, 1993)

- Casanova, Explosive, Gangster, Narcissistic, Spineless Sensation, Turncoat, Backstabber, Accuser, Zombie (Di Genio, 2002)

- Constant Critic, Two-Headed Snake, Gatekeeper, Screaming Mimi (Namie & Namie, 2003)

- Executioner, Dehumanizer, Blamer, Rationalizer, Conqueror, Performer, Manipulator (Hornstein, 1996)

Reed (1993) offered a characteristically pejorative listing of behaviors exhibited by abrasive executives. He stated that so-called *toxic* executives invade the privacy and space of others, have secrets to protect, are changeable and unpredictable, are abrasion junkies, are non-, under-, and half-instructors (failing to inform), are Trappists (demonstrating passivity in solving problems that do not relate to their success), have bad manners, are late for appointments and meetings, are ruinous to meetings, use avoidance English (slurring words, finishing sentences), are cosmeticians (focusing on appearance), highly competitive, abuse people and things , hate others' ideas, are credit snatchers, play the blame game, are Criticophiliacs (enjoy being critical), isolate special targets, are super-simplist/reductionists, have secret agendas, have problems with the truth, zealously protect their power positions, have aggressive possessions (guns, dogs), clothes give them away (black handkerchief signifies criminality), and have little or no sense of the future (p. 13).

Even the authors of one of the earliest scholarly examinations of abrasive executives (Lombardo & McCall, 1984) could not resist the impulse to create pejorative categorizations. Researching the factors that can interfere with or derail executive development, the authors interviewed 73 successful executives on their experiences with an intolerable boss, ultimately categorizing them as Snakes in the Grass, Attilas, Heel Grinders, Egotists, Dodgers, Business Incompetents, Detail Drones, Not Respected, and Slobs.

Descriptions of Abrasive Executives in the Scholarly Literature

Similar to the popular theorists, scholarly researchers strive to categorize abrasive executives through typologies or psychological diagnostic categories. Levinson (1978) pioneered this effort in a *Harvard Business Review* article entitled "The Abrasive Personality." He described abrasive personalities as "people who puzzle, dismay, frustrate, and enrage others in organizations (p. 86) . . . men and women of high, sometimes brilliant, achievement who stubbornly insist on having their own way and are contemptuous of others . . ." (p. 87). According to Levinson, the abrasive personality is highly intelligent and driven by the need for perfection, reflective of an unconscious self-perception of inadequacy and resulting need to see oneself as extraordinary.

Kaplan (1991) described as *expansive* executives whose insatiable appetite for mastery reflects underlying insecurity. "Fundamentally, they do not have a secure feeling of their own worth. For this reason they are inordinately concerned with performing well" (p. 58). He then differentiated between the *effective expansive* who goes to productive extremes to achieve mastery and the *significantly flawed* (p. 59) expansive executive who resorts to interpersonally destructive extremes. For expansive executives, the danger or threat lies in failing to achieve perfection, thereby validating the unconscious and intolerable anxiety of loss of control. Kaplan further differentiated expansives into three subtypes: the *striver-builder,* reflective of the wish to fulfill parental expectations of greatness; the *self-vindicator/fix-it specialist*, reflective of the wish to redeem

oneself in the eyes of rejecting parents; and the *perfectionist-systematizer,* reflective

of the wish to gain the approval of perfectionistic parents.

Emotional intelligence (EI) researchers Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee

(2002) characterized the *dissonant* executive as lacking in empathy, unaware, and

thus out of tune with the feelings of others:

> There are countless kinds of dissonant leaders, who not only lack empathy
> (and so are out of synch with the group) but also transmit emotional tones
> that resound most often in a negative register. Most of those leaders, we
> find, don't mean to be so discordant; they simply lack the critical EI
> abilities that would help them lead with resonance. (p. 23)

Psychodynamically oriented theorists organized dysfunctional executives and

dysfunctional organizations by diagnostic categories, or what Kets de Vries

(2001) referred to as the *clinical paradigm.* "Using the findings of clinical research

on human behavior as its conceptual base, this paradigm helps in understanding

all forms of behavior, however irrational these may appear to be" (p. 6). The

American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

Disorders (DSM IV-TR) (APA, 2000), considered to be the definitive compendium

of psychopathology by mental health practitioners, described the following

personality disorders: paranoid (distrustful), schizoid (detached), schizotypal

(relationship-avoidant), antisocial (disregard for others), borderline (unstable,

impulsive), histrionic (excessive emotionality), narcissistic (grandiose), avoidant

(socially inhibited), dependent (submissive), and obsessive-compulsive

(perfectionistic). Kets de Vries and Miller (1984) drew upon psychological

diagnostic categories to describe five types of organizations: paranoid,

compulsive, dramatic, depressive, and schizoid. Kernberg (1979, 1998), a renowned researcher of the borderline personality disorder, analyzed abrasive executive behavior in terms of schizoid, obsessive, paranoid, and narcissistic personalities. Maccoby (2000) followed a similar track, focusing exclusively on the *narcissistic* leader.

In applying a clinical paradigm to the phenomenon of executive abrasion, these psychodynamically oriented theorists diagnosed the behavior in the context of hypothesized personality disorders. Explicating the details of each theorist's typologies or, in the case of clinician-theorists, diagnostic analyses of abrasive executives far exceeds the scope and intent of this study. These efforts to categorize abrasive executives are described to illustrate that efforts to categorize such behavior inevitably result in typologies reflective of the theorists' perspectives: The abrasive executive is variously labeled expansive, dissonant, or narcissistic, depending on the theorist's stance.

Workplace Aggression and Bullying

A report examining the experience of working for an intolerable boss was part of a larger, long-term study undertaken by the Center for Creative Leadership (Lombardo & McCall, 1984). This work was pioneering in the sense that it addressed the phenomenon of abuse perpetrated by a superior. Types of behavioral constellations were identified, as well as strategies used by the survey participants to deal with the aversive behaviors.

In the late 1980s researchers began looking at the phenomenon of interpersonal aggression in school and work environments. Referred to as *mobbing* or *bullying* in the studies, findings from research in Scandinavian countries then spread to other countries including Australia, Britain, Canada, Germany, South Africa, and Japan. Research on workplace abrasion in the United States is currently viewed as fragmented (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002).

Workplace aggression (termed bullying) is variously defined. Most theorists acknowledge that there is no definitive list of aggressive behaviors, but that these behaviors have the effect of threatening the recipient (Rayner et al., 2002). Other generalized definitions depict workplace aggression as:

> persistent, offensive, abusive, intimidating, malicious, or insulting behavior, abuse of power or unfair penal sanctions, which makes the recipient feel upset, threatened, humiliated or vulnerable, which undermines their self-confidence and which may cause them to suffer stress. (MSF, 1995, p. 2)

> Workplace bullying constitutes unwanted, offensive, humiliating, undermining behavior towards and individual or groups of employees. Such persistently malicious attacks on personal or professional performance are typically unpredictable, irrational and often unfair. This abuse of power and position can cause such chronic stress and anxiety that people gradually lose belief in themselves, suffering physical ill health and mental distress as a result. (Douglas, 2001, p. 4)

The presence of behavioral patterns is emphasized in these definitions: "Taken individually, incidents may seem innocuous, but put together they add up to a scenario which is destabilizing and threatening to the person who receives them" (Rayner et al., 2002, p. 9). These definitions of aggression in the workplace also cite the presence of a pattern, or persistence as a defining feature. Persistence

connotes frequency (more than once, but no minimum required number of

occurrences) and duration (recurrence indicating a pattern of behavior).

Douglas (2001) listed the common threads running through these

definitions, describing bullying as:

- an issue of power and control
- often an abuse of one's position
- unjust, unwarranted and unwelcome
- persistent over time
- extremely damaging in terms of physical and mental health to the victim. (p. 4)

In summary, there is no single, accepted definition at this time for workplace

aggression. Standardized criteria for determining the presence of workplace

aggression do not exist. The judgment can be highly subjective, including

considerations of the degree of reaction of the injured party, the intent of the

perpetrator, and persistence.

Intent

Leary et al.'s (1998) aforementioned research, indicating that most people

who inflict such interpersonal distress do not intend to hurt others, did not

necessarily exclude these individuals from being perceived as bullies. Douglas

(2001) argued that workplace abrasion is not an issue of intent:

> It does not matter whether the perpetrator intends to behave in an offensive way or not. What is relevant is how those actions and behaviors impact on the recipient. If he or she feels threatened or intimidated, or perceives and interprets the behavior to be intimidating, it should be viewed as such. (p. 4)

In his book *Adult Bullying: Perpetrators and Victims*, Randall (1997) took the opposite stance, defining bullying as "the aggressive behavior arising from the deliberate intent to cause physical or psychological distress to others" (p. 4).

As noted above, the popular literature embraces the concept of malevolent intent of the perpetrator. Randall (1997) defined bullying as "aggressive behavior arising from the deliberate intent to cause physical or psychological distress to others" (p. 4). Namie and Namie (2003) defined bullying at work as

> repeated, malicious, health-endangering mistreatment of one employee (the Target) by one or more employees (the bully, bullies). The mistreatment is psychological violence, a mix of verbal and strategic assaults to prevent the Target from performing work well. . . . Bullying encompasses all types of mistreatment at work. (p. 3)

Although they denied intent as a factor of bullying, stating that "all harassment is bullying as long as the actions have the effect, intended or not, of hurting the Target" (p. 3), "accidental bullies" (p. 17) are momentarily excused from the label of intentional malevolence. However they, along with all other bullies, are condemned as "liars and cowards" (p. 4), and are accused of selecting victims to harm, implying intentionality.

Ascribing malevolent intent to the enactment of workplace is inherently problematic, for if intent is a required element of the definition, one faces the problem of the aggressor who denies intent. If the so-called bully denies intent, or if the complainant is unable to prove the existence of malevolent intent, the incident or pattern of incidents could not be called bullying. From the psychological standpoint, the executive may be acting out unconscious

aggression and be consciously unaware of aggressive intent. Should this be categorized as malevolence? Abrasive executives may or may not perceive intent in their actions: Victims of workplace abrasion may or may not perceive malicious intent on the part of the perpetrator *("I know he doesn't mean to hurt others, but he does").* Does this negate the harm incurred through abrasive behavior?

Definitions of workplace abrasion that incorporate malevolent intent are patently unhelpful, in that they require that abrasive executives be perceived as wishing to do injury to others. My experience of coaching executives for the past 10 years directly controverts this view. The majority of abrasive executives I have worked with manifest profound shock and remorse when confronted with the nature and degree of injury that they have inflicted on others. "*I never meant to hurt others – I was just trying to get the job done,*" and "*I can't believe I've caused this much pain – what can I do to change things?*" are typical responses. These executives experience depression when confronted with the damage they have incurred, and work hard to learn more productive modes of interacting and motivating others. These responses refute the proposition that abrasive executives wish to do harm and revel in doing so.

Certainly *Homo sapiens* includes some proportion of individuals with sadistic tendencies—people who delight in cruel acts—and some proportion of those will hold managerial positions. However, to condemn all abrasive executives as sociopathic sadists is inaccurate and unhelpful.

Nomenclature: Bully Boss versus Abrasive Executive

More helpful than the bully label, for reasons listed below, is the term *abrasive executive*, defined herein as individuals charged with managerial authority whose interpersonal behavior causes emotional distress sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning. Disruption is determined by responsible superiors and/or human resource representatives. This definition is preferable to the bully definitions for the following reasons:

First, *bullying* traditionally implies aggressive, malevolent intent. As noted above, the need to ascribe intent to be immaterial, for any behavior that proves destructive and disruptive to the normal, healthy operations of a system should be attended to and guarded against. One does not have to ascribe intent to move on the problem, and lack of intent does not absolve the system of addressing the destructive behavior.

Second, the term bullying also implies cruelty or abuse. Abrasive behavior encompasses a wide range of behaviors causing emotional distress that are not necessarily abusive. Consider the executive who, in an effort to improve performance, constantly lectures his or her employees in a parental tone on the importance of following procedure. The executive feels instructive and helpful, while employees may experience significant distress, feeling that they are being condescended to, infantilized, and discounted. Few would agree that this constitutes abuse, but all would agree that such behavior could provoke emotional distress sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning.

Third, this definition of abrasive executive allows for variation in human response. *Abrasion* was earlier defined as wearing down through friction, irritation, or injury. Abrasive behaviors, then, are aversive behaviors: behaviors that erode individual and organizational functioning through irritation or injury. This definition does not require a certain frequency, type, or intensity of actions to determine abrasion levels. One group may forgive a leader's parental lecturing as "*just the way he (or she) is*," not perceiving it as an insult to their abilities, and experience no distress. Another group may perceive this behavior as deeply denigrating, and react with extreme distress, including severe demoralization, depression, and passive-aggressive sabotage of work production. The first group is not abraded, injured, or worn down. The second group is deeply injured. With the use of the term abrasion, behaviors can be flexibly interpreted according to context and coworker reaction.

At the same time, abrasive executive behavior readily encompasses behaviors on the other end of the continuum that involve severe and/or intentional abuse. The manager who intentionally physically abuses an employee is certainly engaging in abrasive behavior: behavior that creates sufficient emotional distress to disrupt organizational functioning. Thus I propose that the terms *abrasive executive*, *abrasive workplace behavior* and *workplace abrasion* cover the full continuum of destructive behavior ranging from mild incivility to severe emotional or physical abuse, regardless of intent, and are more accurate and useful descriptors than bully and workplace bullying.

Workplace abrasion includes any behavior that creates emotional distress sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning, and thus includes non-aggressive behaviors such as isolation and indecisiveness. Such non-aggressive behaviors may produce intense emotional distress, and thus are included in this definition of workplace abrasion. Workplace abrasion, then, can occur through behaviors that are aggressive (termed bullying behaviors) or non-aggressive (e.g. failing to listen). Non-aggressive executives were not included in this study for reasons set forth below in the discussion of research method.

Determination of Disruption

The last element of the term *abrasive executive,* as defined herein *(*managers whose behavior causes emotional distress sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning), is the determination of disruption by responsible superiors and/or human resource representatives; this also bears explanation. If the employee experiences emotional distress at the hands of an abrasive executive and no one is there to observe it, does it constitute abrasive behavior? Per the definition used in this study, the answer is yes, because the ultimate determinant of abrasive behavior is the reaction of the recipient: the erosion and disruption of the affected individual's sense of well-being. However, what incidence of abrasive behavior earns a manager the label of abrasive executive? Not necessarily the first. The test as herein defined is *sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning*.

Managers, will, in the course of their work, do and say things that cause emotional distress in their employees. Consider the executive who does not grant the hoped-for raise, or who fails to recognize extreme effort. Should we label this executive abrasive? Consider the manager who identifies poor performance, while the employee rejects this perception. The employee will experience emotional distress, but does this qualify the manager as abrasive? We all engage in behavior on occasion that others perceive as abrasive, but does this automatically classify us as abrasive individuals?

Charging responsible superiors and/or human resource representatives with the determination of whether an executive is abrasive takes judgment of the behavior out of the victim's realm and provides interpretation through a variety of filters:

- Is this behavior unjust? (e.g., if a raise is not granted because of poor performance, then no. If a raise is not granted because of personal animosity, then yes.)

- Does this behavior violate general standards of civility? (e.g., verbal abuse, profanity, yelling, public humiliation, etc.)

- Does this behavior transgress standards of appropriate workplace behavior? (e.g., harassment or discrimination based on sex, race, religion, etc.)

- Does this behavior manifest as a recurring pattern? This would be important with some behaviors and not with others (e.g., a single

instance of shouting at an employee may not quality as abrasive per the definition, whereas a single instance of sexual assault of an employee would qualify).

In summary, this definition advocates for flexibility in making the diagnosis of abrasive executive: Not all executives who exhibit abrasive behavior should be considered abrasive executives. Additionally, this definition does not require identification of a pattern of behavior: One egregious incident may be enough to view an executive as abrasive. Finally, the determination of disruption *by responsible superiors and/or human resource representatives* makes the definition organization- and culture-specific.

Definition of Responsible Organizational Authorities

Formal identification of the abrasive executive requires the attention of responsible superiors and/or human resource representatives. Responsible organizational authorities function as guardians of both the financial and human capital of their organizations. This definition excludes irresponsible organizational authorities who choose to deny or ignore disrupted organizational functioning. In other words, abrasive executives can be defined as such even when the organization ignores and tolerates their behavior. Unfortunately, this is a too-common phenomenon; organizations will frequently tolerate the presence of a key executive who creates extreme distress in the interest of profit or progress. When weighed against the price of expelling the

employee, tolerating his or her behavior is viewed as less costly. This stance usually breaks down when the organization is threatened with profound financial consequences, such as a hostile environment suit brought by subordinates.

Incidence

Information on the incidence of superior-to-subordinate workplace abrasion is sparse (Bassman & London, 1993). Referring to the definition used herein – emotional distress sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning as determined by responsible superiors and/or human resource representatives – it seems plausible to infer that such incidents that have been elevated to a level of external reporting for statistical purposes might reasonably be assumed to be close if not sufficient to satisfying such a definition. However, each such study or statistical report has a different method, some gathering data with individual employees versus others gathering data through the same organizational authorities who determine organizational behavior and disruption standards as defined herein. With those caveats and the potential relationships between the current definition and reported incidences in mind, the research statistics follow.

Research on workplace abrasion did not begin in earnest until the 1990s, and is additionally problematic in that different researchers have used differing definitions, time spans, and populations. The majority of the research does not examine superior-to-subordinate abrasion, focusing instead on all abrasive

episodes experienced between employees of any level. The terms used in each such study below are italicized.

From their research at the Center for Creative Leadership, Lombardo and McCall (1984) reported that 74% of successful executives in three *Fortune* 100 corporations stated that they had had at least one intolerable boss. The researchers noted that these statements were based on respondent perception, and that no objective measure of intolerability was utilized. Rayner (1997) conducted a survey of the problem of workplace interpersonal distress, and found that 50% of people thought they had been victims of workplace aggression at some point in their working lives. This survey did not break out superior-to-subordinate abrasion, but looked at abrasion in general.

Research on interpersonal emotional distress and/or disruption at work in the UK and Australia identified managers as constituting the majority of perpetrators of workplace aggression (McCarthy et al., 1996; Savva & Alexandrou, 1998). In the UK, approximately 80% of the perpetrators were managers (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Rayner, 1997; Savva & Alexandrou, 1998) although the figure dropped to approximately 50% in research conducted on Scandinavian populations (Einarsen, 1996; Leymann, 1996).

Current research underscores the prevalence of superior-to-subordinate abrasion . Hoel and Cooper's (2000) national study of workplace aggression projected that close to 2.5 million UK employees considered themselves as having been victims during the preceding 6 months. Applying the previous

findings that 50-80% of workplace aggression is perpetrated by managers, one can estimate that 1.25 to 2 million UK employees suffered at the hands of abrasive superiors.

Research into executive aggression committed by managers in the United States is sparse. A study by Keashly and Jagatic (2000) of Michigan residents led them to estimate that 1 in 6 workers in the U.S. workforce was affected by workplace aggression (again, superior-to-subordinate aggression was not broken out). Defining workplace emotional distress and/or disruption as *generalized workplace abuse*, a study of several work-related groups at the University of Illinois at Chicago found such abuse to be four times more prevalent than sexual harassment (Richman et al., 1999). Research into manager-subordinate aggression in the US thus far has been conducted on populations who have previously identified themselves as victims; although such research is valuable, it has not contributed to discovering the scope of superior-subordinate aggressive behavior as defined herein in the general U.S. workplace population.

<center>Strategies to Address Executive Abrasion</center>

As noted previously, the popular literature on abrasive executives usually takes an adversarial stance. Once the so-called enemy is identified, these self-described survival guides go on to suggest strategies for dealing with the abrasive executive. These strategies fall into three categories: change the victim, change the perpetrator, and change the system.

Change the Victim

Strategies for the victim fall into two categories: either insulation from, or defense against, abuse. To inoculate one's self from the effects of the toxic executive, victims are advised to minimize contact (Hornstein, 1996); stay out of striking distance (Bing, 1992); ignore behavior; emotionally detach through meditation, humor, personal journaling, recreation, enhanced social support (Felder, 1993; Frost, 2003; Hornstein, 1996), or self-analysis to counter one's internal critic; and avoid self-blame (Namie & Namie, 2003). Bing (1992) went so far as to advise the victim to "keep on hating him (the abuser) so he won't own your soul" (p. 129). Using such tactics, victims are encouraged to construct a mental firewall (Hornstein, 1996) to provide insulation from emotional injury.

Defense strategies call for the victim to actively outwit, outlast, or outplay the executive. Less aggressive tactics involve carefully confronting the executive, setting limits, calling for improved behavior, and ideally resolving the abusive treatment. Victims are cautioned to use humor (Felder, 1993), and to use the right language: specific and non-inflammatory; and are provided with various scripts depending on the abuser type. If these tactics fail, the victim can further outwit the executive through compliance. Compliance tactics include demonstrating extreme competence and focusing exclusively on the abuser's priorities (Hornstein, 1996), or one can "suck up, but with dignity, . . . [but without] . . . fawning slavishness" (Bing, 1992, p. 126). Victims can alternately attempt to outwit the abuser by launching psychological attacks designed to "work his

head" (p. 126), using reverse psychology to "destroy the monster with his own craziness" (p. 160). Here one would fuel the such paranoid executives' fears with rumors and innuendoes to exacerbate their disturbed behaviors and speed their demise.

Outlasting the executive requires that the victim establish a highly credible and competent reputation with the greater organization, building a power base, (Bing, 1992) so that when (if?) the abusive executive is exposed and expelled from the system, the victim will triumph. Transferring from the executive's department is another suggested survival tactic. If all else fails, the victim is advised to quit the game and seek employment under a better boss. If the victim selects this route, advice for negotiating severance settlements is provided (Namie & Namie, 2003).

Outplay strategies involve formal recourse with the organization or regulatory entities. The victim can seek protection and defense through internal resources such as labor union representatives, human resources staff, or designated ombudspersons within the organization (Hornstein, 1996). Alternately, the victim may retain external defense by retaining a lawyer and bringing legal action against the organization (Kramer, 1985). If all else fails, one can threaten to take the abuse into the public domain (Namie & Namie, 2003).

Change the Perpetrator

With the exception of the abovementioned *outwit* strategies, the popular literature fails to suggest any intervention strategies to change the abuser. The executive, viewed as intractably sadistic, is untreatable. Hornstein (1996) dismissed the possibility of "talking to abusive bosses in order to stir within them transforming insight into the cause and consequence of their cruel interpersonal behavior" (p. 121). He asserted that any such effort is doomed to fail because "intense workplace pressures and/or a boss's malignant desire to harm weaker people short-circuit the attempted reprogramming of abusers" (p. 123). Organizational pressure may be brought to bear through performance reviews and punitive action that may coerce the evil perpetrator to curb his or her behavior, but any efforts to help the individual to higher levels of interpersonal competence are hopeless. Brief mention is made of referring abusers to training classes designed to improve interpersonal skills (e.g., Dealing with Difficult People, Constructive Communication, etc.), but these are viewed as having little or no impact.

The scholarly literature also has very little to say on intervention strategies with the abrasive executive. Brief references are made to the need for admonition, threat of disciplinary action, and possible referral for management training or EAP assistance.

Change the System

Generally regarding the executive as a hopeless case, the focus in the literature turns to changing the system to identify, prosecute, and punish abrasive executives. Here the strategies evolve from outwit, outlast, and outplay to outlawing abrasive workplace behaviors and perpetrators.

In Scandinavian countries, Germany, and Britain, health and safety law includes psychological or psychosocial issues as well as physical safety; as such, such abrasive behaviors represents a psychosocial hazard (Rayner et al., 2002, p. 123). *Anti-bullying* legislation has been enacted in Sweden, the UK, France, and Canada. In the UK, such behavior that falls within definitions of sexual or racial harassment may be prosecutable under the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 or the Race Relations Act of 1976. This also holds for disabled employees under the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995. In 2001, the European Parliament passed a resolution on workplace aggression, stating that it is a serious problem (Seward & Faby, 2003).

Legal recourse for American victims of abrasive workplace behaviors is limited. There are currently no laws against what has been termed bullying, and suits involving such behaviors have met with varying success when brought forward under legislation pertaining to the intentional infliction of emotional distress, the Title VII Hostile Workplace Doctrine, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the National Labor Relations Act and others (Yamada, 2000).

Currently, the Workplace Trauma Institute's efforts to pass anti-workplace aggression legislation in the state of California have been unsuccessful.

A review of the literature on abrasive executives reveals that these individuals are summarily demonized and dismissed in the popular literature. Scholarly research has thus far focused on the scope of workplace abrasion, but little exists on the etiology of abrasive executives (Bassman & London, 1993). Interestingly, no study known to date has involved abrasive executives as research subjects; this study moves into that void.

Strategies for dealing with abrasive executives focus on victim protection and relief, as well as regulation of abrasive behavior through organizational policy and legislative reform. Minimal attention has been paid to strategies for reducing abrasive behavior in executives; again, this study ventures into that realm.

Interventions for Abrasive Executives

What follows is a review of interventions used to address abrasive executive behavior. Strategies utilized to remediate abrasive executive behavior are presented on a continuum, from general interventions to those most individually focused and specifically designed to permanently improve the behavior of abrasive executives.

Avoidance

Based upon over 20 years' experience both as an executive and executive coach, I have often observed that the first strategy employed in the face of executive abrasion is avoidance based upon denial. Coworkers voicing complaints are frequently discounted as overly sensitive, and it is not until the organization is confronted with a distinct pattern of abrasive behavior involving complaints from multiple coworkers that the denial breaks down. No longer able to deny the presence of chronic abrasive behavior, the organization's common reaction is to delay intervention, a strategy in itself. This phase is characterized by fantasies that the individual's conduct will improve after any number of difficult events facing the abrasive executive is overcome: personal problems resolved, a crucial project completed, a reorganization plan finalized, a smoking habit conquered, and so forth. Although it is true that such stressors could temporarily have a negative impact on any executive's immediate capacity for effective interpersonal interactions, executives whose styles are chronically abrasive will not produce the hoped-for miracle of improved behavior. When such fantasies fail to become reality, the organization usually moves to the next level of intervention: disciplinary action.

Disciplinary Counseling and Other Sanctions

There appears to be no research to date on type, frequency, and efficacy of disciplinary strategies for abrasive executives; research is needed to gain a

deeper understanding of alternatives currently used. A common intervention for abrasive executives consists of disciplinary counseling. Here, the executive is informed of the unacceptability of the conduct and is admonished to refrain from further abrasive behavior. Disciplinary action may include penalties, suspension, demotion, or termination.

Organizations are frequently hesitant to take this course for a variety of reasons. If the executive is viewed as indispensable, the risk of intervening is too high: The individual could elect to resign. Another reason given for failing to set limits on abrasive behavior is that such an effort is viewed as hopeless, a view that usually stems from a history of counseling sessions that have had no positive effect. If the executive is highly valued for his or her technical proficiencies, many organizations will decide against termination and enter into a state of resignation and reluctant tolerance, embracing the belief that the executive cannot change. Instead, coworkers are asked to accept and endure the abrasive behavior.

Disciplinary counseling is especially difficult when the executive is in denial regarding the destructive impact of his or her behavior. In this case, the executive rejects the possibility that such behavior is unacceptable, arguing instead that the organization is obstructing his or her ability to perform and that the problem rests with overly-sensitive coworkers. Under heavy administrative pressure, the executive may decide to attempt to control identified behaviors, but

failure to acknowledge the destructiveness of such behavior bodes poorly for permanent improvement in interactive style.

The primary problem of relying upon disciplinary action rests in two underlying assumptions: (a) that permanent abandonment of negative behavior is within the executive's conscious control, and (b) that the executive is capable of generating and effectively implementing improved methods for interacting with coworkers. An analogy of the latter assumption is that of the lifeguard who advises a drowning person to start swimming. The admonition is simple, direct, and patently unhelpful.

This is not to say that disciplinary counseling and action are not important in dealing with abrasive executives. Organizational leadership must hold all employees accountable for acceptable workplace behavior, and discipline is a critical strategy in setting limits. In regard to abrasive executives, the mistake lies in believing that this course will effectively and permanently change abrasive behavior.

Other sanctions that may be interpreted as disciplinary strategies are job reformulation (removing the executive from a direct supervisory role), transfer to a new department in the hope that the newly configured work group will have better chemistry (commonly referred to as the *geographic cure*) or exile to a position with minimal potential for abrasive impact.

If the above disciplinary strategies fail to resolve the problem of abrasive behavior, abrasive executives are often referred to training events in the hope

that the executive will learn how to manage their interpersonal interactions in a more productive manner. Specific strategies are required in this case, not cautionary remonstrations: The executive usually does not know how to change.

Training Interventions

There are innumerable executive training workshops on interpersonal conflict, communication skills, dealing with difficult people, and leadership development. The first three categories generally focus on strategies to help executives manage *others* who lack interpersonal skills, disrupt team functioning, or produce conflict. In most cases, these seminars focus on another's abrasive behavior, not the executive's. The *interpersonal skills training* category comes closest to addressing the participating executive's behavior. As examples, the American Management Association (AMA, 2004) offers a 2-day interpersonal skills seminar that is designed for "managers, team leaders and supervisors who want to maximize their positive impact on others, enrich the quality of their relationships and increase their job effectiveness"(¶ 1). According to the seminar description, the executive will learn to "implement plans without strong-arm tactics, minimize conflict and build group commitment, develop credibility based on respect and trust, and find alternatives to work with 'difficult' people" (¶ 2). Cornell University's (2004) 2-day executive seminar on "Improving Your People Skills," asserts that attendees will be equipped to "understand why people react the way they do, plan and realize change in their interpersonal

habits, establish rapport with others and build effective teams, handle difficult situations and difficult people, and get the results they want" (¶2). The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL, 2005) offers week-long training interventions, incorporating leadership simulations, feedback from fellow participants, as well as 360-degree feedback from the participant's organization. UCLA Extension (UCLA, 2004) offers a week-long "Leadership and Human Relations Laboratory" designed for "professionals, executives, and managers at all levels whose significant contributions to an organization can be forever enhanced by the development of stronger leadership and interpersonal skills" (¶ 2). This program, described as experiential, does not incorporate any feedback from coworkers regarding the executive's abrasive behavior. The same holds for NTL Institute's (NTL, 2004) week-long "Human Interactions Laboratory: Transforming Interpersonal Relations" workshop. More recently, the American Management Association (AMA, 2005) has offered "Moving Ahead: Breaking Behavior Patterns That Hold You Back", a 2-day seminar for "general managers, supervisors, team leaders, and anyone who has a negative behavior pattern that has impeded his or her career success" (¶2).

How effective are these programs in changing abrasive executive behavior? This question is difficult to answer for two reasons. First, there appears to be an absence of research on the comparative efficacy of interpersonal skills training programs (Kilburg, 2000). Efforts to research this topic are complicated by the proprietary curricula of these programs, as well as confidentiality barriers

to accessing participant data. Second, one would have to identify abrasive

executives from non-abrasive executives as part of the research design,

something that most training program vendors would understandably be

reluctant to ask of their paying clientele.

Of the top 20 executive education programs ranked by *BusinessWeek* (2003)

and contacted by the author, the 14 respondents stated that they did not offer

training interventions specifically designed for abrasive executives (interviewees

were provided with this study's definition of the term). One respondent who

wished to remain anonymous noted that although that organization's leadership

development program has jokingly been referred to as a "charm school for

assholes," the program is open to any executive of any interpersonal skill level.

One is led to theorize on the reasons that there appear to be no training

interventions designed specifically for abrasive executives. The above-mentioned

respondent noted that designating a program for this population would create

insurmountable marketing problems, stating that no executive would ever go to

a program that branded them as abrasive. Another reason may lie in the

conviction held by some that abrasive executives are so deeply personality

disordered as to render any intervention ineffective. There is a growing trend in

the popular literature to apply severely pathological diagnoses, especially

sociopathy and narcissism (Field, 2004; Sanders, 2003), to these so-called

incurable bullies. I have personally observed that managers and human

resources staff who have tried and failed to intervene effectively with abrasive executives report feelings of hopelessness.

Cognitively-Based Training Programs

Another theory on the absence of training interventions specifically designed for abrasive executives may lie in the assumption that the current cognitively-based interpersonal skills training classes are adequate to address this behavior. Even though many human resources staff and members of management express the belief that behavior is difficult to change, in my practice I continually encounter abrasive executives who were referred to training in the hope that the class or workshop would dramatically improve their behavior. This belief is demonstrated in the popular literature, where the sole remedial intervention for the *bad boss* is referral to management skills training. Hornstein (1996) questioned the value of what he referred to as "talking" and "training cures:"

> But far more often, the same factors that undermine the talking cure undermine the training cure: intense workplace pressures and/or a boss's malignant desire to harm weaker people short-circuit the attempted reprogramming of abusers. (p. 123)

 Many abrasive executives and referring parties (in most cases, human resources) I have encountered concurred that although short–term improvements in behavior may have been observed following training interventions, the improvements were transitory and/or insufficient.

It appears that cognitively-based training interventions possess inherent limitations in their ability to effectively improve behavior in the abrasive executive. Such approaches assume that the decision to manifest abrasive behavior is the product of conscious choice, and ignores the possibility of underlying unconscious influence. These training interventions are generally designed to identify unacceptable practices and teach the participant new and acceptable modes of interaction. Such an approach is founded on the belief that behavior is controlled through rational cognition as opposed to being driven by irrational emotion. In other words, one need only instruct the executive on the *right way* and the motivated student will then be able to incorporate and construct new modes of behavior based upon these teachings. The powerful influence of conscious and unconscious emotion on behavior is ignored.

Another limitation to the training approach lies in the fact that such seminars or workshops are usually one-time-only events, not designed for continuous learning over a period of time. This reflects the belief that the student is capable of immediately translating information into practice without further support or feedback, and ignores the difficulty and complexity of evolving a new behavioral style.

A third limitation of current cognitively-based training interventions is the absence of programs specifically designed for abrasive executives. As noted earlier, current offerings are open to executives of any interpersonal skill level seeking development and tend to focus on generalized behavior, disallowing an

intensive, individually tailored focus on the specifics of the executive's abrasive style. For example, these training workshops (including the intensive, multi-day interventions) do not engage in qualitative interviewing to collect detailed feedback from coworkers on the executive's abrasive behavior, deemed as an essential step in the majority of executive coaching processes (Brotman, Liberi, & Wasylshyn, 1998; Diedrich, 1996; Kiel, Rimmer, & Williams, 1996; Kilburg, 1996c; Peterson, 1996; Richard, 1999; Saporito, 1996; Tobias, 1996; Witherspoon & White, 1996). The few training programs that do utilize 360-degree scaled-feedback instruments appear to rely on the assumption that such feedback will increase self awareness, and in turn motivate the executive to improve his or her behavior.

> The current emphasis on using 360-degree feedback to improve managerial self-awareness and directly enhance performance by changing style or behavior appears insufficient in and of itself. The assumption that providing information about others' perceptions leads to positive changes in managerial behavior does not appear to be supported by the theoretical or empirical literature regarding individual change (Goodstone, 1998, p. 161).

Emotionally-Based Training Programs

In contrast to cognitively-based management training programs, emotionally-based training programs are based on the conviction that emotions and management of emotions are critical to the development of management skill. Theorists describe this capacity as emotional intelligence, a relatively new theoretical construct.

The first formal conceptualization of emotional intelligence theory was presented by Peter Salovey and John Mayer (1990), followed by Daniel Goleman's (1995) bestseller *Emotional Intelligence,* written for the general public. The concept of emotional intelligence is derived from Howard Gardner's (1983, 1999) introduction of the concept of multiple intelligences. Gardner specifically defined *interpersonal intelligence* as the capacity to discern and respond appropriately to the moods, temperaments, motivations, and desires of other people. He defined *intrapersonal intelligence* (self-knowledge) as access to one's own feelings and the ability to discriminate among them and draw upon them to guide behavior. In his landmark longitudinal study of high-IQ college graduates, Gardner discovered that these intelligences were more significant in the attainment of success in work and personal life than the cognitive ability (I.Q.).

Emotional intelligence determines how well we handle ourselves and each other (Goleman, 1998). More specifically, emotional intelligence refers to the capacity to *read and manage one's own and others' feelings* "so that they are expressed appropriately and effectively, enabling people to work together smoothing toward their common goals" (p. 7). Mayer, Salovey, Caruso, & Sitarenios (2001) defined emotional intelligence as "the ability to recognize the meanings of emotions and their relationships and to use them as a basis in reasoning and problems solving" (p. 234). This skill in reading and managing emotions has been variously referred to in popular and scholarly realms as *people savvy, people skills, interpersonal competence* and *social competence*.

The three constructs of emotional intelligence theory that have generated the most interest are the theories of Mayer and Salovey (1997) , Bar-On (1988, 2000), and Goleman (1995, 1998). Each theory has unique features, but all focus on understanding the elements related to recognizing and regulating emotions in self and others. "All theories within the emotional intelligence paradigm seek to understand how individuals perceive, understand, utilize and manage emotions in an effort to predict and foster personal effectiveness" (Emmerling & Goleman, 2003, p. 12).

Bar-On's (2000) conceptualization sought to develop a general measure of emotional intelligence that predicts emotional well-being and adaptation. He delineated five components of emotional intelligence: intrapersonal, interpersonal, adaptability, stress management, and general mood. Mayer and Salovey's (1997) research focused on determining the validity and application of emotional intelligence, defining five domains of the capability: knowing one's emotions, managing emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions in others, and handling relationships. Goleman (1995) divided emotional intelligence into the two domains of personal and social competence. The competencies associated with Goleman's personal domain determine our capacity to manage our own emotions (self awareness and self management), whereas the social competencies support our ability to manage relationships with others (social awareness and relationship management). Of the three, Goleman's theory includes the realm of work performance (Emmerling &

Goleman, 2003), and for this reason is the subject of my exploration of the usefulness of emotional intelligence theory in managing anxiety to reduce defensiveness in workplace interactions.

Workplace Impact of Emotional Intelligence

Contrary to earlier beliefs that work success was predicated on high cognitive intelligence, research on IQ has not demonstrated a significant correlation between work performance and career success (Emmerling & Goleman, 2003). When IQ scores were compared with degree of career success, IQ accounted for no more than 25% of the correlation (Hunter & Hunter, 1984; Schmidt & Hunter, 1981). Sternberg's (1996) more recent analysis indicated that the correlation of IQ and success may range as low as 4 to 10%. In other words, being intellectually bright does not necessarily predict that one will be a success in the workplace. In fact, IQ appears to be much less a factor than emotional intelligence in predicting work success, however measured (position, salary, etc.). Studies of professions that require higher IQ, such as medicine and accounting, determined that having a superior IQ did not guarantee that these professionals would excel in their fields (McClelland, 1973; Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

Cognitive intelligence plays a major role in one's capacity to achieve technical expertise, but interpersonal expertise is requisite for managing the interactions with people critical to one's overall success (Boyatzis, 1982). In a

study of competence models for 181 positions in 121 international organizations, Goleman (1998) found that 67% of the abilities viewed as essential for effective performance were emotional competencies. "Compared to IQ and expertise, emotional competence mattered twice as much. This held true across all categories of jobs, and in all kinds of organizations" (p. 31).

Goleman also found that the importance of emotional intelligence increased the higher one rose in the organization. In his analysis of star performers, close to 90% of their success in leadership was attributable to emotional intelligence competencies, the crucial factor between mediocre and superior leaders. More recent research has shown that the more senior the leader, the more important emotional competencies become (Emmerling & Goleman, 2003). A study at the Center for Creative Leadership analyzing top executives who derailed (plateaued or terminated) determined that the two most common traits of those who failed were rigidity (inability to respond to feedback about their traits), and poor relationships (being too harshly critical, insensitive, or demanding), such that they alienated those who worked with them (Leslie & Van Velsor, 1996).

High cognitive capacity is no guarantee of career success, and the case for the importance of interpersonal competence in the successful exercise of leadership is growing. This gives rise to the question of whether such competencies are genetically fixed, or whether they can be developed.

Developing Emotional Intelligence

Goleman et al. (2002) asserted that emotional intelligence competencies

are not innate talents, but learned abilities. The ability to monitor and manage

emotions appears to develop through life experience.

> Studies that have tracked people's level of emotional intelligence through
> the years show that people get better and better in these capabilities as
> they grow more adept at handling their own emotions and impulses, at
> motivating themselves, and at honing their empathy and social adroitness.
> There is an old-fashioned word for this growth in emotional intelligence:
> *maturity.* (Goleman, 1998, p. 7)

Emotional intelligence researchers Emmerling and Goleman (2003) pointed to

findings from the fields of psychotherapy (Barlow, 1985), corporate training

(Marrow, Jarrett, & Rupinski, 1997), executive education (Boyatzis, Cowen, &

Kolb, 1995) and neuroscience as further evidence for people's abilities to develop

their social and emotional competence with sustained effort.

> In addition to research related to outcome studies and program
> evaluations, the findings from affective neuroscience also provide
> evidence for the potential to develop emotional intelligence competencies.
> The findings of LeDoux (1996) seem to indicate that although there are
> stable individual differences in activation patterns in the central circuitry
> of emotion, there is also pronounced plasticity. Research on animals has
> established that the prefrontal cortex, amygdala, and hippocampus, all of
> which are involved in the perception, use and management of emotions,
> are all sites where plasticity is known to occur (Davidson, Jackson, &
> Kalin, 2000). However it has only recently been demonstrated that such
> plastic changes can occur in the adult human hippocampus as well
> (Eriksson et al., 1998), as cited in Davidson et al. 2000). (Emmerling &
> Goleman, 2003, p. 23)

Goleman (1998) explored the neuroscience of emotional intelligence

competencies, pointing out that the seats of emotional perception and regulation

lie in the most primitive brain centers: "Thus these skills are grounded in our evolutionary heritage for survival and adaptation" (p. 6). Bar-On (2000) found small but significant increases in emotional intelligence as people aged, with a peak occurring in the 40s. He found no strong gender differences in the capacity for emotional intelligence; his research on men and women determined that women tend to be more aware of their emotions, show more empathy, and be more adept interpersonally. Men display more self-confidence and optimism, adapt more easily, and are better at handling stress. In an analysis of the overall ratings for men and women, the strengths and weaknesses averaged out such that there was no significant difference in total emotional intelligence (Bar-On, 1997b).

These findings are encouraging in the context of leadership development. Even though a given individual may embark on a career with low competence in one or more areas of emotional intelligence, there is evidence for the potential for development. The state of emotional intelligence training will be reviewed in the following section, followed by a consideration of the appropriateness of current emotional intelligence training programs for the abrasive executive.

Emotional Intelligence Training

Emotional intelligence theory was first used for the development of assessment tools for predictive hiring (Bar-On, 1997a; Boyatzis & Burckle, 1999; Boyatzis, Goleman, & Rhee, 1999). There has been increasing focus on the

application of theory to improve emotional intelligence skills as they contribute to work performance and leadership ability (Cherniss, Goleman, Emmerling, Cowan, & Adler, 1998; Goleman, 1998; Goleman et al., 2002). Emotional intelligence training programs have since flooded the market, designed to educate people about the relevance of emotional intelligence in the workplace, assess their skills, and provide a plan for emotional intelligence competence development (Boyatzis, 1982). Many of these programs are poorly designed, or make unrealistic claims: "The worst ones are those that involve a heavy reliance on inspirational lectures or intense, short-lived experiences – and little else" (Cherniss et al., 1998, p. 4) .

In their book *Promoting Emotional Intelligence in Organizations*, Cherniss and Adler (2000) offered a detailed overview of the research on emotional intelligence training with recommendations for program development. They pointed out that emotional intelligence skills are primarily based on emotional awareness and regulation, and that such skills require emotional learning above and beyond cognitive learning. Because of this, training programs must go beyond traditional cognitive instruction to incorporate emotional learning techniques to activate and examine the learner's emotions about self and others. Both Cherniss and Adler (2000) and Boyatzis et al. (1995) recommended training programs that begin with 360-degree feedback assessment to provide feedback on the students' current emotional intelligence competence levels, followed by selection of the weakest areas for development and subsequent formulation of an

individualized learning plan. Coaching by instructors or peers is provided, with ongoing feedback as the student practices new skills in naturally arising situations in the workplace. This process can be conducted as part of a formal group training program (Boyatzis et al., 1995), or within the context of executive coaching (Peterson, 1996).

Rigorous evaluation of the efficacy of emotional intelligence training is in its early stages; however results to date suggest that significant improvement can occur in well-designed programs. Estimates of improved job performance ratings resulting from traditional organizational training programs are low: only a 10% improvement. Training conducted with American Express insurance salespeople targeted toward the specific emotional competencies important for that role yielded sales gains of 8 to 20% over the previous year (Hay/McBer, 1997). An executive coaching program developed by Personnel Decisions International (Peterson, 1996) showed significant improvement on behaviors targeted for coaching; improvements that were maintained at 6 months post-coaching. Case Western Reserve University's Weatherhead School of Management's year-long Managerial Assessment and Development course for MBA students (Boyatzis et al., 1995) showed significant improvement on 8 of 20 competencies. Research on traditional MBA programs with no emotional intelligence training component found only a 2% increase in social and emotional competencies as a result of program completion (Boyatzis et al., 1995) . The effects observed in the Weatherhead program were sustained over several years, indicating that a range

of emotional intelligence competencies, when taught in a well-designed approach, can be learned and sustained.

Emotional intelligence theory, with its emphasis on research into the value of monitoring and managing emotions, has contributed to a growing psychological sophistication in management development techniques. Identification and study of the range of emotional intelligence competencies and their relationship to effective leadership practices has increased the effectiveness of so-called soft-skills management training, incorporating individualized, experiential- and feedback-training components. Additionally, this body of theory recognizes the importance of empathy in managing workplace relationships.

Appropriateness of EI Training for the Abrasive Executive

To date there is no emotional intelligence training specifically designed for abrasive executives. There are references to improvements in interpersonally abrasive behavior made in the course of emotional intelligence programs, such as Goleman et al.'s (2002) discussion of dissonant leaders, but a training approach specifically targeted for this population has yet to emerge.

Emotional training as currently constituted contains certain strengths and drawbacks when considered for use with abrasive executives. In terms of advantages, the basic construct of emotional intelligence, that of *monitoring* (reading) *and managing one's own emotions in order to monitor* (read) *and manage the*

emotions of others, offers a simple conceptualization of the task of interpersonal competence that is easy for the lay person to grasp. A second advantage lies in the fact that research has validated claims that interpersonal competence has a direct bearing on career success (Boyatzis, 1982; Emmerling & Goleman, 2003; Goleman, 1998), which helps to make a business case for emotional intelligence skills training with the skeptical executive.

Third, unlike traditional management training formats that are targeted toward the group (e.g. Dealing with Difficult People), effective emotional intelligence training incorporates specific 360-degree feedback from other parties regarding each executive's competencies, giving the participant a detailed portrait of perceptions of their emotional intelligence abilities. This, in turn, allows individuals to accurately identify and focus on their particular interpersonal competency deficits (Kaplan & Palus, 1994). A common maxim in business states that "You cannot manage what you cannot measure." This certainly holds true in coaching abrasive executives, for they cannot and will not address competency deficits that they are unaware of, or deny. For this reason, the specific feedback afforded by detailed 360-degree assessment processes used in most emotional intelligence training is highly applicable to intervention with abrasive executives.

Generalized emotional intelligence training presents certain drawbacks when applied to abrasive executives, a conclusion derived from my 10 years of coaching this population. Abrasive executives are usually in significant denial

regarding the harmful impact of their behavior, and tend to view any soft-skills

training as a threat to their management style. The former sentiment is usually

expressed as follows: "*I have to be tough with my people, or the job won't get done,*" or

"*If people don't like me, that's their problem—I'm here to get the job done, not to win a*

popularity contest." These same executives express their anxiety about losing

effectiveness with "*If you turn me into Mr. Nice Guy, I won't be taken seriously and*

people will slack off, " or "*I just don't have the time to do the people stuff.*" In other

words, these individuals do not perceive their behavior as unacceptable, see no

value in changing it, and, worse yet, view interpersonal competency training as a

threat to their effectiveness.

Putting such individuals into a general emotional intelligence training

program will not adequately address the abovementioned resistance. In their

book *Promoting Emotional Intelligence in Organizations*, Cherniss and Adler (2000)

spoke to this issue:

> Should [learners] embark on a potentially difficult and frustrating effort to
> improve one or more competencies? Is it worth the price? If the answer to
> these questions is no, they are not ready to proceed. Unfortunately, in
> most development efforts, the trainers never consider whether the
> individual is truly ready to embark on the change effort. Before training
> commences, the trainers need to gauge the learners' readiness. Do not
> begin training and development until the learners are ready. (p. 98)

This characteristically defensive stance displayed by abrasive executives

intensifies when they encounter the array of competencies identified by various

emotional intelligence theorists. For example, encouraging an abrasive leader to

be more empathic is interpreted as *going soft*: "*If I paid attention to everyone's*

feelings about vacation leave, we'd never get any work done." Unless a compelling case

for the use of empathy is made, attempts at emotional intelligence skill

development, whether delivered in a training or coaching context, will be futile.

Research into specific methods for applying emotional intelligence theory

in training is in its infancy (Cherniss & Adler, 2000). The work is complicated by

the fact that emotional intelligence consists of multiple competencies, delineated

differently depending on the theorist. Because of this, emotional intelligence

development efforts must address a wide range of competencies; effective

training techniques for each competency need to be identified or developed. The

challenge of identifying effective training techniques for each competency has yet

to be explored in detail. In descriptions of researched training programs, the

programs call for identification of learning goals (Boyatzis et al., 1995; Cherniss &

Adler, 2000), but offer little detail on specific training methods. Further directives

for skill development are quite general, calling for the use of experiential

learning methods with ongoing practice and feedback.

These beginning efforts at evidence-based emotional intelligence training

are important steps forward for leadership development. Because of the relative

newness of emotional intelligence theory, it is to be expected that research into

and development of effective methods and best practices for instilling the many

emotional competencies would be at this early stage.

Empathy is considered the primary mechanism for monitoring and

managing in emotional intelligence theory. All three of the major emotional

intelligence theorists include empathy as a critical competence of emotional

intelligence (Bar-On, 1988, 1997b; Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997), but a

specific methodology to help executives learn to use empathy has yet to emerge.

How can abrasive executives develop their emotional intelligence in the realm of

empathy, or more specifically, how can these individuals learn to use empathy to

monitor and manage emotions in the workplace? This study explores that

question.

Finally, training assumes that the instructor possesses the solutions

and/or tools to stop abrasive behavior and develop improved styles of

interacting. Research is needed to determine whether the information offered

and methods of instruction used in current training interventions have, or could,

prove effective in permanently reducing abrasive executive behavior. In the

absence of demonstrated effective training interventions for abrasive executives,

another intervention offering a more individualized approach to behavioral

change is psychotherapy.

Psychotherapy

Designed to treat psychological disturbance, psychotherapy's

predominant objective is improvement of psychological functioning and relief

from symptoms of the underlying conscious or unconscious conflict(s). Here, the

primary focus is on the individual's suffering (Rotenberg, 2000). Rodney

Lowman (1993), a clinical psychologist treating work-related dysfunctions in the

context of psychotherapy, noted that although work-related problems may improve spontaneously upon resolution of psychological issues, work performance is rarely the major concern of the treatment. "At most in such cases, work is used as a metaphor for the client's disconnection with reality, and work counseling serves as a focus for stabilizing and increasing the client's reality orientation" (p. 45). Simply put, the mission of psychotherapy is to relieve the (executive) patient's suffering; organizational (coworker) suffering is not addressed.

The core limitation of psychotherapy as an intervention method for abrasive executives lies in its focus on the individual patient. The psychotherapist willing to take a closer look at the patient's work interactions is limited by the confidential nature of psychotherapy. Therapists do not traditionally enter into the patient's workplace to conduct interviews and interact with organizational authorities. As a result, they are unable to secure an accurate understanding of organizational perceptions and precise feedback for the patient. The therapist is isolated from detailed data about coworker experience of the executive's behavior and is limited to the patient's subjective rendering of work interactions. Deprived of an objective understanding of the nature and effects of the abrasive executive's behavior upon others, both patient and therapist work in the blind. Without these data, the therapist is unable to discern the patient's degree of denial, much less determine the ways in which the abrasive behavior is manifested.

Psychotherapy as an intervention modality for abrasive executives presents further limitations from a practical standpoint. Psychotherapy is often lengthy, expensive, and generally not fully covered by insurance. While this may pose no problem to the highly paid executive, psychotherapy may be beyond the financial reach of those less well compensated.

For many, psychotherapy still bears the stigma of impaired mental functioning or of insanity (Hart, Blattner, & Leipsic, 2001). One can surmise that a large percentage of abrasive executives would resist referral to treatment, perceiving it as a confirmation of the diagnosis of mental disorder. The abrasive executive who is feeling little or no emotional pain beyond the immediate anxiety surrounding organizational sanctions against his or her behavior may experience referral to psychotherapy as a punitive, rather than potentially productive, step.

The psychotherapist may also possess limitations from both the professional and personal standpoints that would impede effective address of abrasive workplace behavior. Psychotherapists do not learn about organizational dynamics as part of their formal training, nor do they generally practice within an organizational environment. Because of this, they may lack understanding of some of the basic precepts of business: that the needs of the individual must be subrogated to those of the business, and that business dealings are not necessarily fair or humanistically focused (Lowman, 1993).

> The mental health interventionist may fail to fully understand this subrogation principle. The personal dispositions and work preferences of people who choose helping professions may be encouraged by the norms of their occupation to make understanding and expression of personal feelings a central goal … Indeed, some of those characteristics that may have caused the therapist to choose a helping profession (e.g., iconoclasm, nurturance, antiestablishment values) are generally ones that might not be appreciated in most work settings. Psychotherapists are the nurturers in an often rejecting and disinterested world of somewhat cold and distant producers. Thus, therapists may be poorly accepted by managers in work settings and, conversely, may at a fundamental level themselves be antagonistic to the organizational expression of issues and power and authority that inevitably arise in organizations. (p. 18)

In conclusion, although psychotherapy is designed to address the origins and manifestations of an individual's behavior, the primary focus of this practice is on the suffering of the individual patient, not the organization. Purely subjective data on workplace behavior further limits the ability of the practitioner to accurately explore and comprehend the patient's workplace interactions, and if the abrasive executive wishes to shift therapeutic work to personal and/or family concerns, focus on abrasive behaviors may be lost entirely. These obstacles are overcome with the method most specifically targeted to change executive behavior: executive coaching.

Executive Coaching

There is no single, agreed definition of executive coaching. Tobias (1996) suggested that executive coaching by psychologists is simply a repackaging of certain practices that were once subsumed under the more general terms

consulting or *counseling*, and speculated that executive coaching is a more

acceptable term because it may perceived as less threatening. It is also important

to recognize that executive coaching does not yet qualify as a profession (Grant,

2003):

> It should be noted that, despite frequent references to the coaching
> profession, coaching is far from meeting the basic delineations of a true
> profession. Definitions of a profession vary somewhat. However, there are
> themes and central criteria that form common understandings of what
> constitutes a profession. These include significant barriers to entry, a
> shared common body of knowledge rather than proprietary systems,
> formal qualifications at university level, regulatory bodies with the power
> to admit, discipline and meaningfully sanction members, an enforceable
> code of ethics, and some form of state-sanctioned licensing or regulation
> (Bullock, Stallybrass, & Trombley, 1988; Williams, 1995). Clearly, at
> present coaching is a long way from being a profession, despite the
> existence of identifiable groups of people who coach professionally; that
> is, who are professional coaches. (Grant, 2003,p. 3)

Despite the fact that there is no standard definition of executive coaching, the

following definitions convey the general nature of executive coaching. The

International Coach Federation (Smith & Sandstrom, 2001) offered the following

definition:

> Executive Coaching is a facilitative one-to-one, mutually designed
> relationship between a professional coach and a key contributor who has a
> powerful position in the organization. This relationship occurs in areas of
> business, government, not-for-profit, and educational organizations where
> there are multiple stakeholders and organizational sponsorship for the
> coach or coaching group. The coaching is contracted for the benefit of a
> client who is accountable for highly complex decisions with wide scope of
> impact on the organization and industry as a whole. The focus of the
> coaching is usually focused on organizational performance or
> development, but may also have a personal component as well. The
> results produced from this relationship are observable and measurable,

> commensurate with the requirements the organization has for the performance of being coached. (p. 2)

Another definition, offered by Kampa and White (2002), stated that:

> We define executive coaching as a formal, ongoing relationship between an individual or team having managerial authority and responsibility in an organization, and a consultant who possesses knowledge of behavior change and organizational functioning. This relationship has the goal of creating measurable behavior change in the individual or collection of individuals (the team) that results in increased individual and organizational performance, and where the relationship and between individual or team and consultant facilitates this change by or through giving direct behaviorally based feedback creating opportunities for change, and demanding accountability. (p. 139)

Current descriptions of executive coaching possess the following common factors: coaching is described as a continuous (vs. single-event), relationship-based, individually tailored, one-on-one process of development focused on increasing executive capabilities (Diedrich, 1996; Kiel et al., 1996; Smith & Sandstrom, 2001; Tobias, 1996). Many definitions describe leadership effectiveness as the ultimate goal of coaching, and as the practice has grown, sub-specialties have evolved. Morgan, Harkins, and Goldsmith (2003) differentiated four categories of executive coaching: behavioral, career/life, leadership development, and organizational change/strategy; they defined *behavioral* coaches as those who focus on

> helping leaders achieve a positive long-term change in interpersonal behavior. They give advice on how leadership can build better relationships and become more effective in motivating people. Most people who call themselves "executive coaches" tend to specialize in behavioral coaching. (p. 4)

Alternately, *career/life* coaching addresses personal growth, career development, and life issues. Coaching for *leadership development* is designed to assist with succession planning, preparing executives for promotion. Coaching for *organizational change* focuses on the execution of organizational change. *Strategy* coaching involves working with senior executives to develop the long-term direction of the organization.

Judge and Cowell (1997) categorized coaching according to three types of executives: executives needing improved leadership skills (planning, implementing, increasing influence, visioning, etc.); professionals and entrepreneurs needing long-range strategies for business or personal development; and executives with adequate skills whose problems interacting with others prevent advancement. "These 'derailed' executives might have an abrasive management style, an inability to delegate, or poor assertiveness skills" (p. 32).

Kiel et al. (1996), stated that one fourth of their firm's practice is devoted to coaching for advancement, one half to coaching senior executives to increase leadership bench strength, and the final fourth on possible derailment candidates: "Few are 'psychologically minded,' and many even hold a fair amount of distrust or disdain for the 'soft' side of leadership" (p. 68).

Executive coaching to address dysfunctional interpersonal behavior is emerging as a sub-specialty of the general definition of executive behavioral coaching. Tobias (1996) provided an explicit description:

> In its narrowest sense, coaching may help someone who has irritated others in the organization. For example, the individual may be seen as abrasive; too expressive of anger; territorial; overcontrolling; underempowering; lacking in personal insight or social, organizational, or political awareness; or a poor communicator. . . . A somewhat broader definition would include someone having conflictual relationships with peers, authorities, "internal customers" or others; someone having trouble adjusting to organization or personal changes or crises, someone who is seen as lacking discipline, planfulness, or organization; someone experiencing stress at work or at home; someone having difficulty selling his or her ideas internally; or, perhaps, someone having difficulty getting a team to coalesce. (p. 87)

Koonce (1994) asserted that a manager who manifests "arrogant, abrasive demeaning behavior to others in the workplace" and who "acts like a bully, using intimidation as a weapon and management tactic" (p. 38) is a prime candidate for executive coaching. Levinson (1996), a psychoanalytically-trained clinical psychologist, management consultant, and pioneer in behavioral executive coaching, stated that "executive coaching usually involves coping with focal problems, mostly of maladroit executive behavior that must become more adaptive" (p. 117).

Thus coaching is emerging as a method to reduce abrasive executive behavior, the first evidence of a potentially effective intervention. Unlike avoidance and denial, organizational tactics frequently adopted as noted above, coaching directly confronts dysfunctional behavior. Unlike disciplinary counseling, coaching goes beyond remonstration to assist the executive in generating more productive modes of relating with others. Unlike training, coaching offers a highly individualized environment of continuous development.

And unlike psychotherapy, coaching incorporates detailed feedback from the workplace and focuses on the dual accountabilities to client and organization to reduce dysfunctional behavior. These assertions will be more closely examined in the following review of the executive coaching process.

The Executive Coaching Process

The process of executive coaching involves a succession of activities. The activities most frequently described fall into six stages: establishing the coaching alliance, assessment, feedback, goal-setting, actual coaching, and follow-up (Diedrich, 1996; Kiel et al., 1996; Kilburg, 2000; Levinson, 1996; Lukazewski, 1988; Peterson, 1996; Richard, 1999; Saporito, 1996; Sperry, 1993; Tobias, 1996; Witherspoon & White, 1996).

Establishment of the coaching alliance

Also referred to as relationship building, this first phase is generally described as the formation of a trusting relationship with the coach, in which the coach is perceived as credible and supportive. Without such a relationship, the coaching process is doomed to failure. Credibility is key:

> Senior executives tend to be skeptical folks by nature. Their training and experience have taught them to question everything, taking little at face value. This is particularly evident in their attitude toward consultants. The likelihood that a consultant could actually understand and, more important, have practical impact on issues relating directly to corporate performance and profitability is a matter for skepticism among this group. Our job as executive coaches is to get beyond the skepticism by making

sure that our involvement is, in fact, extremely practical and directly related to the issues of corporate performance and individual effectiveness. (Saporito, 1996, p. 96)

Support is equally important: Goodstone (1998) cited a nonjudgmental attitude of unconditional positive regard as a critical element of positive change relationships. The coach's trustworthiness, indicated by adherence to agreed-upon confidentiality practices and commitment to the client, is a third essential factor. He further asserted that the coaching alliance resembles the therapeutic alliance, but in a context of organization. Reviewing research on psychotherapy outcomes, Whiston and Sexton (1993) concluded that "more than any other element to date, the therapeutic relationship is significantly related to positive client outcome" (p. 45). Despite the lack of research on coaching outcomes, the data on therapy outcomes led Goodstone (1998)to state that

the "core" element or common factors likely to be found within successful change interventions are far more related to the coaching relationship than the feedback. Successful change interventions are dependent on the extent to which a coaching relationship is established to interpret feedback, help guide development, and support the manager in efforts to change. (p. 158)

Assessment

The second stage of the coaching process consists of assessment. Among executive coaches, the top three assessment techniques include 360-degree scaled feedback instruments, psychometric testing, and qualitative interviewing (Brotman et al., 1998; Diedrich, 1996; Kiel et al., 1996; Kilburg, 1996c; Peterson, 1996; Richard, 1999; Saporito, 1996; Tobias, 1996; Witherspoon & White, 1996).

A variety of 360-degree instruments were cited, but with no consensus on which instrument, if any, proved most effective. Instruments included the Hay/McBer Executive 360º (Boyatzis et al., 1999), the Center for Creative Leadership's Benchmarks© Inventory (CCL, 2001), and other proprietary instruments not available for review. It should be noted that these instruments provide feedback on a range of leadership skills; none was specifically designed to identify and inventory specific abrasive behaviors. Additionally, feedback is provided by numeric scale, allowing the executives to see where they fall in a given range, but does not describe specific behaviors.

Psychometric instruments included the California Psychological Inventory (Gough-Harrison & Bradley, 1996), the NEO-PI-R (Costa & McCrae, 1992), the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (Briggs & Myers, 1976), the Wonderlic Personnel Test (Wonderlic, 1998), the 16 PF the Adjective Checklist (Cattell, Eber, & & Tatsuoka, 1970), the TAIS (Nideffer, 1996), the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Hathaway, McKinley, & Butcher, 1990), the FIRO-B (Schutz, Hammer, & Schnell, 2000), and the Strength Deployment Inventory (Porter, 1996).

Qualitative interviews, both structured and semi-structured, can be conducted with superiors, subordinates, peers, other coworkers, family members, friends, and more rarely, customers and suppliers (Judge & Cowell, 1997; Kiel et al., 1996). Duration of the interviews varies depending on the coach, generally ranging from 1 to 2 hours per person, often with longer interviews of

the identified client to explore personal and professional histories (Kiel et al.,

1996; Peterson, 1996; Saporito, 1996).

Feedback

Upon completion of the assessment, coaching proceeds to the feedback

phase. To be effective, feedback must be specific, accurate, detailed, and refer to

actual behavior (Church & Bracken, 1997; Diedrich, 1996). "Feedback can lead to

positive change only if the information is perceived to be unbiased, well-

intentioned, and in the long run, valuable to the attainment of a

personal/professional goal." (Goodstone, 1998, p. 12). Isolated at the top of their

organizational hierarchy, feedback is a rare commodity for senior-level

executives; subordinates may be afraid to confront them or give advice on their

behavior (Kiel et al., 1996; Lukazewski, 1988).

However, feedback is not enough. "All too often managers are given

feedback, dutifully resolve to do better, and nothing changes" (Kaplan, 1993, p.

300). One reason given by Goodstone (1998) for this phenomenon is resistance:

> Resistance to change and information that may be threatening (such as
> feedback regarding discrepancies between the manager's self view and
> the perceptions of others) is likely to relegate the feedback report to
> nothing more than taking space in the manager's file cabinet. (p. 161)

A second reason may lie in the assumption that once executives are motivated to

improve their behavior, they will then be able to generate more effective

methods for interpersonal interaction. Suddenly and magically, they will possess

the insight to manage their emotions and develop positive interactive strategies

to motivate their subordinates. Goodstone continued:

> We believe that 360-degree feedback combined with a strategic coaching
> relationship has the best possibility of producing individual change that
> can be considered as representing significant management development.
> Within the context of a coaching relationship, resistance can be overcome
> and feedback can be interpreted in terms of the strategic changes that
> manager needs to make within the organization. (p. 157)

Although there is a paucity of empirical, evaluative research addressing 360-

degree feedback, existing data suggest that improved managerial performance

requires participation in ongoing developmental activities. It appears, then, that

a coach can provide the necessary elements for personal change and that a

prerequisite for successful coaching is the management alliance (p. 162).

Goal-setting

Once the client has received feedback, the coaching process moves to goal-

setting. Here client and coach determine the objectives of coaching. Hart et al.

(2001) asserted that the client, not the coach, should establish the agenda for the

coaching. Kiel et al. (1996) described a more collaborative process:

> The consultants work with the client to consolidate the information and
> target areas for development, including the leveraging of identified
> strengths. Both parties collaborate to produce a document that integrates
> the collected data and use that information as the basis for a development
> plan that details specific and measurable goals and actions steps. (p. 18)

Authors differ on the extent of information to be shared with the greater

organization. While some have espoused total confidentiality of the feedback

information (Brotman et al., 1998), others have recommended that the development plan be reviewed by the client's superior, other organizational sponsors such as human resources, and/or interview respondents (Diedrich, 1996; Kiel et al., 1996). Peterson (1996) suggested that including members of the organization in this phase increases a sense of ownership and commitment to change from all parties.

Coaching

The coaching phase uses a diverse spectrum of techniques, further shaped by the coach's theoretical foundation. Frequently cited techniques include discussion, reflection, education, advice-giving, training, reading assignments, role modeling, simulations, brainstorming, and journal-keeping. Practitioners versed in techniques derived from psychodynamic psychotherapy may also use clarification, confrontation, interpretation, and reconstruction (Kilburg, 2000). Richard (1999) advocated monitoring of affect, physical sensations, and repetitive self-statements, based upon the cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques developed by Lazarus (1989). Lazarus (1995) also coined the term *technical eclecticism,* calling for practitioners to use strategic interventions based on family therapy concepts, organizational development models, or other creative problem-solving techniques. The diverse array of theoretical models and practice techniques applied to the coaching phase suggests that the entire field of executive coaching could safely be conceptualized as technically eclectic.

Follow-up

The final phase of the process can include brief contacts with the client, and depending on the model, with any or all of the involved parties. Duration and frequency of contact varies widely, but there is general agreement on the objectives of follow-up: to determine progress, refine or revise goals, and consolidate learning. Depending on the model used, this information may or may not be shared with other parties in the organization.

Popular Theories on the Etiology of Abrasive Executives

Theories on the etiology of abrasive executive behavior in the popular literature are treated in a characteristically sensational manner. Executives are described as malevolent sadists who derive intense pleasure from the suffering of others.

> The cruel disrespect of workers that is born of bosses' characters has no reason or purpose other than the act of abuse itself. It is not a cathartic outburst produced by tension, nor is its goal the prevention of some real or imagined organizational adversity. This is abuse for the sake of abuse. Malignantly motivated bosses experience temporary relief, and sometimes even ghastly pleasure, because they have diminished another human being's sense of power, competence, or self-worth. And those sick gains simply whet their appetite for the next go-round. (Hornstein, 1996, p. 49)

Bing (1992) asserted that the crazy boss possesses a debilitating range of character deficiencies that are uniquely suited to a successful business career, including rigidity of character, pervasive feelings of inadequacy, problems asserting oneself, and an underlying need for perfection and control: "But the

bottom line on the crazy boss is this: he is sick in a lot of ways, not just one. And yes, *he will seek to destroy himself,* in time" (p. 25).

Other authors suggest that the abrasive executive is simply the victor in a process of selection that rewards exploitation: a product of "institutional Darwinism" (Reed, 1993, p. 55). Business culture, which is generally described as ruthlessly competitive, exploitive of opportunity, and focused on profit, naturally seeks agents that excel in exercising these skills. Bing (1992) described the *American management disease*, which originates in an infected economic and political environment, producing a diseased business environment, fraught with opportunistic illnesses that in turn generate crazy corporations, crazy CEOs, and crazy working persons. Here again, the abrasive executive is described as a lethally toxic force: "The truly virulent boss can spread a fever that kills a lot of innocent people before it finally kills him" (p. 88).

A recently published popular tome on abrasive executives, *The Bully At Work* (Namie & Namie, 2003), attributed abrasive behavior to psychological deficits. "The chronic bully's motivation is her own failure to confront her deepest feelings of personal inadequacy, her self-loathing" (p. 14). The authors state that some of these individuals are character disordered: "either Antisocial or Narcissistic Personality disorders", and that "these are the most malevolent, mean-spirited, and nasty people at work" (p. 15). The authors included a placard in the chapter stating: "Bullies Are Liars and Cowards!" (p. 5), betraying a

distinct trait of borderline personality disorders: splitting, in which entities are

described in categorical absolutes.

Namie and Namie (2003) proceeded to discuss the motivation of other

bully types, variously ascribing them as *opportunistic bullies*:

> The opportunist differs from the chronic bully in that when she is away
> from work, she's able to suspend her competitive nature. She's capable of
> being charming and supportive. . . . She's a great mother, churchgoer,
> neighborhood activist, and good citizen. (p. 16)

Accidental bullies "are benign . . . simply a social fool . . . awkward and

childlike" (p. 17).

The popular literature promotes simplistic, pejorative thinking on the

topic of abrasive executives, more popularly described as bullies. Here, all

abrasive executives are bad souls, motivated by malevolence. All fall into

circumscribed categories, and all behave in predictable, easily identified ways.

Scholarly Theories on the Etiology of Abrasive Executives

In contrast to assertions in the popular literature that abrasive executives

are alien predators exclusively bent upon destruction, scholarly theorists first

acknowledge that executives, abrasive or not, are human beings who have taken

on the challenging task of directing people and their work. This is no easy task,

for executives are constantly faced with intense stressors from without and

within:

> Over the last decade the environment in many companies has become
> increasingly stressful. Competition has intensified, downsizing has

increased spans of control, and pressure to do more with fewer resources all have contributed to greater stress experienced by managers. In this environment, stress can bring out abusive behavior not only in those who may have a predisposition, but also in those without such a predisposition. When the demands or pressures become intense enough, most of us are capable of abusive behavior. (Bassman, 1992, p. 46)

Bassman (1992) went on to describe the subjective experience of abused employees:

Employees experience a threat to their survival, although it may not be an explicit threat to their physical survival. They may feel a threat to their job, career, organizational status, professional credibility, financial standing, or any other aspect of their life tied to their work situation. Especially during downsizing or poor economic conditions in society, they may feel unable to escape their situation—either by moving to a new job within the company or by leaving. Also, they tend to feel isolated. (p. 276)

Is this not the experience of *all* employees, abused or not? What employee has not worried about his or her job, career, or organizational status? What employee has not experienced anxiety regarding his or her professional credibility, financial standing, or other aspects of life tied to the work situation? I assert that *all* employees at *all* levels experience various degrees of work-related anxieties at some time or other. Certainly the threat level is increased when working for a hostile boss, but if the stressor is not the absolute determinant of abrasive response, what other factors account for the phenomenon?

Sociobiological and Psychoanalytic Perspectives

Contrary to the belief held by popular theorists that abrasive executives are deeply pathological, research has demonstrated that ordinary people can be induced to behave in extremely abusive ways. Milgram (1963) discovered that it was surprisingly easy to get people to administer what they believed to be severe, dangerous electric shocks when the directive was issued by an authority figure. Zimbardo, Banks, Haney and Jaffe (1973) randomly assigned college-age young men to play guard or prisoner roles in a mock prison; the participants played their roles too well, resulting in incidents of abuse that impelled Zimbardo to halt the study. Bassman (1992) concluded that role demands are very effective in inducing abusive behavior, that very little external pressure is needed to elicit abusive behavior toward others, and that abusive behavior in response to abuse may at times be more a function of the roles in which people find themselves than with their own internal personality characteristics. The concept that abrasive/abusive behavior can be socially induced is also borne out in research on another social system: the family.

In a study of executives exhibiting abrasive behavior, over 50% of the executives reported experiencing childhood abuse. A Bureau of National Affairs Special Report (1990) also attributed abusive workplace behavior to the managers' own histories of child abuse. Kaplan (1991) suggested that abrasive executives may compensate for their remembered sense of powerlessness with an overly-developed need to dominate as adults.

Whether learned from families or authority figures in adulthood, Bassman (1992) held that abusive behavior is learned, and that "all of us have learned it. The skill of behaving abusively toward others is one we all have in our behavioral repertoires, ready to be tapped when appropriate external pressures crop up" (p. 53). If we accept that anyone is capable of abrasive or abusive behavior under stress and that behavior can be learned from families or other social systems (school, work, society) (Bassman, 1992), the question again arises: Why will one individual exhibit abrasive behavior in response to stress and another not?

Threat

Biologists define *stress* as any change that may tend to alter an existing equilibrium (optimal steady state) and trigger counteracting responses at molecular, cellular, and system levels to preserve and/or reestablish such an equilibrium and ensure adaptation (Timiras, 2002). Lazarus (1966) defined the change or stimulus that provokes an emotional reaction as the *stressor,* evoking a particular emotional reaction in accordance with the individual's perception of the stimulus situation or *threat*. Spielberger (1972) refined this definition, stating that stress refers only to the stimulus: an object or situation that most people would identify as dangerous, either physically or psychologically.

The primary threats in the animal world derive from environment and other organisms, both jeopardizing survival. Darwin (1859) theorized that

animals have an instinctual drive to reproduce and thus perpetuate their species. To do that, the organism must stay alive. Cloudsley-Thompson (1980) described this drive to survive:

> This is why Charles Darwin and Alfred Russell Wallace both recognized as inevitable the "struggle for existence," the competition between all organisms, and between each individual and the physical environment. This struggle is threefold: environmental, against heat, cold, drought, excess moisture, lightning and tempest, earthquake and volcanic eruption; intraspecific, between members of the same species, for food, territory and mates, or to avoid cannibalism; and interspecific, between members of different species for food and living space and when one species is parasitized or preyed on and eaten by another. As in human warfare the struggle is often more bitter the closer the relationship or similarity between the contestants. (p. 14)

The threats experienced by *Homo sapiens* are not only to physical survival, but to psychological survival as well.

From his analyses of patients, Freud (1926) postulated that threat was developmentally determined and emerged in a specific sequence, first experienced by the infant in two forms: threat of *helplessness* and threat of *loss of the object* (usually maternal). He posited that the threat of helplessness arises from the infant's inability to reduce tensions related to unmet needs (food, warmth, etc.). Freud termed the threat of helplessness, from the as-yet undeveloped ability to control physical and psychological functioning, the threat of *annihilation,* or dissolution of the self. The second threat, threat of *loss of the object,* stems from the danger of losing the care-taking person and the child's protection from excessive external stimuli. Freud also theorized that as children develop, they perceive the threat of *castration* (in the case of boys), and the threat

of *loss of love* (in the case of girls). Freud posited a fifth threat to be the danger of conflict with the superego (conscience).

Freud (1926) conceived of a mental apparatus, which, in its later form, consisted of the id (unconscious realm of primitive drives, also known as *instincts)*; the ego (mediator of stimuli from internal—id—drives and external influences); and the superego (internalized societal demands—the conscience). Sjöbäck (1973) concluded that Freud (1926) stressed a biological view in describing the mental apparatus as an instrument whereby the organism adapts to and exploits its environment, in order to secure its own survival on the most favorable terms. According to Freud, the specific task of the ego, through processing external (environmental) and internal (intrapsychic) events, is the self-preservation of the organism. Subsequent psychological theorists generally adhered to Freud's delineation of threat (Sjöbäck, 1973). The coaching process that I have developed cites loss of life (annihilation) and loss of love (abandonment) as the two primary threats experienced by humans. Essentially, I have rephrased Freud's (1926) threat of helplessness (resulting in annihilation) as *the threat of loss of life*: physical life, professional life, economic life, etc. In psychoanalytic terms, this can also be viewed as the loss of ego functionality, the loss of the ability to mediate internal and external forces to maintain functionality (survival): the loss of control. Freud (1923) described this threat of the ego losing control:

> What it is that the ego fears from the external and from the libidinal danger cannot be specified; we know that the fear is of being overwhelmed or annihilated, but it cannot be grasped analytically. (p. 57)

My studies of ethology as a zoology major revealed that the animal world, in the competition for physical survival, seeks to avoid annihilation from starvation, attack or other environmental hazards. My psychological studies have further reinforced the theoretical basis for my assertion that one of the greatest threats experienced by humankind is that of loss of life through loss of control of the self: annihilation of physical, professional, economic or other modes of survival.

My assertion to executives that the second greatest threat occupying humans' attention, that of loss of love (through abandonment), is based upon a consolidation of Freud's (1923, 1926) abovementioned threats of *loss of the object* and *loss of love.* Spitz's (1965) research on abandoned infants dramatically demonstrated that the presence of a care-taking object (in this case, orphanage attendant) was insufficient to support normal psychological development without the added element of continuous loving attention (attachment) from the object. In their research for the book *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant*, object relations researchers Mahler, Pine and Bergman (1975) confirmed that it was the *quality* of the relationship with the object (primary parental figure) that influenced the child's ability to successfully separate and individuate from the parent to become a psychologically healthy adult. I find it more helpful to integrate the threat of loss of object under the general threat of loss of love: love that applies to various realms of life, whether family love (beloved objects),

professional love (respect), or self-love (esteem). Threat can be realistic or

imagined, on conscious or unconscious levels. The task of responding to threat,

of communicating danger, is accomplished through the emotion of anxiety.

Anxiety

Simple perception of threat is not enough to protect the organism from

harm: One can perceive the grizzly bear and still be consumed. To respond

effectively to threat, the perceiving organism(s) must issue a signal to mobilize to

either flee or fight the danger.

In *The Problem of Anxiety* (1936), Freud described anxiety as "a specific

state of unpleasure accompanied by motor discharge along definite pathways . . .

a signal of danger. . . . Symptoms are created in order to remove . . . the situation

of danger" (p. 70). Freud (1926) differentiated between realistic anxiety (also

termed *objective anxiety)*, which has a real source in the external world as

opposed to *neurotic anxiety* that arises from intrapsychic experiences of danger

when no real external danger exists. Levitt (1980) asserted that efforts to

distinguish between the constructs of anxiety and fear on the basis of the origin

of the signal (internal vs. external), the specificity of the signal (diffuse vs.

defined), and the degree of reaction (intense vs. mild) demonstrated no proven

value in research and recommended that fear and anxiety be regarded

interchangeably. In the context of my coaching method, I use both terms, but

more often refer to the signal as anxiety because it has a less intense, more

psychological tone, and because in my experience executives have greater

resistance to admitting to fear (usually perceived as a sign of weakness) than to

anxiety.

Whether derived from internal (neurotic) or external (realistic) sources,

anxiety has a dramatic influence on the sense of self. Bonime (1981) elaborated:

> The focal element for the dynamics of anxiety is the sense of self. It is a complex affective-sensate-cognitive phenomenon experienced in the course of functioning. Sense of self is ineffable and private. It is a subliminal feeling of being a particular person in an experience, a vague sense of a *me* involved, actively or passively, alive and somehow being in relation to others. The sense of the self functioning effectively maintains the familiar, thereby relatively comfortable, constant subjective sense of the *me.* Interferences with the sense of effective functioning are experienced as threats to the integrity of that *me.* The experience is anxiety. (p. 72)

Bonime highlighted a core aspect of anxiety: the feared loss of functional

effectiveness. When confronted with threat, two anxieties arise: fear of the

dangerous entity, and feared loss of the ability to function, to survive the

physical or psychological danger. "Anxiety, as I view it, is fear that comes from

danger to, or disruption of, the subjective sense one has while functioning, the

sense of me" (p. 69).

How, then, can individuals protect themselves from dangers in the real or

neurotic realms that may constitute threats to self-functioning? The answer lies in

defense; the mechanisms evolved to protect the psyche from dangerous stimuli.

Defense

Biologists attribute the term *defense* to any trait that reduces the likelihood that an organism, or part of an organism, will be consumed by a predator or wounded from attack (Cloudsley-Thompson, 1980). Animal defensive traits encompass a wide range of strategies, including aggression, protective coloration, locomotive capacity, etc., but all serve one of two purposes: flight or flight. The *fight or flight response*, also termed the *acute stress response,* was first described by physiologist Cannon (1939) in his studies of neural activity. Cannon determined that the sympathetic nervous system serves an activating function in response to perceived threat, releasing hormones that prepared the organism for fight or flight. Cannon also developed the concept of *homeostasis*, wherein the organism seeks to maintain a steady balance in the function of various organs to maintain bodily function.

Freud (1905/1960) clearly took a biological view in his conceptualization of psychological defense. He first referred to the term defense in his 1894 essay "The Neuropsychoses of Defense" (1894), suggesting that threatening ideas (perceptions, thoughts, memories) were defended against by being expelled from consciousness (forgotten or *repressed),* thereby defending the individual from painful affect. Freud actually referred to defensive processes as the "psychical correlative of the flight-reflex" (1905/1960, p. 233). Sjöbäck (1973) cogently summarized Freud's biological orientation: "The mental apparatus, [Freud said], is an instrument whereby the organism adapts to and exploits its environment,

in order to secure its own survival on the most favorable terms" (Sjöbäck, 1973, p. 19). In the biological world, physical defenses operate to protect the organism from threats to physical survival, thus preserving homeostasis. Freud (1923) similarly conceived of mental defenses as mechanisms operating to protect the human organism from threats to its psychological survival.

Freud (1894) originally referred to defense as a general term for the unconscious mechanism of ego protection, using *defense* or *repression* interchangeably. Threatening internal impulses could be banished from consciousness (defended against) through repression (forgetting). Freud first posed repression as the primary mode of defense (1894); it was not until later, in *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety* (1926), that he suggested that the ego relied upon various defense mechanisms to ward off threat.

Anna Freud (1936) introduced the first systematic theory of defense mechanisms in her book, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense.* She explained that defense mechanisms serve to protect against painful internal or external stimuli, whether derived from instinctual drives or derived from fear of punishment for instinctual impulses: "dread of the outside world" (p. 62). Like her father, Anna Freud believed defense mechanisms to be a special group of ego functions which operates automatically outside of consciousness, and said it was the psychoanalyst's work "to bring into consciousness that which is unconscious, no matter to what psychic institution it belongs" (p. 28). Later theorists (Semrad, 1967) placed defenses on a developmental continuum, ranging from the most

primitive (denial, delusion, projection, dissociation), to defenses reflective of

more mature levels of ego development such as suppression, sublimation,

intellectualization, and humor. It is not the purpose of this review to describe the

various elaborations of defense mechanisms developed by theorists since Anna

Freud, but instead to acknowledge the acceptance of the theoretical construct of

defense in current psychological thought.

Kline (1993), a contemporary researcher of defense mechanisms,

commented:

> Over these years the concept of defense has become far more broad. It
> began, in psychoanalytic theory, as a general term for an unconscious
> mechanism of ego protection. This became more precisely delineated into
> a number of unconscious defense mechanisms. These have been studied
> by clinical psychologists, and the concept of defenses has merged into a
> larger one of coping mechanisms, some unconscious, some conscious, and
> some actual behaviors designed to deal with stress. . . . It appears from
> these studies that the original Freudian defense mechanisms, as
> unconscious processes to avoid pain, even if differently described, are still
> useful concepts in that they appear in most lists and descriptions. . . . In
> conclusion, therefore, it can be argued that the psychoanalytic notion of
> defense, even if it has to be conceptualized within a different framework,
> has stood the test of time. (p.11)

The psychological threats representing annihilation and/or abandonment,

whether internal (neurotic) or external (realistic) are signaled by anxiety,

producing defensive response. The progression can be illustrated as follows:

threat => anxiety => defense. This, then, is the theoretical construct derived from

sociobiological and psychoanalytic theories of physical and psychological

survival that informs my coaching practice.

Psychological Defensiveness in the Workplace

As noted above, organisms defend against threat through fight (aggression) or flight (isolation) strategies (Cannon, 1939; Cloudsley-Thompson, 1980). Psychoanalytic organizational theorists similarly view abrasive behavior, whether aggressive or isolative, as a defense against threat (Argyris, 1990; Hirschhorn, 1988; Kaplan, 1991; Kets de Vries, 2001; Levinson, 1972; Vaillant, 1977). In response to threats to self-preservation in the workplace, executives possessing personality constellations that render them more vulnerable to threat will respond defensively, either aggressing or withdrawing, in the interests of survival.

> As the individual develops a somewhat stable self, it becomes the "filter mechanism" through which he perceives himself and his world and by which he evaluates his and others' effectiveness in it. The individual will tend to accept those experiences consonant with his self; and he will tend to distort, deny and reject that behavior that is different from, and is not immediately integratable with, his self. The latter is usually described as defensive behavior. Behavior is "defensive" when it is a response to a perceived threat to the self. (Argyris, 1962, p. 18)

This conceptualization of abrasion as defense controverts the popular view that employee abuse is intentional. In response to threat, the abrasive executive's primary goal is self-preservation, not other-destruction. The assault or neglect that employees experience as a result of the executive's defensive responses is thus neither intentional nor deliberate (Kellerman, 2004). Ryan and Oestreich (1998) researched abrasive executives and concluded that much of the behavior was the result of defensiveness and lack of awareness: "We believe that most

managers do not actually mean to hurt or punish anyone" (p. 60). Despite their

view that abrasion is not intentional, "these behaviors cause employees to feel

bullied, and *threatened*"[italics added] (p. 59).

Defensive behavior in leaders can evoke defensive behavior in followers,

creating a vicious cycle of organizational distrust and defensiveness (Kets de

Vries & Miller, 1984).

> Morale can deteriorate substantially under these conditions. Subordinates
> may tend to hold back their contributions and to increase their "mistakes."
> Indeed, transference-based hostility by the leader often generates reality-
> based hostility among his workers as they try to even up the score and
> protect themselves from further exploitation. Work-to-rule practices,
> sporadic acts of sabotage, and deliberate "misinterpretations" of the rules
> become common. Such worker practices give the leader an even stronger
> sense that he has a worthless crew, and his hostility and attempts to
> control and punish become even more vigorous. This closes the vicious
> circle. A subordinate experiencing transference hostility becomes
> uncooperative toward the boss and exhibits much the same characteristics
> as the workers whose hostility is based on a disturbing working
> environment. Mistrust, suspicion, and vindictiveness are likely and can
> cause subordinates to perceive all directives as attempts to manipulate or
> entrap them. Subordinates become uncooperative and assert their
> independence, trying to punish the parent represented by the person with
> authority. The leader then has firm grounds for reprimanding them,
> which aggravates the situation. (p. 89)

Menzies-Lyth's (1960, 1979) landmark research on nursing students produced

the concept of *social defense*: defenses institutionalized and enacted by the

organization to avoid nurses' experience of helplessness in the face of suffering.

Allcorn and Diamond (1997) elaborated on this concept of social defense in their

book, *Managing People During Stressful Times: The Psychologically Defensive*

Workplace. As with the individual, the need to defend arises in response to

workplace threats and resulting anxiety. "Psychological defensiveness is

externalized in the form of the need to control others, work and events" (p. 13).

Striving to defend against anxiety when threatened with loss of control, the

organization then resorts to a variety of mechanisms to combat the perceived

threat. This same conceptualization can be applied to the abrasive executive,

where such work-generated anxiety can be compounded by anxieties unresolved

in early development, producing an individual who is overly sensitive to

perceived threats to his or her security and self-esteem (Kets de Vries, 1979;

Kofodimos, 1990; Levinson, 1978).

Defense mechanisms in and of themselves are not necessarily

pathological:

> For example, every individual erects a good number of defenses to
> maintain a stable, favorable conception of the self. These defenses are used
> to control impulses or emotions that are deemed unacceptable and that
> give rise to conflicts: the more vulnerable the psychological equilibrium of
> the individual, the more formidable the defensive barriers to adaptation
> and change. (Kets de Vries, 1993, p. 178)

Vaillant (1977) addressed the pathological use of defense mechanisms:

> When is a given adaptive mechanism coping and when is it pathological?
> For by now it should have become clear that much of what is called
> mental illness is in fact the manifestation of an individual's adaptive
> response. It is not the defenses themselves that are pathological but the
> conflicts and disordered events that call them forth. In evaluating the
> significance of a given defense, both context and flexibility become
> exceedingly important. If a defense is used in a rigid, inflexible way, if it is
> motivated more by past needs than by present and future reality, if it too
> severely distorts the present situation, if it abolishes rather than limits
> gratification, or if it dams rather than rechannels the expression of
> feelings, then it is likely to be maladaptive. (p. 85)

It is only when the individual or organization experiences threat sufficient to jeopardize that entity's sense of security that defenses are roused. If one's capacity to manage anxiety is overwhelmed, defensive operations may reach a maladaptive level. As noted earlier, in the case of workplace abrasion, *maladaptive* is determined by the organizational culture.

Thus, the psychologically normal, non-abrasive person may be driven to maladaptive (abrasive) defensive response in the face of extreme threat. Most of those who have fulfilled executive roles confess that they have, on rare occasions, responded abrasively to extreme provocation, a response reactive to acute threat. On the other hand, theorists assert that the psychologically insecure executive responding to the same level of threat will resort to a continuing pattern of more extreme defensive behavior (Kets de Vries, 1993; Kets de Vries, 1984; Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977). I have termed this latter group *abrasive executives*: executives who manifest a chronic pattern of abrasive behavior under circumstances that more psychologically secure executives manage without defensiveness.

Having examined the literature on workplace abuse and theories on the possible antecedents of abrasive behavior from both sociobiological and psychoanalytic perspectives, this review now shifts to an exploration of various dimensions of empathy, the social sequelae of deficient empathy, and empathy's relationship to leadership.

Dimensions of Empathy

Social psychology is a discipline of relationship: the relationship of the

individual to his or her surrounding social world. Arising out of a desire to

understand how individuals function in a social context, the earliest studies in

social psychology focused on the characteristics of group thought and behavior

that could lead to the primitive, inhumane responses of genocide and mob

attack. The discipline soon diverged into two approaches: psychological social

psychology and sociological social psychology. Psychological social researchers

held that the individual is not dependent upon social forces for its existence, and

can be studied through observation of the individual's behavior and thinking

(Burr, 2002). Sociological social psychologists asserted that the individual's

identity is created through social interaction, and that individual behavior must

be researched and understood in the context of social interaction. Mead (1934)

called this process of entering into the social context to understand human

behavior *social behaviorism*:

> Mead (1934) calls this "taking the role of the other." Because we can
> imagine the meaning that words and events hold for other people, we are
> continually stepping in and out of their perspective[s], their role[s] in
> events, in forming our own conduct. In this way we come to have a
> concept of ourselves as others might see us. It is this process that makes it
> possible for us to be self-aware, to be conscious of being a self. (Burr, 2002,
> p. 18)

How do others see us? How are we perceived in our social context? These

questions lead us to the study of empathy, the process of deciphering the signals

emanating from our social surround.

Historical Definitions

Empathy is a relatively new concept, expressed in a recently coined word. Empathy is a direct translation from the German *einfühlung*, a term first used about 1885, described as the "understanding of another person that includes, but is not limited to an affective experience" (Basch, 1983, p. 110). *Ein* translates to *with*, *fühlung* to *feeling*, thus *feeling with*. *Einfühlung* was viewed primarily as an experience related to aesthetics: One would attempt to *feel with* or *feel into* the experience of the author, painter, composer, or Creator, and through this means, come to a deeper understanding of their artistic products, whether man-made or natural (Pigman, 1995; Shapiro, 1974).

Pigman (1995) states that empathy first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1904. The term is a neologism attributed, according to Lee (1913), to E.B. Titchener who constructed the word from the Greek roots specifically for the translation of *einfühlung*. The early Greeks created the word *empatheia,* implying affection and passion with a strong quality of suffering. *Pathos* is from the Latin, and can refer to feeling-perception (Barrett-Lennard, 1981). Lipps (Freud, 1905/1960), a philosopher admired by Freud, was the first to use *einfühlung* in the context of psychology, and the term was adopted in 1905 by Freud to describe the process of putting oneself into another's position, either consciously or unconsciously (Pigman, 1995).

There are as many definitions of empathy as there are interpreters of the term. As early as 1935, German psychologist Reik (1935) observed that "the

concept of empathy in psychological discussion has come to mean so much that

it is beginning to mean nothing" (p. 193). James Strachey, an early translator of

Freud's work, called empathy a "vile word, elephantine, for a subtle process"

(Meisel & Kendrick, 1985, pp. 170-1). More recently, researchers have remarked

that the "definition and mechanism of empathy seem unclear" (Sexton &

Whiston, 1994, p. 26), and that there is little agreement on concepts of empathy

among investigators (Moore, 1990). Despite the continuing controversy over

empathy's nature, origins, goals, operations, and effects, one common

denominator emerges in the early conceptualizations of empathy and persists

over time: that of *putting one's self into another's place to gain understanding of their*

experience.

> The German word *Einfühlung* refers to the ability of one person to come to
> know first-hand, so to speak, the experience of another; metaphorically, to
> step, as we say in English, into another person's shoes. (Basch, 1983, p.
> 110)

Adler (Shipley, 1961), a contemporary of Freud, quoted an unidentified English

author's elegant description, which captures the essence of the foundation of

empathy: "to see with the eyes of another, to hear with the ears of another, [and]

to feel with the heart of another" (p. 698).

Sympathy

The concept of empathy is frequently confused with sympathy

(Rothenberg, 1987). *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social Psychology* (Manstead &

Hewston, 1999) offered the following differentiation, authored by Eisenberg and

Fabes (1990):

> *Sympathy,* which frequently may stem from empathy is defined as a
> vicarious emotional reaction based on the apprehension of another's
> emotional state or condition, which involves feelings of sorrow,
> compassion, or concern for the other. (p. 203)

Empathy, then, does not contain sympathy's essential elements of condolence to,

or pity for, the other (Greenson, 1960). Nor should empathy be confused with

telepathy, which was commonly assumed to imply a supernatural or paranormal

connection with the mind of a living or deceased person (Ickes, 2003).

Evolutionary Views of Empathy

Pigman (1995) noted that the concept of empathy had a long history

before the advent of psychoanalysis and psychology. Biologists have been

studying emotional communication among organisms for many years; Darwin

(1872/1965) was the first to describe the emotional communication process,

analyzing the expression and reception of emotions in dogs, cats, monkeys and

diverse human groups. He asserted that these communicative sending

mechanisms were innate, and that the primary purpose of this process was to

create and maintain social order.

Later researchers elaborated on the role of social communication in

survival. Social psychologists Buck and Ginsburg (1997) described empathy from

a biological orientation:

> Empathy involves a biologically based, spontaneous communication process that is fundamental to all living things, and that includes innate sending and receiving mechanisms (visual, auditory, or chemical displays and preattunements to such displays, respectively). (p. 17)

They stated that innate mechanisms of social communication can be observed in the simplest of creatures, such as the amalgamated single cells of slime molds that sacrifice cells in the anterior portion of the animal so that the posterior can generate individual mold amoeba. "The 'altruism' of the individuals who die to form the stalk is understandable because it serves the community; here the communication–altruism relationship is rigid and reflexive" (p. 20).

Buck and Ginsburg (1997) regarded empathy, rapport, intuition, altruism, and related concepts as emergent properties of a primordial biological capacity for communication that inheres in the genes, and proposed that this capacity is the basis of a general affiliative phenomenon that is characteristic of all creatures, from the simplest forms to the most complex. Even single-celled creatures cannot live indefinitely without exchanging genetic materials, which requires selective social communication and affiliative interactions.

What is the survival value of social communication? Gibson (1979) answered this, stating that:

> Any animal needs to distinguish not only the substances and objects of the material environment, but also other animals and the differences between them. It cannot afford to confuse prey and predator, own-species with another species, or male with female. (p. 7)

"Other animals afford, above all, a rich and complex set of interactions, sexual, predatory, nurturing, fighting, playing, cooperating and communicating" (p.

128). Each of these interactions requires the ability to convey and decipher emotional communication, "to pay the closest attention to the optical and acoustic information that specifies what the other person is, invites, threatens and does" (p. 128).

Buck and Ginsburg (1997) held that the capacity for affiliative social communication is genetically inherited, and serves the evolutionary objective of promoting survival. But the development of that innate capacity in advanced vertebrates is conditioned on social experience: "altruism, empathy, and other 'positive' social behaviors depend upon affective bonds that normally are formed during communicative exchanges early in life" (p. 21).

The Process of Empathy

Early conceptualizations of empathy by psychologists implied a predominantly affective, single-stage process of *feeling into* another's experience of emotion. Greenson (1960) termed this process *emotional knowing,* describing it as a "very special mode of perceiving"(p. 418). Another term applied to this feeling-based mode of experiencing is *affective resonance*, reverberating with another's emotion without any inference, judgment, or other cognitive processing (Basch, 1983).

Controversy persists over whether empathy is primarily a cognitive or affective process. Stotland (1969) defined empathy as purely affective, describing it as "an observer's reacting emotionally because he perceives that another is

experiencing or is about to experience an emotion" (p. 272). He defined empathy as the emotional reaction stemming from perception, as an outcome of perception.

Davis (1996) identified the source of continuing confusion and controversy over definitions of empathy when he pointed out that one category of definition describes empathy as a *process*, and while the other defines empathy as an *outcome (*reflected by Stotland, 1969*)*. In the process definition, one engages in a process: One empathizes by putting oneself in the place of another. "I have empathy" means that the subject *perceives* the target's emotional state. In the outcome definition, "I have empathy" means that the subject *has feelings* for the other. Here, "I have empathy" means "I have my feelings" (outcome) rather than "I perceive your feelings (process)." Davis then defined empathy as process, not outcome, and developed a model differentiating the antecedents, processes, and outcomes of empathizing.

Davis (1996) defined antecedents to empathy as the *person* and *situation* that will be involved in an empathic process. The person presents with the *capacity* for empathizing, which varies according to the individual (Ickes, 2003), their *learned history* of socialization experiences, and their *individual differences*, described as the stable dispositional tendency to engage in empathy-related processes that involve observing and reacting to others' emotions (Davis, 1980). The *situation* consists of the specific situational context of the empathic experience. Feiner and Kiersky (1994a) reinforced the concept that an empathic

process must also take into account the contextual factors of environment and participants.

The processes of empathy, according to Davis (1996), fall into three categories: noncognitive, simple cognitive, and advanced cognitive. *Noncognitive processes* involve the least cognitive effort and sophistication, consisting of primitive emotional responses such as motor mimicry (imitating another's behavior), or *primary circular reactions* described by Hoffman (1984), exemplified in infants crying in response to the cries of other infants.

Simple cognitive processes require rudimentary cognitive abilities in the observer, who relies on simple cues to make inferences. An individual reliant upon simple cognition may have had a positive experience at a birthday party, and subsequently infers that all observed participants in birthday parties are having that same positive experience.

Advanced cognitive processes require sophisticated cognitive activity. The most advanced process, according to Davis (1996), consists of *cognitive role taking*, described as "the attempts by one individual to understand another by imagining the other's perspective" (p. 17). Because one cannot truly *know* another's thoughts and feelings through observation (the claim of telepathy), cognitive role taking implies the ability to *imagine* another's thoughts and feelings (Eisenberg, 1986). In this conceptualization, empathy is defined as a process in which one individual attempts to imagine the thoughts and feelings of another through cognitive role taking. Hogan (1969), stated that "empathy refers

only to the *act of constructing for oneself another person's mental state* [italics added]; the verisimilitude of the resulting construct is not a necessary part of the concept's meaning" (p. 308).

In concert with Davis' (1996) differentiation of process and outcome, empathy for the purposes of this study is defined as *the process of perceiving and interpreting (inferring) emotions in others and oneself.* This definition of empathy is applied hereinafter to any references to empathy in the description and analysis of my research on evoking empathy in abrasive executives. The imagined construct of another's thought or feeling does not have to be accurate or probable; in other words, empathy is a process of perceiving and developing a *hypothesis* regarding the target's experience. The issue of whether or not hypotheses formulated in the course of empathizing prove to be accurate is discussed later in this chapter.

This conceptualization of empathy as a cognitive process of imagination/interpretation is supported by the work of recent theorists who similarly describe empathy as perception followed by interpretation. Feiner and Kiersky's (1994a) conceptualization described a first stage involving perceptual process that gives a measure of direct access to aspects of another's inner state, and usually includes some affective resonance. Davis (1996) would call this emotional response an affective *outcome* of empathy, rather than an element of the *process*. Feiner and Kiersky's (1994b) second phase involves attribution of

meaning (inference, interpretation) of the perceived state. As with Davis (1996),
empathy incorporates both perceptual and interpretive activity.

A direct access model of this kind is more consistent with recent evidence
from sociobiology and neurology, suggesting that organisms are genetically
endowed or wired for cognitive role taking, also known as *perspective taking*, and
that this capacity is essential for social interaction (Beebe & Lachmann, 1988;
Feiner & Kiersky, 1994a). Feiner and Kiersky (1994b) described this two-stage
model as helical or circular because the process repeatedly cycles through
perception-interpretation, perception-interpretation; each new perception may
refine or build upon the last cycle.

Buie's (1981) earlier conceptualization is in concert with the two-step,
direct access model. He, too, described the first step of empathy as perception by
the empathizer of expressed cues from the object through ordinary sensory
receptors, cues that betray something about the object's emotional experiences.
However "partial or inaccurate cues or failure to provide cues will limit, skew, or
even block the empathic process" (p. 300). Without these cues there can be no
perception (perspective taking) and no empathic process. Perception is followed
by inference, and inferences are generated from references to the empathizer's
own past experiences. Buie proposed that empathy can be fallible due to an
inaccurate match between the target's expressed emotion and the observer's
inferences. Such variations of expression in the object and emotional experience
of the empathizer would then impair the accuracy of empathy:

The final reason that empathy is inherently a limited means for knowing another person's thoughts and feelings is that empathy ultimately depends on inference. The empathizer never directly perceives the inner state of the object. Instead he finds a referent within his own mind, a referent that could, if expressed, reasonably be manifested by cues similar to those he observes in the object. The empathizer infers that a congruence between the inner experience of the object and his own internal referent actually exists. Such inference must sometimes fall short of accurate correspondence with the reality of the patient's inner experience. Not only is the inferential process itself fallible, but there is the problem that in the complexity of human experience sometimes two or more qualitatively different referents seem to fit with one set of observed cues. (p. 302)

Outcomes of Empathy

What are the outcomes of empathy? What are the products of this perception-interpretation process? Davis (1996) defined two categories of outcome: *intrapersonal* and *interpersonal.* Intrapersonal outcomes are "the affective and non-affective responses of the observer that result from exposure to the target" (p. 17). He described affective intrapersonal outcomes as outcomes that can be either parallel or reactive. *Parallel affect* consists of reproduction of the target's feelings in the observer. *Reactive affect* consists of emotional reactions that differ from feelings observed in the target. For example, the employee who experiences the same sense of humiliation he observes in a coworker being verbally abused by her supervisor experiences parallel affect. The employee who reacts with anger or anxiety, emotions that differ from the humiliation observed in the target, exemplifies reactive affect rather than parallel.

The non-affective intrapersonal outcome of empathy described by Davis (1996) is *interpersonal accuracy*: the correct estimation of other people's thoughts and feelings. Ickes (1997) alternately referred to this outcome as *empathic accuracy:* the accuracy with which one infers the specific content of another's thoughts and feelings. So, as one engages in the empathic process, first perceiving and then interpreting, one's results may range from accurate to off the target.

In contrast to the above-described intrapersonal outcomes, Davis defined *interpersonal outcomes* as behaviors directed *toward another* that result from empathy (perception and interpretation) for the target. These can include prosocial behaviors such as helping, asocial behaviors such as avoidance, or antisocial behaviors, such as aggression. Thus, empathy may result in a variety of interpersonal responses, whether emotional or behavioral, but these responses are the *outcomes*, the products of empathy, and should not in themselves be classed as empathic.

Thus, simply put, empathy is the process of *reading* emotions*. When reading words in a book, we perceive letters and infer their meaning according to accumulated internal and external referents. Thus the meaning of D-O-G is interpreted into an image of a canine, or an errant husband, depending on the referent context of other words and our own experience. In the same way, perception of another's smile could be interpreted, or read, as happiness or anxiety depending on contextual cues in the moment, as well as one's own past

experience with similar situations. In either case, one can read sentences or

people accurately, or misinterpret the perceptual input and, so to speak, get it

wrong.

Empathy, then, is a neutral process (Kohut, 1982), which may or may not

lead to positive or negative emotions. Empathy is *not* feeling: Empathy can only

produce feeling. In this definition, empathizing is a process of perception and

interpretations: Emotions are a possible outcome of that process (Goldberg,

1983). This empathic capacity, "the capacity to understand intimately the

thoughts and feelings of another person, to put oneself in the other's place,"

(Pigman, 1995, p. 238) does not imply any type of behavior, positive or negative.

Basch (1983) elaborated:

> Empathy leads to knowledge. By itself it neither prescribes nor proscribes
> behavior any more than does the knowledge gained from logical
> reasoning alone. What one does with the insight provided by empathic
> understanding remains to be determined by the nature of the relationship
> between the people involved and the purpose for which the empathic
> capacity was engaged by its user in the first place. (p. 122)

This conceptualization of empathy is crucial, because it encompasses situations

where the observer may empathize with another and *not feel for the other*. Batson

(1987) stated that empathy may *produce* personal distress or anxiety about one's

own welfare, *without interest in the other: In this case the outcome of empathy is feeling*

for the self with no feeling for the other.

Empathic Capacity

Even though the capacity for empathy is considered to be innate (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997), it requires neuropsychological maturation and interpersonal interaction in the course of individual development (Buie, 1981). Brothers (1989) concurred that the capacity for empathy is present in some precursor form at birth in the normal brain and is developed through cognitive maturation and by social experience. If the development of the capacity for empathy is dependent upon neuropsychological maturation and interpersonal interaction, then disruptions in either of these two areas would inhibit the ability to perceive and respond to the emotional communications of other members of one's species. Baron-Cohen (1995) held that severely autistic people are unable to experience empathy, to read and respond to emotions, because from the perspective of the autistic person, other people are not people at all:

> They are not dealt with as if they were sentient, self-aware beings who live in an intersubjective social world and who have their own unique inner lives of sensations, thoughts, feelings, memories, motives, desires, and beliefs. Instead, they are treated as if they were little more than noisy, animate objects that have to be dealt with like similar objects in the physical world. (pp. 158-159)

Baron-Cohen referred to this state as *mindblindness*: the inability to see, much less empathize with, others' expressed emotions.

Impairments in empathic ability are evident in the behavior of animals that experienced early social deprivation. These isolates are unable to produce, much less read, emotional communications. Research on a wide variety of

species, including dogs, wolves, monkeys, chimpanzees, and humans, has shown

early social deprivation to be associated with serious deficits in later social

competence (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997). Studies of maternally-deprived rhesus

monkeys demonstrated that such deprivation resulted in severe social deficits in

the infant animal. When these monkeys became mothers, they displayed no

maternal bonding behavior with their infants (Harlow & Suomi, 1970). However,

when wolf and primate isolates were placed serially with much younger

members of their species at earlier stages of behavioral development, these

behavioral pacemakers proved effective in restoring the isolates to nearly or

seemingly normal behavior.

Social experience appears to remediate communicative deficits in social

isolates. Summarizing the results of their studies of animal communication,

Ginsburg (1991) and fellow researchers (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997; MacDonald &

Ginsburg, 1981) concluded that:

> Such creatures demonstrate species-typical displays; however, they do not
> use these displays appropriately when placed with other animals, nor do
> they appear accurately to "read" the displays of others. On the other hand,
> if these socially deprived individuals are given social experience—
> particularly that involving "behavior pacemakers," individuals at the
> same stage of socioemotional development —the ability to communicate
> accurately is attained. Because experienced "tutors" are not present such
> social experience must *evoke* [italics added] rather than shape accurate
> communication. The individual appears to attain genetically based
> communicative "set points." (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997, p. 29)

Buck and Ginsburg (1997) additionally suggested that these deficits manifested

by social isolates are not deficits in empathic ability, but instead are deficits in the

attention given to the displays of others. Like autistic individuals, social isolates

do not attend to expressions of others, although with isolates the cause is not

neurological impairment, but a total absence of social interaction. However,

when the isolation was relieved by the introduction of behavioral pacemakers,

primate and human isolates were able to develop normal social behaviors. They

described the common denominators in the evocation of social communication:

> (1) gradual exposure to a succession of behavioral pacemakers that overcame their initial fear, and (2) affiliative behavior with the experimenters that could later develop into more appropriate social bonds with individuals of their own kind and age. Similar studies involving humans have produced similar results. In psychodynamic therapies, the emotional affiliation, or "transference" that occurs, first with the therapist and later with appropriate social peers, is perhaps another example of behavioral change wrought about by empathic, affiliative bonding. (p. 31)

Koluchova (1972, 1976) studied a pair of twin boys who had been severely

abused for their first 7 years, lacked language, and were assessed as mentally

retarded. After physical rehabilitation, the twins were placed with much younger

children in a playschool environment. By the age of 14, they displayed normal

speech and social interactions, and manifested no symptoms of mental

disturbance. Ginsburg (1991) asserted that remediation in these various species

depended on appropriate affective bonding and on the use of behavioral

pacemakers. These findings support the later theory (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997)

that the capacity for perception of emotion is innate, and that with normal

neurological development and adequate social interaction, individuals will

develop their empathic ability.

In addition to developmental and environmental factors, researchers found that genetics play a role in determining empathic ability. Buck and Ginsburg (1997) proposed that the degree of empathic skill level is influenced by genetics, serving the evolutionary objective of promoting survival. Other researchers had previously confirmed this hereditary component (Emde et al., 1992; Lochlin & Nichols, 1976; Rushton, Fulker, Neale, Nias, & Eysenck, 1986). Zahn-Waxler, Robinson, Emde, and Plomin (1992) found that identical twins are more similar to each other on empathy measures than are fraternal twins of the same age. This case for genetic variability is not surprising in view of extensive research confirming the influence of heredity on individual cognitive and affective ability.

Development of Empathy

Numerous studies examining parental child-rearing practices and levels of attachment in infancy demonstrated that parental environmental influences factor into empathic reading (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Kestenbaum, Farber, & Sroufe, 1989). Koestner, Franz, and Weinberger (1990) found that child-rearing practices of parents of 5-year-old children predicted the children's empathy at age 31. The question then arises: What specific child-rearing practices promote the development of empathic reading in children?

Hoffman (2000), a leading authority on the relationship of empathy to prosocial behavior and moral development, suggested that empathy is

developed through parental discipline encounters, defined as settings in which parents attempt to change a child's behavior against the child's will. "[The encounters] begin when the child's behavior diverges from the parent's wishes and end when the child complies, the parent gives up or an external event intervenes" (p. 40).

Hoffman (2000) asserted that children learn to empathize through *parental inductions*, a type of disciplinary encounter that empathically-aware parents utilize when they observe transgressive behavior in their children. Hoffman defined behavior as transgressive when one is harming or thinking of acting in a way that may harm another. "A transgression may be provoked, intentional, accidental, a by-product of conflict, or a violation of another's legitimate expectations" (p. 113). In these instances, when a child harms or is about to harm another, parents take the victim's perspective and discuss how the child's behavior harms the victim, inducing the child to empathize with the potential or actual victim. For example, a parent might intervene with "*John, you shouldn't call Mary 'stupid.' See how she is crying? How would you feel if someone called you a name?*" Here the parent asks the child to consider the implications of his or her transgressive behavior, to read the thoughts or feelings of the victim and imagine himself or herself in the victim's place.

Hoffman (2000) asserted that parental induction discipline encounters are crucial for the development of empathy:

> Whether the harm done by the child is accidental or intentional and whether the victim is a parent or a peer, it is only in discipline encounters that parents are likely to make the connection, necessary for guilt and moral internalization, between children's egoistic motives, their behavior, and their behavior's harmful consequences for others and put pressure on children to control their behavior out of consideration for others. (p. 142)

These parental interventions stimulate children's early empathic tendencies, inducing the child to attend to others' thoughts and feelings (empathic reading). "The type of discipline that can do this is induction, in which parents highlight the other's perspective, point up the other's distress, and make it clear that the child's action caused it" (Hoffman, 2000, p. 142). Hoffman theorized that the successive integration of inductive messages over many years constructs an internalized norm of considering (reading) others, which can then produce empathic distress and prosocial responses. Empathic distress and pro- and antisocial responses to empathy are addressed later in this chapter.

Hoffman's (2000) research suggests that low empathizers receive little or no training in empathic reading from their parents. Reading the impact of one's behavior on others' feelings would not be given much attention in these families, and when the children of these parents become adults, they, too, would exert little or no effort on reading others. This scenario fits the executive who fails to read others, who is oblivious to the impact of his or her abrasive behavior. I regularly encounter this phenomenon in my work when clients react with surprise to coworker feedback describing the harm they induce in others: "*I can't believe this; I had no idea I was affecting people this way!*"

An added point of interest regarding empathic training: Stotland (1969) found that asking how the subject would feel if in the target's place (*self*-focused role-taking) was more effective for evoking a caring response than asking the subject how the target felt (*other*-focused role-taking). Applying this to the above example, asking the child, "*How would you feel if someone hit you?*" proved more effective for inducing prosocial responses than focusing the aggressor's attention on the victim's distress (*"See how she is crying? How do you think she feels?"*).

It is important to note that even though individuals may have been inadequately trained to read empathically, they are not necessarily doomed to a lifetime of empathic illiteracy. Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, and Teng (1995) determined that empathic reading is trainable in later years through feedback. Adults provided with accurate feedback on a stranger's thoughts and feelings, after observing the stranger, were subsequently able to learn to read that stranger's thoughts and feelings with a level of accuracy comparable to friends who have known each other for at least a year. Marangoni et al. also found that giving perceivers immediate feedback about the target's actual thoughts and feelings (halfway through the observed stranger episode) further increased empathic accuracy.

> This was an exciting finding . . . it indicated that empathic understanding is a trainable skill, and that providing immediate feedback about a target person's actual thoughts and feelings can be an effective component of empathy training. (p. 106)

Research supports Hoffman's (2000) theory that parents who use induction produce children who internalize a moral orientation characterized by prosocial behavior and guilt over harming others (Brody & Shaffer, 1982; Krevans & Gibbs, 1996). Induction's importance lies in its ability to teach empathic reading. Thus, individual differences in the capacity to empathically read others result from individual differences in the parent's use of inductions. From these findings, it would appear that children of parents who did not intervene with inductions were deprived of *empathic education*, and were not raised to read the thoughts and feelings of others, rendering them low on the scale of empathic reading ability.

In summary, the research on empathy indicates that all individuals with the exception of those afflicted with an autistic disorder are capable of engaging in the process of cognitive/affective role taking and interpretation: empathic reading. Levels of empathic reading skill vary from individual to individual, from low to high, and are influenced by genetic, developmental, and environmental factors. Empathic reading skills can be developed in later life through exposure to feedback. Individuals at the lower end of the skill range (*low empathizers*) will read emotions in others less frequently and/or less intensively, rendering them blind to the impact of their behavior on others.

An example of this is given by Christie and Geis (1970), who conducted extensive research on *Machiavellian* personalities, defined as individuals who use guile, deceit, and opportunism to manipulate others for one's own purposes.

These individuals intentionally transgress with others to achieve their objectives. Christie and Geis found that these very effective manipulators were *not* skilled empathizers who read the thoughts and feelings of others in order to take advantage of them. To the contrary, those who scored high as far as embracing Machiavellian techniques were low empathizers, poor at reading others' emotions and motives. The researchers suggested that their participants' empathic inadequacy gave them the advantage of insensitivity; their blindness to others' feelings permitted them to pursue their own goals without regard for others' feelings.

Well-meaning low empathizers who unintentionally wound others are similarly limited in their ability to perceive the impact of their transgressive behaviors on others. If the transgressions are not too frequent or egregious, they will often be excused because of their blindness: "*Don't be mad with Paul. He didn't mean to insult you; he has no idea of how to deal with people.*" In addition, these *emotionally blind* individuals will not see the need to remedy or correct abrasive behavior toward others because they are blind to the effects of their behavior. However, if the transgressions are sufficiently frequent and offensive, others will suffer.

Empathic Accuracy

Because of the aforementioned genetic, developmental, and environmental factors, individuals differ in their level of empathic ability. The

process of empathy begins with perception – cognitive role taking—followed by inference – interpretation based on external and internal referents. The accuracy with which one infers the specific content of another's thoughts and feelings has been extensively researched by Ickes (1997, 2003,; Ickes et al., 2000); he termed this ability *empathic accuracy* (Ickes, Stinson, Bissonnette, & Garcia, 1990). Ickes et al. (1990) videotaped conversations between two parties, asked each party to review the videotape, noting their thoughts and feelings at each moment, and then asked each individual to infer the thoughts and feelings of their partner. The degree to which an individual was able to accurately read their partner constituted their level of empathic accuracy.

Ickes, Marangoni, and Garcia (1997) discovered that individuals differ in their ability to accurately read the thoughts and feelings of others, and that perceivers' empathic accuracy scores tended to be relatively consistent no matter whom the empathizer read. Some individuals consistently scored high in accuracy, while others consistently scored at average or poor levels. Analysis of the data revealed the difficulty of achieving empathic accuracy. Same-sex strangers attained about 20% of the possible *accuracy points* when they attempted to infer each other's thoughts of feelings; same-sex friends averaged 30%. Yet, on rare occasions, the researchers encountered individual accuracy scores as high as 50% (Ickes, 2003).

Graham (1994) also discovered that friend dyads displayed more empathic accuracy than stranger dyads, showing that greater acquaintanceship—

shared history—led to greater empathic accuracy. Friends achieved higher empathic accuracy because of common ground developed from their interactions, but the increase of shared experience contributed to increased empathic accuracy in stranger relationships just as it did with friends (Graham, 1994). From these findings Ickes (2003) suggested that the most accurate mind readers are those who are skilled at relating information from the partner's current behavior to the partner's past behavior, and integrating this accumulated information to interpret their partner's thoughts and feelings.

Surprisingly, this finding did not hold for marital relationships. Studies conducted in New Zealand and the United States revealed that empathic accuracy declines over the course of the marriage (Kilpatrick, Rusbult, & Bissonnette, 2002). The decline was attributed to an increasing divergence in marital partners' viewpoints and current concerns that eventually erodes their intersubjectivity and empathic accuracy. Kilpatrick et al. (2002) found that in the early months of marriage, partners' degree of empathic accuracy was strongly correlated with their level of commitment to the relationship, their willingness to accommodate each other's bad behavior, and their level of satisfaction with the marriage. Swensen, Eskew, and Kohlhepp (1981) argued that these longer-married couples develop a different kind of interpersonal understanding, based more on stereotyped views of the other than on continued active sharing of thoughts and feelings. It appears that both estrangement and stereotyping inhibit

the exercise of empathy: Why go to the effort to decipher another's thoughts and feelings if you could care less, or already believe you know?

In same-sex friend relationships empathic accuracy increased the most during the first few months of contact (Ickes, 2003); nearly 85% of the total increase took place during the first 6 to 8 months of acquaintance. The increase was then minimal and extremely gradual, occurring over the next 7 or 8 years. This finding suggests that the intersubjective activity between individuals in the first 6 months is critical to the success or failure of interpersonal attunement over the longer term.

> And if it is true that a modicum of empathic accuracy is needed for a relationship to begin at all, it is also true that increased empathic accuracy is necessary for the relationship to develop and progress over time. As the research findings . . . suggest, people make the transition from being strangers to being intimates by getting to know each other "from the inside." This process requires the partners to spend time together; to establish common ground; to share their more intimate thoughts, feelings, and perceptions with each other; and to recall this information in order to more effectively "read" each other's unexpressed thoughts and feelings. Through this process, greater empathic accuracy helps to change and redefine the partners' relationship in a way that typically makes it better over an extended period of time—turning strangers into friends and acquaintances into intimates. (p. 277)

Ickes (2003) also found that empathic accuracy is not always a predictor of better relationships. As previously noted, empathy is a neutral process that can produce either helpful or harmful responses in the empathizer. "Whether increased empathic accuracy helps or hurts relationships 'in the moment' depends both on how it is used and on the context in which it is applied" (p.

277). The employee who observes (reads) a public humiliation could choose to offer emotional support to the victim, or conversely promote further humiliation through disparaging gossip.

According to Ickes' (2003) model, when another presents little or no threat, greater empathic accuracy should improve the relationship; we infer that we can relate without risk. However, when another's thoughts and feelings are perceived as threatening, one's own ability to accurately decipher the threat can harm the relationship; inferring risk, one moves to retreat or defend. Thus high degrees of empathic accuracy allow organisms to read their social reality, to accurately determine the emotions producing anxiety and defensive responses in others.

Accurate empathy becomes a powerful tool in our social interactions, because accurate inferences—*insights*—aid one's assessment of potential risks and benefits in further social interaction. Inaccurate empathy renders one blind to the thoughts of feelings of others, and without insight one is left to blunder through social interactions, impairing the possibility of constructing effective interpersonal strategies in one's private and professional lives.

Prosocial and Antisocial Responses to Empathic Distress

Individuals capable of empathy can experience empathic distress, defined by Hoffman (1981) as *distress experienced by an individual as a result of empathizing with someone in actual distress*. A common belief is that experiencing empathic

distress will lead to a feeling of sympathy, followed by a helping response

indicative of caring. Such responses are considered *prosocial* behaviors, defined

by Eisenberg (1986) as voluntary behaviors intended to benefit another,

regardless of motive. Altruism is considered to be a subtype of prosocial

behavior; altruism is voluntary behavior intended to benefit another and is not

motivated by the expectation of external reward (Eisenberg, 1982; Staub, 1978). Is

it a given that empathic distress will motivate prosocial behavior? In other

words, if one feels distress after reading another's distress, will he or she

inevitably be moved to help, to behave prosocially? In the organizational context,

will abrasive executives who experience distress upon discovering that their

behavior causes pain then refrain from such behavior and make prosocial

reparations (apologizing, etc.)?

Theorists have long held that empathy is an important motive in prosocial

behaviors (Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981; Hoffman, 1981;

Staub, 1978). Batson et al. (1981) proposed that empathic reading of a person in

distress tended to increase one's desire to help. However, a 1982 meta-analysis of

studies addressing this question found no significant relation between empathy

and prosocial responding (Underwood & Moore, 1982); however Eisenberg

(1986) pointed out that most of the studies included in this analysis were

conducted with children. The findings make sense if one accepts the theory that

human empathy development progresses in concert with parental influence and

the ongoing achievement of higher developmental levels of cognition (Hoffman,

2000). Underwood and Moore (1982) did note that the strength of the association

between empathy and prosocial behavior seemed to increase with age. Research

on adolescents and adults has supported a positive correlation between empathic

distress and prosocial responses (Barnett, 1982; Barnett, Howard, King, & Dino,

1981; Davis, 1983; Eisenberg et al., 2002; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Penner,

Fritzsche, Craiger, & Freifield, 1995) .

> The empirical findings concerning the relation between empathy and
> prosocial behavior (an inconsistent relation in childhood, a positive
> association in adulthood) apparently are influenced by several factors.
> First, it is likely that empathy actually becomes a more effective mediator
> of prosocial action with age, especially as vicarious emotional responding
> involves a greater degree of sympathetic concern. (Eisenberg, 1986, p. 49)

In addition to motivating prosocial behavior, empathizing has been shown to

function in the inhibition of aggressive or antisocial actions toward others

(Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Gibbs, 1987; Parke & Slaby, 1983). Letourneau

(1981) also found that role-taking (empathic reading) has been negatively related

with aggressive behavior. A meta-analysis of the research further confirmed a

modest negative relation between empathy and aggressive and antisocial

behavior (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988); the majority of this research was done on

children.

In regard to the inhibitory effect of empathic reading in adults, studies of

abused children found that abusive parents scored lower on indexes of empathic

distress than did mothers from the non-abusive population (Miller & Eisenberg,

1988). Interestingly, the abused children exhibited less empathic distress toward

others than did non-abused children, supporting the theory that the lack of

empathy training produces less empathic children. Miller and Eisenberg (1988)

concluded that

> Thus it seems appropriate for practitioners and researchers interested in the inhibition of individuals' aggressive and antisocial behavior toward others to pay greater attention to the construct of empathy in their work. (p. 341)

Considering these findings in the context of management practice, it is important

to recall that not every abrasive workplace behavior is aggressive (e.g., employee

neglect, micromanagement, etc.). However, in those instances that involve

aggressive abrasive behavior (e.g., verbal abuse, intimidation, etc.), empathizing

may serve to inhibit this behavior in abrasive executives.

Emotional intelligence theorists deviate from the prevailing definition of

empathy as a neutral process (Davis, 1996; Ickes, 1997; Kohut, 1982), asserting

that empathy includes caring, describing it as "supportive emotional connection"

(p. 6). Goleman et al. (2002) termed this supportive activity *resonance*, and called

the negative driving of emotions *dissonance*. Goleman and other emotional

intelligence theorists (Bar-On, 1997a; Cherniss & Adler, 2000) implied that

leaders who engage in empathy will inherently respond to perceived feelings in

a prosocial manner. For examples: "Empathetic people care about others and

show interest in and concern for others" (Bar-On, 1997a, p. 17); or "Empathy:

sensing other's feelings and perspectives and taking an active interest in their

concerns" (Cherniss & Adler, 2000, p. 11). In point of fact, empathy research has

demonstrated that recognition and interpretation of other's emotions (putting oneself in the other's place) may result in, but does not necessarily lead to supportive (prosocial) behavior (Underwood & Moore, 1982).

Avoidant Empathizers

Empathizing can motivate prosocial behavior, reduce aggression, and interfere with the ability to manipulate others. But this is not always the case. Not everyone who experiences empathic distress translates this distress into prosocial responses. In this case, an individual empathically reads the experience of another (gaining awareness), but consciously or unconsciously chooses to avoid responding in a prosocial manner. I refer to these individuals as *avoidant* empathizers. In transgressive situations, the avoidant empathizer is conscious of the pain he or she inflicts, but does not react prosocially. The literature discusses three factors that may result in non-helping responses (Hoffman, 2000): These are defenses against (a) diversion from egocentric (self-serving) objectives, (b) perceiving oneself as harmful, and (c) one's helplessness to respond.

Defense Against Diversion from Egocentric Objectives

Responding prosocially to empathic distress can be a costly process. The cost of helping can be incurred through expenditure of time, money, and emotional energy. Diverting these resources from their original goals may help the individual in distress, but detract from personal goal achievement or risk

avoidance. Oliner and Oliner (1988) studied Germans who did and did not rescue Jews from the Nazis during the Holocaust, discovering that some non-rescuers who felt intense empathic distress did not help Jews because they were afraid that they themselves would suffer from Nazi retaliation.

People are confronted with competing agendas and environmental demands on a daily basis as they strive to achieve their priority objectives; a manager sees that granting an exception on paid leave for one employee will allow the employee to care for a disabled family member, but rejects the request so as not to jeopardize the organization's productivity goals, prioritizing organizational needs over individual needs. A sociopath may see that a plan to commit robbery will inflict harm on the victim, but is unwilling to abandon the egocentric objective of getting money. A narcissistic personality-disordered person may see that his or her expensive acting lessons and incessant auditions (all part of a quest to achieve fame) are damaging his or her marriage but remains unwilling to pay the cost of anonymity to relieve his or her partner's distress. Simply put, diverting energies from one's egocentric objectives to respond to another's distress can threaten the pursuit of one's own objectives.

Researchers have identified a subtype of avoidant empathizing which serves both egocentric and relationship-maintenance objectives: *motivated empathic inaccuracy*. Simpson, Ickes, and Blackstone (1995) found that relationship partners will often be motivated to *avoid* accurately inferring each other's thoughts and feelings to protect themselves and their relationship from the

damage that could result if accurate inferences were made. In the course of their research they found the first direct evidence that perceivers use motivated inaccuracy as a means of protecting their relationships when accurate understanding of their partners' thoughts and feelings might destabilize and undermine the relationships. Couples who used motivated inaccuracy were found to have more success in keeping their relationships intact by *tuning out* potentially relationship-threatening information than did partners who were empathically accurate.

> Evidence that motivated inaccuracy stems from subconscious processes would lend support to the proposition that motivated inaccuracy operates as a psychological mechanism serving a primary defensive function: to sidetrack or minimize conscious perceptions of threat to an existing relationship. (p. 639)

Thus, responding prosocially to empathic distress can be costly, diverting focus from one's personal objectives. These costs can be avoided if one chooses to ignore the distress of others in favor of one's egocentric pursuits, or by consciously or unconsciously choosing to *misread* or tune out empathic distress.

Defense Against Perceiving Oneself as Harmful

A second motive for asocial (indifferent) or antisocial (hostile) responses to empathizing occurs when one believes that the distressed individual is not deserving of help. For example, one may experience little or no empathic distress for an individual facing bankruptcy as a result of profligate spending. Schmidt

and Weiner's (1988) research confirmed that people were less likely to help if they felt the individual participated in creating their own distress.

But if one transgresses against another by behaving abrasively, one may experience empathic distress and attempt to resolve that distress by blaming the victim. Unwarranted blaming is a form of projection, a defensive act of getting rid of an unwanted part of the self by placing the perceived bad part into someone else (Diamond, 1992). The executive who publicly humiliates a subordinate for poor performance can rationalize that the victim deserved to be verbally abused, thereby negating the possibility of guilt that would impel the executive to apologize or make reparations for the hostile behavior. In essence, blaming the victim for one's own transgression allows one to deny that he or she is the cause of another's distress.

Defense Against One's Helplessness to Respond

The third motive for ignoring distress in others involves the pain of helplessness. It is extremely difficult to see others suffer when one can do nothing about it. An effective defense against such pain lies in insulating oneself physically or emotionally: creating psychological distance through denial or minimization of pain. This phenomenon can be observed in caregivers who become overwhelmed by another's distress and experience emotional hardening, also known as burnout (Pederzane, 1998; Staub, 1996). Figley (1995) researched individuals continually exposed to victims of trauma and found that those who

were unable to tolerate high levels of empathic distress distanced themselves psychologically, consciously or unconsciously numbing themselves to perceived pain. In this scenario, the abrasive executive may require, or be required to ask employees to perform, tasks that are unreasonable or excessively burdensome. The executive then distances himself or herself from resulting employee distress by denying or minimizing their pain: "*They're just complaining about nothing; we all have to do things we don't want to at some time or another*."

In the case of individuals with adequate empathic-reading skills, the act of reading other people may or may not result in empathic distress for the other's suffering. Empathic distress has been shown to inhibit aggression and motivate prosocial responses such as caring or helping (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). At the same time, empathic distress may threaten an individual's pursuit of egocentric goals, self-perception, and ability to tolerate suffering. This may result in defensive responses to empathic distress where the individual ignores another's needs, blames, or psychologically distances oneself from others' distress.

<center>Insightful Leadership</center>

The two processes of empathy—*cognitive role-taking* followed by *interpretation* (Davis, 1996)—serve to read emotions. The word *emotion* is derived from the Latin *motere*, which means *to move* (Segal, 1997). In essence, emotions motivate us to act, whether defensively (through fight or flight), or prosocially (through cooperation).

> That emotions lead to actions is most obvious in watching animals or children; it is only in "civilized" adults we so often find the great anomaly in the animal kingdom, emotions—root impulses to act—divorced from obvious reaction. (Goleman, 1995, p. 6)

Emotions move us to action, and are consistent in their expression across *Homo sapiens*:

> Compelling cross-cultural research by Ekman (1973) has supported Darwin's hypothesis that emotional expression as evolved across species (Darwin, 1872/1965). This strongly implies that emotional information—and the capacity to read it—would show some universality across human beings and even closely related mammalian species. Ekman argued that recognition of facial emotional expression was universal. (Mayer et al., 2001, p. 234)

Leaders are required to move people, but leaders who do not understand the power of emotion to motivate action will be handicapped. Goleman (1995) stated that great leadership works through the emotions: "Setting the emotional tone of an interaction is, in a sense, a sign of dominance at a deep and intimate level: [I]t means driving the emotional state of the other person" (p. 117). Failure to drive emotions in the right direction is a failure of leadership.

The dominant emotional intelligence theorists cite empathy, the ability to recognize and interpret emotion, as a fundamental competence for emotional management (Bar-On, 2000; Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Empathy is essential for reading and ultimately managing emotions, and failure to exercise this emotional competence intelligently in the workplace will have dramatic implications for leadership ability.

To drive emotions, to *emot-ivate* people to action, a leader must be able to read and accurately interpret the emotions of those around him or her. These dual activities comprise the actual use of empathy as formally defined in the literature (Davis, 1996). Whereas Bar-On spoke of empathy as a single process—to "emotionally read" other people (Bar-On, 1997b, p. 17)—Boyatzis et al. (1995) adhered to the more formal definition, stating that "empathy is indicated when a person accurately reads or interprets the moods, feelings, or nonverbal behavior of others" and "understands the reasons for others' behavior (i.e., knows what motivates or demotivates specific other individuals" (p. 84). Maintaining the distinction between reading (perspective-taking) and interpretation (inference) is critical when training individuals to empathize, for both processes of empathy must be operative and accurate for empathy to serve as useful tool in managing emotions in oneself and others.

The executive who fails to register that his or her management team sits at the far end of the conference table, at the greatest possible distance from their leader, exemplifies emotional illiteracy: the failure to read emotions, neglecting the process of perspective-taking, in a potentially significant emotion-driven scene. Because of such *sightlessness*, any chance of interpretation ("*Perhaps they distance themselves because they feel emotionally distant from me.*") is precluded.

An example of the ability to read, but failure to accurately interpret emotions (to demonstrate *empathic accuracy*) is presented by the executive who complains that his or her management team never speaks up or offers ideas in

management meanings. The executive succeeds in perspective taking (reading silence and tense expressions) but fails miserably in the accuracy of interpretation ("*They don't speak up because they're lazy and don't care!*" versus "*They feel intimidated and threatened.*"). The first case signifies a failure of reading (*sightlessness*), precluding any hope of interpretation. The second case demonstrates a failure of accurate interpretation (*insightlessness*). In neither case are the feelings of others understood. In summary, accurate empathy is key to reading and understanding the behaviors and emotions of others.

> When such leaders fail to empathize with, or to read the emotions of, a group accurately, they create dissonance, sending needlessly upsetting messages. The resulting collective distress then becomes the group's preoccupation, displacing the attention they need to give to the leader's message—or to their mission. In any work setting, the emotional and the business impact of a dissonant leader can be gauged easily: People feel off-balance, and thus perform poorly. (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 19)

> When leaders are able to grasp other people's feelings and perspectives, they access a potent emotional guidance system that keeps what they say and do on track. As such, empathy is the sine qua non of all social effectiveness in working life. (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 50)

Deficits in the reading and accurate interpretation of emotions impair a leader's capacity to develop insight into the psychological dynamics of the workplace. Herein lies the primary challenge for the practitioner of empathy: accurate interpretation of emotion—insight. I*nsightless* emotional management — management lacking psychological insight—inevitably incurs chronic emotional distress. To quote Scottish essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle (1913): *"Nothing*

is more terrible than activity without insight" (p. 6). This holds for coaching as well as management.

This review of the literature on abrasive executive behavior, the process of empathy, and the outcomes of empathy, clearly indicates the need for research on methods of working with abrasive executives: to improve their awareness of the impacts of their abrasive behaviors on others, to develop their empathic skills, and to foster their insight into others' emotions particularly as affected by their own behaviors. The next chapter describes the methods used in this research study, followed by a description of findings and conclusions regarding the use of empathy in a coaching process intended to help abrasive executives construct less destructive interpersonal management strategies.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

Research Design

The objective of this qualitative study is to construct theory regarding the use of empathy in a coaching method for abrasive executives. I used the psychological case study approach in this retrospective study of a coaching method designed to help these executives construct less destructive interpersonal management strategies.

The psychological case study method evolved from the practice of clinical psychology, and focuses on the decision-making process in the delivery of treatment: why decisions were made, how they were implemented, and with what results (Schramm, 1971). Psychological case studies differ from other case studies in two aspects: The researcher is the clinical investigator and the participant in this case in the role of psychodynamically-oriented coach. The objective is theory construction, not treatment effectiveness (Kazdin, 1980). The choice of this method to explore the use of empathy is particularly appropriate in view of von Wright's (1971) assertion that experiential understanding is an empathic approach to research, "a form of *empathy* or a re-creation in the mind of the scholar of the mental atmosphere, the thoughts and feelings and motivations of the objects of his study" (p. 6).

Shaughnessy & Zechmeister (1994) characterized the psychological case study method as a source of hypotheses and ideas about behavior. Case study

methods may be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory (experimental) (Yin, 2003). This study , as noted, used the exploratory case study approach, examining three cases of executives who were coached from a theoretical orientation based upon empathy. Yin (2003) asserted that a complete research design benefits from the development of a theoretical framework for the intended case study:

> Rather than resisting such a requirement, a good case study investigator should make the effort to develop this theoretical framework, no matter whether the study is to be explanatory, descriptive, or exploratory. The use of theory, in doing case studies, is not only an immense aid in defining the appropriate research design and data collection but also becomes the main vehicle for generalizing the results of the case study. (p. 33)

Three cases were analyzed with the goal of strengthening and exemplifying the theory and effects this coaching method. I then analyzed themes emerging from a range of sources (Bulmer, 1979) consisting of the case material, the literature review, and the sociobiological and psychoanalytic theoretical orientations upon which I have based my work over the past 10 years, with the objective of developing, refining, or rejecting elements of the theoretical framework underlying this method of coaching abrasive executives. Essentially, this research consists of a retrospective case study of the coaching method using the data from clients in the coaching sessions, and research and theory discussed in the literature review.

Setting and Sample

The three executives participating in this study were employed at the middle and upper management levels, two in low-technology companies, the third in a high-technology environment. Because of the extreme sensitivity regarding confidentiality issues, their work locations are only described as within the United States. All were referred by their respective employers. Following the initial in-person assessments at their workplaces, two of the executives were coached by telephone, the third in person.

Participants were selected from the population of 29 individuals who were referred by their employers from January 2003 to December 2004 to the Executive Insight Development Group, Inc. for coaching to reduce abrasive behaviors. The coaching model under consideration in this study evolved over 10 years of practice; only in the 2 years immediately preceding the study did the model achieve sufficient definition to be applied consistently to the executives receiving coaching.

The sample was then limited to executives I coached for 6 months or more to demonstrate the course of the coaching process and the participants' responses to it. To guard against the potential ethical complications of dual roles (simultaneous research and practice) or coercion (compelling clients to participate as subjects), research was conducted only on individuals who had concluded their coaching engagement prior to participation in the study.

The sample was then further limited to individuals presenting with an aggressive (as opposed to avoidant) abrasive style, the latter characterized by neglect of, or isolation from coworkers. This was done in the interests of literal replication (Yin, 2003) to explore the conditions under which this style is likely to be found. Aggressive abrasives, earlier defined as executives who injure through aggressive words or actions, constitute the majority of referrals for this type of coaching, and are the focus of bullying literature on executives. Much less attention has been devoted to abrasive executives who cause distress through non-aggressive styles characterized by avoidance through isolation, indecisiveness, and neglect.

Imposition of the above criteria on an initially very small group of coaching clients incidentally reduced the remaining sample to an all-male Caucasian population ranging in age from the mid 40s to early 50s (exact ages are not given in order to protect client anonymity). Admittedly, this final sample was severely limited in terms of gender, race, age, and abrasive style. Although this limits the potential generalizability of the theory developed to White, middle-aged males with aggressive styles, it is at the same time hoped that theory emerging from study of this limited sample will serve as a beginning point for future researchers in their studies of abrasive executives of different demographics and abrasive styles.

Data Collection and Management

The data source for this study consisted of my concurrent notes taken as executive coach (researcher), composed of alternately detailed and summarized transcriptions of coaching sessions. These notes were taken during coaching sessions, with the permission of the participants for the purpose of facilitating the coaching process. It should be noted that these notes are not perfect transcriptions of the coaching sessions; because the notes were touch-typed concurrently while actively engaged in coaching dialog, limitations of typing speed and the coach's ability to focus on both coaching and recording required intermittent summarization. In addition, the notes were taken exclusively to support the coaching process and not for research purposes. All coaching cases were concluded prior to initiation of this research study, as noted above.

Although recording the sessions would have guaranteed accuracy and completeness of transcribed dialog, initiation of coaching with abrasive executives, as noted above, is a highly sensitive enterprise: Because a relationship of trust and confidentiality has yet to be established, the executive client could easily perceive tape recording of sessions as an effort to collect evidence that could then be used against the executive.

Written permission was secured from each former client-participant to use these notes as a data source for the research. Each proposed participant was first contacted by telephone (Appendix A) to introduce the project and to invite the individual to participate in the study. Each participant who agreed to

participate was then sent two copies of the informed consent form (Appendix B)

for signature, one to be returned to the researcher. Upon receipt of the signed

form, the participant was then sent a copy of his coaching session notes, and

asked to strike out any material directly on the notes that he wished to have

deleted. Enclosed with the notes was a letter requesting specific consent to use

these notes (Appendix C) along with a separate consent form granting

authorization to use the notes (Appendix D) once any requested deletions were

made. None of the executives requested any deletions and the notes were

analyzed in their entirety.

The purpose of this study was to explore how empathy is used in a

coaching process intended to help executives construct less abrasive

management strategies. This statement brings forth the question: less abrasive in

comparison to what? The answer: less abrasive in comparison to the level of

distress reported by the executive's coworkers prior to initiation of coaching.

This response would seem to call for a comparison of initial distress levels and

distress levels reported in subsequent periodic retrieval of coworker perceptions

(referred to as *pulse checks*). Data from these pulse checks could provide a source

for *data source triangulation* in which the researcher looks to see if the

phenomenon under study remains the same at other times, in other spaces, or as

persons interact differently (Stake, 1995). If the intent of this dissertation had

been to validate the effectiveness of the coaching method under question, these

data would be essential. How could the researcher make the claim that abrasive

behavior was reduced without supporting data from coworkers? However, including these data in their original form would constitute a significant threat to the executives' anonymity, because consent for use of the information would have to be secured from each coworker, thereby signaling to the executive's workplace that he is one of the individuals in the study. For these reasons, these data are not a part of this study.

Once again, this theoretical dissertation research seeks to construct theory, not to demonstrate validity, reliability, or efficacy of the coaching method under study. Because of the risks to confidentiality, a decision was made to exclude the specific content of these pulse checks from the study, making only summary references to their content in respect to the increase or reduction of abrasive behavior.

All written materials were stored in files on a desktop computer, which is protected by password access and maintained in a locked facility to which only I have access. The data will be maintained for years, and then destroyed by deleting the information from my computer system. Any materials printed from the computer will also be destroyed through shredding. Names, employers, position titles, and other potential identifying information were disguised or deleted to protect anonymity.

Data Analysis

Formal analysis of case study materials is usually conducted through *direct interpretation* or *coded analysis* (Stake, 1995). In this study I use the qualitative research method of hermeneutic analysis to explore the phenomenon of empathy in a coaching process designed to reduce abrasive behavior in executives. Hermeneutics is the practice of interpretation, of rendering meaning, through the recursive analysis of text or discourse (van Manen, 1997).

Hermeneutic inquiry involves the application of direct interpretation and thematic analysis. *Direct interpretation* consists of meanings drawn by the researcher from instances, even single instances (Stake, 1995). *Thematic analysis* involves the process of recovering the theme or themes embodied and expressed in the evolving meanings and imagery of phenomena (Van Manen, 1997); in this study, the exercise of abrasive behavior and the use of empathy to reduce abrasive behavior.

Data were first coded (yet another method of interpretive analysis) (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and aggregated into categories or themes. I then engaged in *direct interpretation* of individual instances and *categorical aggregation* of instances to make conclusions about them as a class (Stake, 1995). I then proceeded to thematic analysis (Flick, 1998) of the coaching notes to identify themes and their relationship to concepts presented in the literature review and potentially operative in the coaching method. Findings from this analysis were then

interpreted in the context of prior research on abrasive behavior and empathy to construct and explicate the theoretical bases for the coaching method.

Kazdin (1981) stated that the case study method is usually considered to be inadequate as a basis for drawing scientific inferences: "Relationships between independent and dependent variables are difficult to discern in a typical case study because of the ambiguity of the factor(s) responsible for performance" (p. 184). Even if the treatment appears to be effective, one could not verify that the interpretation offered is valid; alternative interpretations could constitute threats to internal validity. Shaughnessy & Zechmeister (1994) agreed that the major limitation of the case study method lies in its failure to control for extraneous variables.

Although it is difficult to draw inferences relating to causality in case study research, Kazdin (1981) maintained that it is neither impossible nor prohibited; the absence of quantitative material does not necessarily rule out the exploration of causality. He asserted that drawing causal inferences in the treatment of a clinical case depends on the *type of effect*: "the more immediate the therapeutic changes after the onset of treatment, the stronger a case can be made that treatment was responsible for the change but this does not by itself mean that treatment was responsible for the change" (p. 186). Kazdin added that the more immediate the change, the less likely alternative sources of influence coincident with treatment account for the change. Causal inferences, then, can be drawn from immediacy of change.

A further element inferring causality is the *stability factor*: If the problem is stable, and has not changed for an extended period of time, changes that coincide with intervention suggest that the intervention may have led to change. "When change has occurred for a client whose problem has been evident for a long period, the plausibility that treatment changed the case is greatly increased (Kazdin, 1981, p. 185).

When case studies are used to generate theory, the focus of generalizability shifts. Yin (2003) explained that case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions, not to populations or universes. "In doing a case study, [the] goal will be to expand and generalize theories (*analytic generalization*) and not to enumerate frequencies (*statistical generalization*)" (p. 10). Analytic generalization generalizes a particular set of results to a broader theory, but Yin cautioned that such generalization is not automatic; the theory must be tested by replicating the findings in a second or even third case. "Once such replications have been made, the results might be accepted as providing strong support for the theory, even though further replications had not been performed" (p. 37). Three cases were analyzed in this study to strengthen the potential generalizability of the emergent theory:

> A common complaint about case studies is that it is difficult to generalize from one case to another. . . . The problem lies in the very notion of generalizing to other case studies. Instead, an analyst should try to generalize findings to "theory," analogous to the way a scientist generalizes from experimental results to theory. (p. 38)

Here, a major insight is to consider multiple cases as one would consider multiple experiments – that is, to follow a "replication" logic. (p. 47)

To follow a replication logic, Yin stated that each case must be selected so that it predicts either similar results (*a literal replication*) or contrasting results (*a theoretical replication*). He described how two or three cases are selected to determine the conditions under which a particular phenomenon is likely to be found (literal replication), while additional cases are used to determine the conditions under which it is *not* likely to be found (theoretical replication).

This form of replication logic is analogous to that used in multiple experiments (Hersen & Barlow, 1976). As much as similar findings from multiple experiments are considered more compelling (Herriot & Firestone, 1983), similar findings from multiple cases would be worthy of continued investigation or interpretation (Yin, 2003). "The theoretical framework [developed from multiple case analysis] later becomes the vehicle for generalizing to new cases" (p. 48).

Three cases representing aggressive abrasive management styles were selected for this study as a literal replication to explore the conditions under which aggressive management behavior is likely to be found, and to strengthen, through analysis of multiple cases rather than a single case (Kazdin, 1981; Yin, 2003), the generalizability of conclusions expressed in the coaching theory. Further research testing this newly explicated theory is needed.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS WITH ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

This study was undertaken to research and articulate the theoretical bases of a coaching method intended to help abrasive executives construct less destructive interpersonal management strategies. This analysis and explication of the elements of this method are then applied to construct a theory of coaching abrasive executives. In theory construction, building materials comprise prior theories and research that provide the foundation for new theory. The emergent theoretical construct is further reinforced and refined by empirical data found in current practice. This new theory of coaching abrasive executives is constructed using discoveries from existing theory, research, and data drawn from case analysis of three abrasive executives.

The coaching method is described at each stage in the process, using the case study data for both the method's inputs and the executives' responses. In each phase, these inputs and responses are accompanied by the rationale for the coaching method's development as it evolved, thematic findings emergent in the coaching cases at each such stage, and the executives' progress which signals readiness for the next phase in the coaching process. Throughout the text, attributed quotations in regular type are actual statements of the executives; unattributed remarks in italics are rhetorical/hypothetical statements illustrating the coaching method and process itself.

The Executives

Abe

Abe was referred to coaching by organizational authorities for being overly reactive, overly emotional in his reactions, and for assistance regarding his management of subordinates. In referring him they described him as sorely lacking in patience and diplomacy, often speaking in an inappropriate or offensive manner with peers and subordinates. Abe's responses were depicted as hostile, threatening, cold, and brutal, characterized by name-calling, swearing, criticizing ("ripping") others, and temper outbursts.

Coworkers also noted a tendency to avoid direct confrontation; Abe would often criticize coworkers covertly, "badmouthing" them to other parties. Abe was described as impatient, adopting a commandeering tone, rarely saying please or thank you. Peers and subordinates portrayed Abe as attempting to display superior knowledge, continually striving to win the "war of the words" by out-talking others. Coworkers felt that he would frequently respond to questions with the implication that the inquirer should already have known the answer.

Peers and subordinates concurred that Abe treated subordinates "like kids," displaying an impatient, condescending style, frequently blowing up, belittling them, and constantly checking on them. They viewed him as totally uninterested in their needs, stated that he isolated himself, communicated

infrequently, and failed to advocate for their issues with management and other departments. Their conclusion that they fell "last on his priority list" resulted in repeated "mutinous" (Abe's term) forays to higher management. On the other hand, his superiors described in Abe a constant need for support, manifested by continually seeking approval from superiors for the adequacy of his decisions.

Regarding strengths, Abe was characterized as motivated, highly intelligent, technically proficient, innovative, and possessing strong business skills. His responsiveness to the requests of others was greatly appreciated, as was his willingness to take on new assignments and creative thinking in generating business solutions.

Ben

Ben was referred to coaching by his organization for disrespectful behavior toward subordinates, peers, and superiors. He was described as overly-direct without regard for the feelings of others: "Shoots from the hip;" "Doesn't sugar coat;" and "Comes across as cruel" were typical descriptions. Ben frequently used blunt, crude, or off-color language that often included inappropriate sexual or ethnic references. On two occasions female employees lodged complaints regarding these sexual references. Ben frequently engaged in mischievous "smart ass" humor designed to shock and/or and confound the recipient: coworkers said that they frequently did not know if he was serious or not in his cunning taunts. Ben was also described as quick to anger, resorting to

vulgar colloquialisms as the conflict escalated. On two occasions, he invited coworkers to resolve conflict through physical combat away from company property.

Ben's coworkers fell into two highly polarized groups: those who appreciated Ben's directness and viewed him as sincere in his efforts to improve operations and hold others accountable, and those who ascribed Ben's behavior to malevolent, persecutory intent. Ben's efforts to enforce policy were viewed as courageous and admirable by the former group, and rigid and authoritarian by the latter. While superiors valued Ben's technical expertise, they felt he often went too far with his abrasive style. Both groups concurred that Ben was very intelligent, highly talented, and driven to fulfill company objectives at the expense of his personal life and physical health.

Chris

Chris was referred by his organization to coaching for lack of emotional control, manifested in volatile outbursts primarily toward subordinates and peers. These episodes often occurred in front of others; Chris was described as using derogatory and occasionally foul language in his attacks on others' competence. Variously described as becoming "uncorked," "unglued," or "blowing up," coworkers noted that Chris's anger could be directed at anyone, that he did not appear to hold grudges, and never apologized. When he began working at the company these episodes could occur as often as 3-4 times daily;

however, after Chris was reprimanded 6 months prior to initiation of coaching, frequency dropped to 1-2 times per week, escalating during periods of stress.

Chris's abrasive style was characterized as intimidating, overbearing, condescending, and demeaning toward peers and subordinates. Coworkers said that they felt he was quick to label them as worthless and lazy, and took pride in making people feel less intelligent. Chris would frequently express himself non-verbally through facial expressions and other body language signifying contempt or disdain (e.g., rolling his eyes). Chris often made contemptuous comments toward other departments, whose members he would publicly malign. Coworkers also noted that he was quick to leap to negative judgment without investigating circumstances, and gave minimal attention to team building, considering it superfluous to the work at hand.

Coworkers cited numerous strengths regarding Chris's management style. He was described as extremely intelligent, hard-working, technically expert, visionary, and dedicated to the interests of the company, his department, and himself. Coworkers noted that he was decisive, direct, and held no hidden agendas.

Executives' Abrasive Styles

Notes of the coaching sessions were analyzed to gain a detailed understanding of each executive's abrasive style. Codes were developed and applied to analyze key elements of executive behavior, including precipitants of

abrasive behavior, responses to provocation, aggressive language, family and work history, and management style objectives

Precipitants of Abrasive Behavior

Provocations: Abe

Abe's Achilles heel as a manager lay with subordinates, and to a lesser degree with peers whom he perceived as inept, uncooperative, and immature. Abe readily admitted: "I manage up better than down."

Abe's anger was most easily ignited by having to deal with his subordinate team, whom he characterized as immature and difficult. He variously described them as "troublemakers," "whiners," "passive-aggressive," "prideful," "resistant," and "complainers." He was easily provoked when they questioned his decisions, resisted his directives, or performed poorly. Underlying his descriptions was a theme of impatience with their childish incompetence. One legendary blowup was recounted wherein Abe exploded when he found his team watching a news broadcast on a television monitor that was to be used only for business purposes.

Abe used a sports metaphor to describe his team: "You are trying to win the Indy 500 and you are driving a [Volkswagen] Rabbit." Complaints about his team reflected a theme of impatience with slowness, ineptitude, or what he interpreted as passive-aggressive resistance to his leadership. When he

confronted his team with these perceptions, he reported that they would "give him a bunch of excuses."

Peers who exhibited similar uncooperative or negligent behavior were also subjected to his anger. Abe became incensed when peers or subordinates failed to meet a given customer's needs to his level of expectation. Challenges to his knowledge and/or authority constituted a major theme of provocation for abrasive behavior: "It is repugnant to me when people think they know more than I do and they don't. That is painful. They don't respect me, my knowledge. It's a threat to me. "

Provocations: Ben

Ben listed lateness, lying, and laziness as behaviors that he found intolerable. "I cannot stand people that are lazy: That will push my button more than anything else." He added that he did not tolerate people who were loafers: "I expect everyone to be just like me." Also on the list of irritants were coworkers who stole or blamed others for their shortcomings, and "backstabbers:"

> I cannot stand a person who will look you in the eye, stab you in the back, and then want you to feel good about it. They smile, and can't do their job, and take credit for other people's work.

He described his reaction to this type: "To be around him, I'd like to strangle him." Ben also professed a strong aversion to "your typical politician person—I have no time for them."

Ben took company policy very seriously, especially policies related to safety: "We have to preach safety, like a religion." Breaches of policy would quickly invoke his wrath: "Why do people feel they don't need to make it safe?!!"

Perceived close-mindedness also provoked abrasive response: "I have a hard time relating to people who don't have the same values that I have. I think that is one of my largest weaknesses, is being able to relate to people who keep their minds stagnant." Included in this category were people who leapt to judgment. Ben was infuriated when he was accused of unacceptable behavior by individuals who he felt neglected to investigate the surrounding circumstances or listen to his case.

Provocations: Chris

Chris was immediately and deeply provoked by coworkers who obstructed his efforts to improve operations. "I have trouble when people put blocks in front of me. . . . I am ruthless; I hang them out to dry." He described an instance where another department head resisted implementing Chris's recommendations: "I was hugely frustrated by being told why I can't do something. Just blew. Come hell or high water, I'll do it without them. "

Chris loathed peers whom he adjudged indecisive:

I struggle with peers: I have the patience of a wounded rhino. . . . I challenged peers on the pace they did things… .They don't like change…. I think there are a lot of my peers who with past management, a lot of decision making was taken from them. I am used to seeing department heads stand on their own two feet; too many here are prepared to sit back,

and then not move forward. . . . I challenged peers on the pace they did things. . . . They don't like change. They waste my time. . . . They don't have vision to move forward. I felt I was wading through syrup.

I don't know how to keep patience. . . . People will repeat themselves like they're trying to write a book. . . . I interrupt. It is the speed of which they can or can't get to a decision. It doesn't frighten me to make a decision; other people are slower.

Responses to Provocation

Responses: Abe

Abe reacted to challenges to his knowledge or authority with aggression or avoidance. Aggression took the form, as he described it, of "rattling the cage" of the offending party. "[You have to] grab them by the face mask and rattle their cage. There are certain types of people who are motivated by fear, others who are self-motivated, who respond to the carrot." Abe's management strategy involved instilling fear in order to motivate the individual. In the course of coaching, Abe would come to describe this as his "bazooka" strategy, designed to "blast" a person out of resistance and into action. Abe only did this with those he thought could tolerate it. He described one employee who, although a "bit of a whiner," was perceived by Abe as lacking in confidence, "having a self-doubting personality:" "I never grabbed him by the face mask: That would damage him." Instead he would resort to lecturing such coworkers "just like kids." Referring to a resistant subordinate, he commented: "I can send 5-year-olds to their room. I

wanted to give the bastard a time out." In response to the aforementioned television episode, Abe lambasted his team in a manner they later described as an angry parent lecturing little children.

Abe rarely responded abrasively to superiors, employing logic and diplomacy to overcome perceived resistance to his recommendations. When Abe experienced resistance from peers or perceived them as incompetent, particularly on issues of customer care, he would resort to scathing voice- or e-mails, written complaints to superiors, or "badmouthing." Peers cited instances where he threatened to complain to the CEO if they did not respond immediately to his voice- or e-mails. "I have a certain affinity for the military operational ass-kicking framework. That is a place of danger. You don't make soufflé on the front line of battle."

Abe would also avoid conflict, isolate himself from his subordinates in his office and avoid communication on issues that could give rise to conflict, such as employee requests related to benefit issues. He stated that he "never got any management training. [I] was thrown in to run a team."

Responses: Ben

Ben readily admitted that he was overaggressive in his response to provocation. When others refused to listen to (his) logic, Ben would unleash verbal assaults characterized by devastatingly quick-witted and vulgar insults.

"Blow up and blast 'em out of their saddles. Whoever could yell the loudest won the battle."

These attacks were sometimes accompanied by threats of physical assault. He described one instance where a coworker "made me look like an idiot" and then "blocked [my access to] the door:" "I gave him one of my best cussings. [I told him,] 'If you open your mouth, I am prepared to lose my job.'" As noted previously, Ben challenged coworkers to resolve conflict through physical combat away from company property on several occasions. Ben also threatened termination when provoked. To a coworker who complained over having to do safety inspections on his off time, Ben responded, "I'd like to put that in writing, that you don't care. You might want to look for a job elsewhere."

Ben also displayed aggression toward coworkers whom he held in contempt by publicly humiliating them in the course of conversation; he would question such an intended target in a highly logical and methodical manner until the target was revealed to be negligent, untruthful, or unintelligent. Coworkers likened the behavior to "throwing darts in front of an audience to make the person look like an idiot." He also engaged in clever displays of humor and verbal sparring intended to disarm and humiliate his opponent.

Responses: Chris

Chris equated aggression with proactivity, frequently describing his efforts to bring about change as "fights." When asked if he thought that his

abrasive style would help him to get upper management to approve a request, he responded, "There are things worth fighting for . . . [management] won't make a stand in public. They will do things subversively." On another occasion, Chris said, "I had to fight for my people," and stated that he "beat [a coworker] up royally." Chris appeared to be very comfortable with this approach. In reference to a peer, Chris said, "He doesn't enjoy conflict as much as I do."

Chris considered direct expression of aggression to be an acceptable mode of crusading for his issues, and disdained those who, in his view, did things "subversively." "I don't want to be insincere. I tend to be aggressive and demanding. That's how I reconcile it with myself."

Chris's responses to provocation were swift and severe, characterized by verbal attack and/or threat of exile:

> I am a natural to [jump to] conclusions. I do it pretty well. I will take snapshots. What I don't understand is that I go [back] to the same places, where the waste is, [and nothing has changed]. . . . Dumb people, lazy and worthless. Their managers are doing worthless stuff."

> I do discard guys. Write them off, discard them. It's not fair. I am very spontaneous when it comes to assessing somebody. I value some. I give them more time. The ones I don't value, I write them off.

He expressed that this latter group watered down his effectiveness: "It is almost a dilution process: Do I want to waste my time?" Chris admitted that on rare occasions his judgments were in error: "Ten percent of the time I have screwed up."

Abrasive Language

Abe relied almost entirely on sports and military metaphors: "Grab their face mask," "Rattle their cage," "bazooka," "bash," "beat," or "blast," "sabotage," "mutiny," and "Throw down the gauntlet."

Ben's language depicted direct physical attack: "slap," "kick," "stab," "strangle," "shoot," "cut your head off," "destroy," "crucify," "rip," "whip," "whipping boy."

Chris's language regarding aggression was generally more abstract and less graphic: "ruthless," "brutal," "nasty," and "see red." Some references to direct aggression were used: "kick ass," "rip their head off," "hang them out to dry," and "beat up."

Management Style Objectives

Objectives: Abe

Abe used sports analogies to describe his goals as a manager: "I play to win. I give 110%" every day; "Some coaches are nice, but don't win the Superbowl;" "[When you are] driving a Rabbit [at the Indianapolis 500], you are not going to win. So you can get mad, or you can decide to do what it takes." Abe was focused on winning, on being judged the best. When asked for his definition of happiness, Abe responded:

The key word is *execute*. To be happy at this at the end of this trip is to be successful, doing the best you can. If you hit the ball, do it just right. I raised my kids right. In my professional life, I hit the ball just right. In my personal life, I hit the ball right. To maximize my value. I didn't shortchange myself. What I want to do is do the best I can and pass that test having given the best of my abilities.

Abe viewed his life as a test that could be passed only through near-perfect execution. When asked of his goals for executive coaching, he immediately answered: "My goal is not to be impotent." He added "I don't want coaching to be about someone below me not liking my style."

Objectives: Ben

Ben described himself as task-oriented, rule-oriented, and results-oriented. He took enormous pride from "following directions, rules, and regulations" in doing as he was asked: "I have tremendous work ethics." He derived immense gratification from being "respected for my abilities." Reports and measures of exemplary performance provided particular satisfaction: He noted that he "loved being evaluated every 3 months." He added: "I always thought I was fairly gifted."

Ben described his value to past employers: "I was known as the axman, the problem solver. I was hired to do a job. That was viewed positively by upper management. I loved it. I still crave that, get an adrenaline rush, the axman stuff." He noted that a member of upper management had recently complimented him for being "one tough son of a bitch." Ben no longer savored

the executioner's role in his executive duties: "After [my last employer], it wasn't fun anymore, by then I didn't like it. I used to thrive on it, but it's not for me anymore."

Ben excluded personal relationship and social interaction from his quest for excellence. In his view, objectives could only be accomplished by separating "business from personal."

> I am not a team worker; I can live with that. They don't pay me to be a team player, they pay me to bring things together . . . to do business while I'm here. . . . Popularity is not in my vocabulary. . . . Most managers get results but in different management styles. I don't drink beer with the guys. I don't go out every weekend and play golf. I feel like a person who is paid to do a job. Their paycheck is the reward.

He considered social interaction to be a sign of weak management:

> It is a difference in their style. . . . They are part of the old boy network, the close knittedness. I don't want to be in that clique, in any clique. I feel they are intimidated, [that they] go for friendship instead of business. . . . A lot of people can't handle the truth, can't present the truth. I think they are looking for some way for me to soften up my communications, (to be) politically correct. I have fought that; I think you sugarcoat the truth. . . . Some people can handle it; the ones that can't handle the truth are going.

Ben placed great value on blunt communication free of "sugarcoating:"

> I think [the company is] looking for some way for me to soften up my communications, being politically correct. I have fought that; I think you sugarcoat the truth. [I don't want to be] someone so politically correct that when [coworkers] get chastised, they feel good about it.

He reported that his company was hiring an assistant for him, "someone to complement me who will, instead of telling them to get off their butt and go to work, will soften it up for them, do the touchy feely stuff." In Ben's view,

engaging in niceties was duplicitous, reflecting an individual's unwillingness to speak frankly and honestly.

Ben held very high expectations for himself, endeavoring to improve his management and technical skills through continued education. He took the same stance in relation to his work, incessantly striving for excellence on his company "report card." He perceived his abrasive behavior as necessary and appropriate to the task, and considered his "shoot-from-the-hip" style to be justified, and more honorable than dishonest "sugarcoating."

Objectives: Chris

Chris defined success by his ability to implement his vision of excellence:

I want to move the idea ahead. I just want to be successful. . . . I want to consistently hit those high numbers, the opportunity to get fitter and leaner, to make sure that we perform exceptionally well. [With the current approach] we don't sustain or flourish. I don't want to [just] survive, but move to grow.

He enjoyed campaigning for excellence: "I like working here, always have. . . . [I] get a huge kick out of working." His aforementioned comment about a peer "who didn't enjoy the conflict as much as I do" further supports this stance. Like Ben, he equated direct expression of aggression with frank communication and had contempt for those who, in his judgment, behaved "subversively." "I don't want to be insincere. I tend to be aggressive and demanding. That's how I reconcile it with myself." He had no reservations regarding his abrasive style, considering it expedient:

> I don't care what they think. . . . I want it quickly and they sit there and talk about it. . . . It drives me crazy when people get nice and skirt around [making a decision]. It's more fun to kick ass. . . . I have time to be nasty; it's faster.

In summary, although the executives cited a variety of provocations, the precipitants of their abrasive behavior reflected similar themes. The executives were provoked by incompetence, attributed to lack of motivation (e.g., "lazy," "loafer," "childish"); ignorance (e.g., "stupid," "slow," "inept" "indecisive"); or defiance (e.g., "liar," "difficult," "prideful," "troublemaker"). Each working from his own interpretive frame, the executives determined three core motivations of coworker incompetence: sloth, stupidity, and/or insolence. Their interpretations were consistently pejorative: In their view, coworkers failed to meet expectations because the coworkers were flawed. Their interpretations also reflected splitting, wherein the executives perceived themselves as "all good" (motivated, intelligent, cooperative), and coworkers as "all bad" (slothful, stupid, insolent).

All three executives were intelligent, technically proficient, and driven to achieve and exceed company objectives. They were accepting of people they considered their equals, but were frustrated and impatient with coworkers who did not measure up (e.g., Ben: "I expect them to be just like me"). Two of the three made little or no effort to educate or develop "stupid" coworkers; Ben, who placed high value on education, took pride in giving technical seminars to his subordinates. He rewarded motivated students with his approval, reflected in his

highly polarized feedback. However, like Abe and Chris, Ben quickly became aggressive when coworkers persisted in their "close-mindedness."

All three perceived coworker incompetence as a threat to their competence, obstructing and thus thwarting their efforts to achieve. They also took it personally, interpreting coworkers' failures to cooperate as intentional resistance to and sabotage of their initiatives. Frustrated and angered by their coworkers, they abstained from socializing on the personal or work fronts. All three executives responded to coworkers whom they perceived to be resistant as adversaries, aggressing with threats of abandonment (through termination), or annihilation (through verbal or physical assault). Abe was the only executive who occasionally resorted to avoidance of conflict by isolating himself or enlisting others to fight his battles.

Abrasive management styles were ego-syntonic for all of the executives: They considered themselves crusaders for excellence and saw their behavior as necessary, ethical, and admirable. All took pride in communicating without tact (viewed as duplicitous) or consideration for other's emotions ("touchy-feelyness"). In summary, these executives felt that threats to their competence could only be overcome through force, through aggressively wielding the sword of their power to decapitate coworker resistance.

Psychodynamics of Abrasion

What follows is a consideration of the psychological dynamics influencing abrasive executive behavior. Data from the coaching cases are analyzed and interpreted in the context of theory and research presented in the literature review. Antecedents to abrasive behavior are then examined in relation to the case material, followed by discussion of the issue of intent to harm.

Mastery as Defense against Threat

Freud's (1894) theory of psychoanalysis was built upon the sociobiological construct of threat, fear (anxiety), and defense. He expanded Darwin's (1859) concept of *survival of the fittest* to the psychological realm. Psychological threats to life or love stir annihilation and/or abandonment anxieties, and various mechanisms of defense (Freud, 1936; Freud, 1894) could be mobilized to overcome or at least reduce these threats. Anxiety over loss of functional effectiveness, of one's ability to battle threat, pervades the threat-anxiety-defense dynamic (Bonime, 1981).

When viewed from a psychoanalytic perspective, we see the dog-eat-dog world of business survival through the executives' eyes. For them, super-effectiveness is the only route to victory over threats to competence. *Fitness* is defined as excellence bordering on perfection, as superhuman demonstration of competence. These *SuperManagers* are driven to leap tall objectives in a single bound, to work faster than the speeding-bullet objectives issued by management,

to fight crimes against productivity. Incompetent coworkers are perceived as threats to the SuperManager's heroic crusade. This threat of coworker resistance must be dealt with swiftly and effectively, through aggression: the block(heads) must be crushed.

The SuperManager's heroic quest disguises an underlying fear of loss of functionality, heard in the executive's words:

> Chris: One of things that drives me is the fear of failure. . . . I just want to be successful. . . . I want to consistently hit those high numbers. . . . [I want] to make sure that we perform *exceptionally* [italics added] well.

> Abe: My greatest fear is the fear of failure, of not executing, of being revealed as a fraud, incapable of doing what I've been given. The fear that I am not a good leader or manager. . . . Don't ever put me in a position where I can fail. Being boxed into that corner did violence to my disposition. . . . I have to be successful.

> Ben: I have always been in control since I was young. I always had control in my life. . . . I am a driver. . . . Rage is in there . . . [about] the [projects] that have failed, and [the coworkers] sit there and dumb down. I cannot stand that. It is gut-wrenching. Headaches, very severe, chest pains set in. I just want to go and find a board and beat it with my fists. . . . I go into withdrawal; I worry too much, and then when it doesn't go right, it kills me when they slack. They pull into my chest and pull my heart down.

> Coach: I'm hearing that you are trapped.

> Ben: I have always felt trapped, wherever I've been.

If the SuperManager is rendered impotent by the kryptonite of coworker resistance, he loses control over his environment. He is trapped, annihilated (terminated, demoted), and/or abandoned (ridiculed, ignored). As noted in the literature review, sociobiologically, animals threatened with entrapment have two options: fight or flight (Cannon, 1939). Psychologically, we are limited to

those same options; to defend against threat by mobilizing defense mechanisms (A. Freud, 1936; Freud, 1894) in support of fight or flight. These executives' defensive maneuvers in response to provocation (threat) have already been discussed, but are well summarized in Ben's comment: "Is [the job] survivable? I have done a good job. If I feel threatened, in any way, shape or form, I will come out swinging. There is survival, tooth and nail." This is the psychological self striving to secure survival on the most favorable terms.

Bonime (1981) spoke of the preservation of the desired self-image: "The sense of the self functioning effectively maintains the familiar, thereby relatively comfortable, constant subjective sense of the *me.* Interferences with the sense of effective functioning are experienced as threats to the integrity of that *me"* (p. 72). For these managers, the *me* is SuperManager: omnipotent and invulnerable.

These SuperManagers closely resemble Kaplan's (1991) *significantly flawed expansive executive*, who he described as struggling with underlying insecurity and resorting to destructive interpersonal extremes. "Threat lies in failing to achieve perfection, thereby validating unconscious and intolerable anxiety over loss of control." Levinson (1978) underscored this interpretation, concluding that the abrasive personality is driven by the need for perfection, reflective of an unconscious self-perception of inadequacy and a resulting need to see oneself as extraordinary.

Other psychoanalytic organizational theorists view abrasive behavior similarly, whether aggressive or isolative: as a defense against threat (Argyris,

1990; Hirschhorn, 1988; Kets de Vries, 2001; Vaillant, 1977). In response to threats to self-preservation in the workplace (which may of itself be psychologically defensive) (Allcorn & Diamond, 1997), executives possessing personality constellations that render them more vulnerable to threat will respond defensively in the interest of survival. "Psychological defensiveness is externalized in the form of the need to control others, work and events" (p. 13).

Work-generated anxiety can be compounded by anxieties unresolved in early development, producing an individual who is overly sensitive to perceived threats to security and self-esteem (Kets de Vries, 1979; Kofodimos, 1990; Levinson, 1978). The greater the anxiety, the more extreme the defensive behavior (Kets de Vries, 1993; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984; Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977).

These SuperManagers equated aggression with effectiveness, believing that their abrasive behaviors (superpowers) would impel their coworkers to desired action. Coworker emotions (the "soft stuff") were distractions that only drained their superpowers. How and where did they learn that aggression is the motivator of choice?

Antecedents of Abrasion

Bassman (1992) stated that abusive behavior is learned, and that everyone has learned it. Even though most elect not to abuse others, research on abusive behavior, as noted above, indicates that ordinary people can be induced to

behave in extremely abusive ways (Milgram, 1963) and with very little external pressure (Zimbardo et al., 1973). Bassman (1992) further asserted that role demands are very effective in inducing abusive behavior and that abusive behavior in response to abuse may at times be more a function of the roles in which people find themselves than of their own internal personality characteristics.

If abuse is learned, who are its teachers? Lessons on how to relate to others are learned in the family, the community, and at work. These behaviors are taught at home by parents and other family members, in the community by religious, academic and sports instructors (coaches), and at work by managers and fellow employees. The very limited research on managerial styles suggests a possible connection between past childhood abuse and workplace behavior (BNA, 1990), with one study reporting that over 50% of executives exhibiting abrasive behavior reported experiencing childhood abuse (Henderson-Loney, 1996).

Two of the three executives in this study made reference to childhood abuse. These references emerged in the course of coaching, either spontaneously or in response to a general inquiry regarding past experience or behavior. Coaching for abrasive executives is not psychotherapy and does not aim to intrude into personal realms that may be sensitive in the context of employment. The only history taken is a work history, asking the executive where he or she grew up, family size and occupation(s), type and location of education, followed

by a request for a description of work experiences that led to his or her current

position.

Abrasive Executive Intent

Theorists have proposed that employee abuse is neither intentional nor

deliberate, but is instead a response to threat in the interests of self-preservation,

not other-destruction (Kellerman, 2004; Ryan & Oestreich, 1998). This

conceptualization of abrasion as defense controverts the popular view that

employee abuse is motivated by malevolent intent:

> The cruel disrespect of workers that is born of bosses' characters has no
> reason or purpose other than the act of abuse itself. . . . This is abuse for
> the sake of abuse. Malignantly motivated bosses experience temporary
> relief, and sometimes even ghastly pleasure, because they have
> diminished another human being's sense of power, competence, or self-
> worth (Hornstein, 1996a, p. 49).

The current study was neither designed nor intended to discover the etiology of

abrasive executive behavior. Nevertheless, none of the findings from the three

cases supports the theory of malevolent or sadistic intent. In this theory, abrasive

executives are sadists, here defined as individuals who derive gratification by the

deliberate act of inflicting pain. Certainly, the three executives admitted to

inflicting pain, evidenced in their comments:

> Abe: I told you that if you make me feel pain, I will want to inflict pain
> back. I want you to feel it so you don't inflict it on me anymore.

> Ben: If I feel threatened, in any way, shape, or form, I will come out
> swinging.

Chris: I am ruthless. I hang them out to dry.

It should be noted that their admissions were always framed in defensive response to perceived threat; on no occasion did any of the executives describe inflicting pain outside of threat contexts.

Two of the executives did connect aggression with pleasure: Chris, in his previous statement that he "enjoyed conflict" more than one of his colleagues, and Ben, in describing his current employer: "This is one place that didn't want me to be an axman. I still crave that, get an adrenaline rush (from) the axman stuff." One might interpret these as indicators of sadism, but the contexts of each of the three indicated that they derived satisfaction from efficiently winning the battle against incompetence, not from the injuries inevitably suffered by their coworkers. Aggression wasn't satisfying; it was expedient. Chris:"[I don't have time to be nice]. . . . I have time to be nasty, it's faster." Another observation from Chris: "[My coworker] is honest and open, prepared to listen . . . very receptive to new ideas. I don't think I need to intimidate him." These are comments of measured mastery, not intent to harm.

Executives motivated by sadism would seek to torment through proactive, as well as reactive, aggression (Kets de Vries, 1984). There was no evidence from the executives or their coworkers of such proactive aggression, of efforts to devise destructive strategies independently of immediate threat. Sadists would also resist relinquishing their source of gratification (harming others) (Moore & Goldner-Vukov, 2004). In contrast, the executives in this study demonstrated a

willingness to work toward less aggressive management strategies as evidenced by their intense engagement in coaching; Ben: "I don't want to be mean anymore. . . . Now I am looking to solve problems without shooting. " Abe observed: "I want to have this conversation [with my team] in a professional 'bazooka-free' meeting."

The sadism theory of executive abrasion represents a primitive attempt to apply a clinical paradigm (Kets de Vries, 2001) of psychopathology to abrasive executives, Psychodynamically-oriented theorists diagnose the behavior in the context of hypothesized personality disorders when applying a clinical paradigm to the phenomenon of executive abrasion (Kernberg, 1979, 1998; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). The behavioral styles of the three executives in this study did not support this paradigm . Although all displayed some selected features characteristic of various personality disorders, none fulfilled the diagnostic criteria for any of the personality disorders set forth in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM IV-TR) (APA, 2000). For example, two of the executives displayed a lack of remorse characteristic of antisocial personality disorder, but did not meet additional criteria such as "irresponsibility indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior" (APA, 2000, p. 706), nor did they engage in deceit.

Narcissistic personality disorder is indicated by grandiosity; the wish to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements (APA, 2000). Each of the three executives in this study indicated their wish to be recognized as

superior in their levels of achievement and each strove diligently to meet his

company's standards of excellence, which were congruent with his own. There

was no sign of entitlement, defined in the DSM IV-TR (APA, 2000) as

unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment (p. 717), nor did the

executives believe they were special and unique. Far from viewing themselves as

a superior breed, they considered themselves equals with their coworkers (Ben:

"I expect everyone to be like me") and were frustrated and mystified when

coworkers failed to perform at their level.

The DSM-IV-TR (APA, 2000) states that both antisocial and narcissistically

disordered individuals "share a tendency to be tough-minded, glib, superficial,

exploitative, and unempathic" (p. 716). However, the conclusion is not

warranted that all individuals who display these behaviors are personality-

disordered. Similarly, even though application of a clinical paradigm may bring

greater insight into the types of behaviors manifested by abrasive executives, the

presence of some of these behaviors is not necessarily indicative of serious

psychopathology. Certainly some abrasive executives fit the diagnosis of

narcissist or sociopath (Kets de Vries, 1984), but such is the case in any

professional population (including psychiatry and coaching).

Aggression was used by the three executives with strategic, rather than

sadistic (pathological), intent, and was not indicative of underlying mental

disorder. The choice of aggression reflected a conviction that aggression served

to motivate the recalcitrant to action:

> Ben: [A manager shouldn't be] someone so politically correct that when they [employees] get chastised, they feel good about it. I was whipped [as a child].

> Abe: You have to grab them by the face mask and rattle [their] cage. There are certain types of people motivated by fear.

Each was firm in his belief that aggression would mobilize coworkers into competence, thereby eliminating any threats to the executive's competence. Yet, the question arises of the executives' own past experience.

Abrasive executive behavior can be viewed from the perspective of moral pathology (malevolence) or psychopathology (mental disorder). It can also be considered in a sociobiological context, where the measured display and use of aggression is deployed in the struggle to survive and, in the case of these executives, excel in the dog-eat-dog worlds of nature and business:

> In their quest to survive and reproduce, animals of the same species inevitably compete for resources such as food, territory, and mating opportunities. Contests may occur when two animals simultaneously attempt to gain control of a single indivisible resource. If both individuals want the resource, but only one can have it, then their genetic interests conflict and we might expect the question of possession to be settled aggressively, through fighting. (Quinn & Noble, 2001, p. 367)

Psychoanalysts interpret the abrasive executive's battle for dominance over incompetence as a defense against threat. Sociobiologists interpret animal struggles for dominance over resources as defense against threat. In both scenarios, aggression is applied to reduce threat and thereby achieve the desired end. In this framework, aggression is neither evil nor pathological. It is expedient and supportive of survival.

If, then, abrasive executives are firmly entrenched in the battle for competence through aggression, the question arises as to how to get them out of these trenches. The next section examines and analyzes the theoretical bases of the coaching method, designed to draw abrasive executives out of these entrenched, aggressive management styles and to help them construct management strategies reflecting emotional attunement to coworker psychodynamics of threat, anxiety, and defense.

<div align="center">Blinders Off: Feedback</div>

None of the executives studied expressed any sympathy for the targets of their behavior prior to receiving feedback. Abe's response to the suffering experienced by a subordinate was to label him a "whiner." Ben made no comments on this issue. Chris said only "I don't care what people think."

There are at least two possible explanations for this apparent lack of sympathy. The executives consciously or unconsciously, through the defense of denial, failed to see that they caused suffering. Or, they saw it and did not care. This issue will be explored below in the discussion of findings on empathy. Whatever the cause, the executives seemed blind to the negative impact of their behavior on their employers' perceptions. Abe felt that his boss liked him and had pressure from his superiors to retain him: "I know how to do what we are doing. . . . [They] say 'Keep him around.'" Ben said that he would "rate (his employer's) satisfaction with [him] on a 1-to-10 scale at 11.5; highly satisfied. . . .

[A top executive] said I'm tough, task-oriented, and that I have his support."

Chris did not comment on how his superiors viewed him, instead noting, "I

work with peers and people below me. I feel I have a lot of loyalty and respect

from people below me."

The executives provided the following responses when asked in their first

(pre-feedback) sessions to describe their goals for the coaching process:

> Abe: I'm not the screamer I used to be; [my] goal is not to be impotent. I
> don't want coaching to be about someone below me not liking my style. I
> want to figure out what is important to me. . . . I want to understand what
> management style most closely fits me and is true to what I am, and to go
> to the next level down: how to deal with people below me who aren't
> performing. I have high expectations of them.

> Ben: I hope we can agree to disagree. I am open-minded to change. Task
> oriented, not a political type of person. The gray area is narrow. I have
> love/hate relationships. I want to find a larger gray area, sway the hate
> group into the gray. . . . I don't want to be mean anymore.

> Chris: [I'm interested in] developing behavioral change to become more
> effective for what I do. I want to be more polished: I don't want to change
> my focus or character. What I want to do is not be phony. I don't want to
> let my body language and behavior send out the wrong message. I want
> to be more polished with superiors, [learn] how to effect change with
> other people.

All of the executives grossly underestimated the degree of distress that they had

generated in superiors, peers, and subordinates, as reflected in the 360-degree

feedback surveys and concerns expressed in my initial meetings with company

representatives. I had not yet made it my practice to record executives' reactions

to their feedback; however, I do recall that each appeared deeply dismayed by

the degree of distress and alienation depicted in the feedback, while at the same time defending his behavior as necessary to "get the job done."

On the other hand, the executives questioned the veracity of the some of the feedback and persisted in denying the seriousness of their situations, perceiving the referral to coaching as a minor slap on the hand for errant behavior. These reactions are consistent with research which found that perpetrators of abrasion minimize the negative impacts of their behavior, view the behavior more benignly than their targets, perceive the behavior as rationally motivated, and consider the consequences of the behavior to be minimal (Baumeister, 1997; Besag, 1989; Leary et al., 1998).

The earlier discussed selection of aggression as the motivator of choice may account, to some degree, for the executives' blindness to the costs of their abrasive behavior. They perceived aggression as an effective strategy for combating employee behaviors and the underlying emotions that blocked their quests for competence. Emotions were perceived as distractions that delayed and disrupted, that had to be "whipped" into compliance. This philosophy is not uncommon to the American workplace: "*Leave your feelings at the door,*" or "*We don't have time for emotions*" are familiar refrains. Emotional expression is often considered taboo in the course of conducting business: One should *keep a lid on it* and *stay focused*. Wholly focused on their quests to execute at superior levels, the three executives were blind to the costs of the emotional executions they perpetrated in the interest of performance.

The coaching challenge lay in motivating them to look at their behavior differently, as defective rather than effective, as destructive rather than constructive. How does one get them to stop turning blind eyes to the costs of their abrasive behaviors? I elected to blindside them. To "blindside," according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* is to "attack on the blind side to take advantage of weakness in another" (Simpson & Weiner, 1989, p. 289).   I elected the same approach deemed effective by the executives, in essence "rattling their cages," "blasting" them, and "blowing them out of their saddles" to get them to open their eyes to the emotional harm they were inflicting on others and the professional harm they were bringing upon themselves.

This was achieved through interviews I conducted with an average of 10-12 coworkers, superiors, peers, and subordinates, using a qualitative, 360-degree feedback approach.

The interview opened with a single question: "Would you talk with me about your perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of this person's management style?" This method is used for a variety of reasons. First, I have found that the areas of greatest injury and suffering emerge first, and are described the most vividly. Second, the focus is on determining *exactly what the executive does or says* that causes distress. Non-specific feedback, such as, *has difficulty building a team* or *needs to be more supportive*, tends to have little value (Church & Bracken, 1997; Diedrich, 1996; Kaplan & Palus, 1994), because the executive is deprived of information on the specific actions or words he uses that

abrade others. Third, I am also careful to gather data on the specific impact of the abrasive behavior, that is, the effect on the recipient. This information is used to demonstrate the erosive impact of the executives' behaviors on initiative, creativity, morale, and productivity. This explicit description of behavior is used to challenges their choice of aggression as the superior motivator.

The feedback is then paraphrased to protect the anonymity of the respondents, and aggregated into themes. Themes describing these abrasive executives included (in alphabetical order):

- complains about others: indiscreet
- condescending: flaunts his intelligence
- conflict avoidant
- controlling: not collaborative
- disrespectful
- does not care about other departments
- doesn't advocate
- doesn't know as much as he portrays
- doesn't trust
- hostile
- impatient, angry
- insecure
- intimidating
- lacks people skills
- leaps to judgment
- loses emotional control
- overly direct
- overly goal driven
- overly independent
- persecutory
- plays favorites
- publicly criticizes/humiliates others
- punishes the group for individuals' infractions
- reactive
- responds impulsively

- rude/crude humor
- uncaring

The feedback sessions are specifically designed to remove the blinders of ignorance and/or denial of the executives' abrasive impact on others; to bring the impact of their behaviors into consciousness, and "blast" them out of their blindness. Before receiving feedback, the executives are advised of the following:

The scope of the feedback session is limited to reading, absorbing, and reacting to the feedback (with questions, protests, etc.) and nothing else. The executives is told that coaching priorities will be established in a later meeting. This relieves the executive of any pressure to demonstrate immediate competence in the coaching context.

The feedback represents perceptions, not fact. The feedback portrays how coworkers perceive the executive's words and actions, and their resulting emotions. This becomes important when the executive inevitably rushes to defensiveness by denying either the behavior or the intent of the behavior with statements such as *"I never said that,"* or *"I didn't mean to offend them."* The executive is brought to understand that fact and intent have no relevance in the world of perception and emotion. If coworkers perceive that they were threatened or insulted, their perceptions become *their facts.* Simply put, fact reigns in the physical (rational) world, but in the psychological (irrational) world of emotions, *perception is reality*. If the executive chooses not to deal with, or

manage coworker perceptions, he or she runs the risk of alienation concomitant with reduced competence in achieving objectives.

What the executive hears in terms of feedback may be very distressing. In most cases the executives respond with shock upon perceiving the nature and degree of the distress they cause in others. Secondary reactions may consist of defensive refutations or expressions of bewilderment and/or remorse. One executive (not in this study) said, "It was the worst day of my professional life." All three executives in this study acknowledged that they were deeply disturbed by their feedback. Abe and Ben expressed this immediately, Chris only in the later stages of his coaching. Warning the executive normalizes the reaction: "*You were right. I was really blown away*." Extreme reactions are assessed for potential self-destructive behavior, including suicidal ideation.

Coaching is structured to help. Although the coaching process aggressively strives to open these executives' eyes to the consequences of their abrasive behavior, the coach's attitude toward the executive is anything but aggressive. Throughout the coaching process, I maintain a non-judgmental stance characterized by support, encouragement, and, when appropriate, humor. Once executives have absorbed the feedback and acknowledged that their behavior is professionally counterproductive, I am invariably asked, "*So what do I do? How do I manage people [less abrasively] so that the job gets done?*" I state that this is the reason for my presence. I am here to help them do exactly that. This introduces a transition to the next phase of the abrasive executive coaching process.

Overcoming Resistance to Coaching

Having essentially blindsided them with their own blindness to coworkers' emotions, the coaching process then moves into the second phase: motivating these executives to commit to the coaching process. This consists of dealing with their resistance (Goodstone, 1998; Kaplan, 1993), which I interpret as stemming from anxiety over threats to their competence, namely, the SuperManagers' superpowers. Comments at this stage reflect the executives' anxiety over being rendered "soft," weak, and thus ineffective through the coach's efforts to make them more "touchy feely." Abe: "I don't want to be impotent . . . to have the coaching be about someone not liking my style. Chris: "I don't want this to be a charm school." It was clear that a sales pitch based on the you-get-more-flies-with-honey approach wouldn't work. (When told this by a human resources representative, Ben's response was, "You can attack more flies with shit.") Intuitively, I responded with a paradoxical offer, claiming that coaching would make them *more* powerful.

In retrospect, I realized that this response was based on my (at the time) unconscious comprehension of the sociobiological and psychoanalytic threat-anxiety-defense dynamic: These executives absolutely would not tolerate threats to their competence and would resist any attempts to "weaken" them. Sensing this, in the evolution of the coaching process, I (again unconsciously at the time) drew upon psychoanalytic-developmental psychology, also referred to as ego psychology (Hartmann, 1939-1958; Hartmann, Kris, & Loewenstein, 1946). Ego

psychology evolved from Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, integrating later

object relations theories derived from investigations into the psychological

development of infants (Mahler et al., 1975; Spitz, 1945, 1946).

> Psychoanalytic procedures are designed to make the unconscious
> conscious and effect structural change (alteration in relationships among
> id, ego, and superego). . . . In psychoanalysis, ego building is usually
> incidental to the major technical purpose. In *ego-psychologically based*
> [italics added] psychotherapy, the treatment per se consists of an attempt
> to heal the damaged ego. Ego building becomes the very fabric of
> treatment and procedures must be designed specifically for this purpose.
> (Blanck & Blanck, 1974, p. 9)

In a therapeutic setting, the ego's adaptive organizing and defensive functions,

rather than unconscious content, would become the primary focus. The

therapeutic objective is to understand, restructure, and build ego functioning

that is adaptive to current realistic threats rather than past internalized childhood

trauma. Alternatively, in this coaching approach, defenses are not confronted,

but are respectfully examined in the context of their past adaptive, and currently,

maladaptive) functions. Similarly, this coaching method focuses on mutual

examination of defenses enacted by both executive and coworker for their

destructive or beneficial value.

I was not consciously aware of this when constructing my response to

executives' anxiety over loss of competence threatened by the "etiquette" coach. I

did recall that there was nothing to be gained by attempting to defuse their

anxiety with reassurances to the effect that "nicer" behavior would yield better

results. Instead, I took a characteristically ego-psychological position of working

with, rather than against, the resistance. I "sold" coaching as a means to increase

rather than decrease their competence: to add to their arsenal of super-powers.

The claims were brief and bold: "*This coaching will make you* more

powerful. *. . . I will show you how to deal with these employees that frustrate you so*

that you can be even more effective."

I used an additional approach in my intervention, pointing out that

coworkers' focus on the executives' behavior diverted focus from the executives'

objectives. The aforementioned single-standard question in the coworker

feedback interviews asks for comments on both strengths and weaknesses, all of

which are compiled for the executive. Not surprisingly, the "weakness"

comments far outweighed the strengths. The three executives in this study

received a combined average of 19 comments on strengths and 114 comments on

weaknesses. The visual disparity between the two categories is painfully obvious

to the recipient, and I use this in support of my sales case. I often put this claim in

question form: "*When everyone leaves a meeting after you've lost your temper on an*

issue, what is your guess on what they are talking about? Your behavior in the meeting

or your position on the issue?" This has proven a powerful support for the coaching

sales pitch.

Although not entirely convinced of the claims made for coaching, this

stimulated enough curiosity and interest to secure a commitment from each of

these executives to embark on the coaching process. Having been through this

process many times, I concur with the research that indicates simple provision of

feedback is insufficient to overcome executives' resistance to altering their management styles (Cherniss & Adler, 2000; Goodstone, 1998; Kaplan, 1993). It is critical to address this early resistance despite the fact that the executives feel compelled to cooperate because of their companies' referrals to coaching. At this point, I set the stage for immediate work and minimize initial resistance as much as possible. I also work to command their respect (admittedly powerful language) with the hard-sell approach to making a strong business case for coaching. This approach temporarily disarms their anxieties over the threat of becoming "Mr. Softy" or "The Big Cupcake" (other executives' terms) through coaching, and opens the door for work to begin. Having turned a blind eye to coworker emotions, they are now prepared for removal of the blinders, to *see* the power of emotion.

First Framework: Emotional Unintelligence as Interpersonal Incompetence

No longer blind to the destructive impact of their behavior on coworkers and their own ambitions, executives are introduced to the theoretical construct of emotional intelligence, which asserts that management skill is partially dependent on a leader's ability to "read and manage one's own and others' feelings" (Goleman, 1998, p. 7). Most executives are familiar with the adage, "You can't manage what you can't measure," so the concept of measuring or monitoring emotions to manage them usually resonates. I link *interpersonal competence* with emotional intelligence, occasionally referencing research that

correlates higher levels of emotional intelligence (*EQ*), rather than cognitive

intelligence (IQ), to higher levels of interpersonal competence manifested in

superior management skills (Boyatzis, 1982; Emmerling & Goleman, 2003;

Hunter & Hunter, 1984; McClelland, 1973; Schmidt & Hunter, 1981; Spencer &

Spencer, 1993). If needed, I also briefly reference research correlating low levels

of emotional intelligence, manifested in rigidity and poor working relationships,

with executive derailment (Leslie & Van Velsor, 1996).

I introduce this new category of competence along with the feedback that

supported the case for their interpersonal *in*competence, their lack of emotional

intelligence (EI). Doing so has had an effect similar to the toreador who flaunts

his red cape at the bull. The executives appear unable to resist this challenge to

their competence. They could not and would not tolerate being branded

emotionally unintelligent.

Findings from the fields of psychotherapy (Barlow, 1985), corporate

training (Marrow et al., 1997), executive education (Boyatzis et al., 1995), and

neuroscience (Eriksson et al., 1998; LeDoux, 1996) offer evidence for people's

abilities to develop their interpersonal competence with sustained effort. The

three major EI theorists (Bar-On, 1988; Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997)

cite empathy as a core competence of emotional intelligence; however, none of

them has described a specific method for developing empathy. This is also true

of researchers of EI training. They advocate for emotionally-based learning

predicated upon 360-degree feedback and a development plan, but offer no

detail on specific techniques for empathy development (Boyatzis et al., 1995;

Cherniss & Adler, 2000).

From this retrospective analysis of these coaching cases, I found that I

introduced the construct of emotional intelligence into the coaching for three

purposes: to provide support for the link between emotional management and

management skill; to frame emotional management as competence, thereby

stimulating the executives' reflexive striving for mastery; and to introduce

Goleman's (1995) concept of *emotional hijacking,* wherein one loses emotional

control through instantaneous neural response to threat.

Until the executive gains awareness and control of emotional

explosiveness resulting from the amygdala's response to threat, little progress

can be achieved. I explain the concept very briefly, for the first time introducing

the concept of threat, the brain's response to severe threat (neural activation

triggering the fight response), and the result: an emotional outburst intended to

defend against the perceived threat. I may also suggest that the executive read

Goleman's (1995) chapter on the topic if they wanted more detail. This

description reinforces the theme of loss of control, a concept that is anathema to

executives who wish to exert control in the interests of mastery. In this view, a

SuperManager always maintains emotional control, no matter who (or what) the

adversary. Failure to maintain control over one's emotions thus becomes a sign

of incompetence.

Framing loss of emotional control as loss of competence had an immediate effect on these executives: They became hyper-aware of their success and failure in maintaining emotional control. Failures to maintain control were immediately reported at the initiation of coaching sessions, usually prefaced with statements such as "I lost it" or "I blew it this time." Additionally, they began to focus on the circumstances that provoked their respective amygdalas to action. This heightened level of consciousness did not automatically render total control, but had the effect of getting the executives to focus, often for the first time, on their roles in abrasive interactions.

In the course of my research and development of this coaching method, I encountered the above-cited empirical support for my intuitive conviction that I could increase the emotional intelligence of these executives. At the time, however, this belief was only a gut feeling based on my own life experience. Growing up in what I considered to be an emotionally intelligent family attuned to interpersonal competence (with psychiatric patients, in the case of my father, and hospital patients, in the case of my mother), I believed that I had further developed my interpersonal competence skills from my acquaintance with zoology, psychotherapy, and life's school of hard knocks. I literally remember thinking, "*If what I had learned worked for me, why not also for these abrasive executives?*"

Emotional Intelligence and Insight

In my early years of coaching abrasive executives, it was clear to me that these individuals were blind to their impact on others. From my perspective, they lacked insight. *Insight* became the coaching goal, based on my belief that if they could *see* the destructive impact of their behavior to their quests for mastery, they would abandon abrasive strategies in favor of more constructive management strategies conducive to goal achievement. My work as executive coach, then, was to get them to see and accurately understand emotion, what I later learned to be the exercise of empathy. Unbeknownst to me in the early years, my goal was to induce the use of empathy in these abrasive executives.

At the inception of my coaching career, I defined empathy as the *suspension of moral judgment in order to understand another's behavior*, as in the therapist's empathic stance. In the course of this study I encountered the definition of empathy as a two-step process of perceiving emotions and interpreting their meaning (Davis, 1996; Feiner & Kiersky, 1994b). Despite my ignorance of the research on empathy, I intuitively embarked on a process intended to develop these skills. Instinctively I found myself asking the executives to do two tasks: *perceive behaviors and hypothesize (interpret) the emotional meaning of those behaviors*. Repeatedly, I would ask the executives to observe and interpret behavior, by first asking *what* (*"What happened? What did coworkers do/say? What did you do/say?"*) and then asking them to hypothesize as

to *why* ("*Why do you think it happened? Why do you think coworkers did/said that? Why do you think you did/said that?*"). An example:

> Executive: "*I get nothing from my management team.*"
>
> Coach (call for perception): "*What happens?*"
>
> Executive (perception): "*Nobody on my management team speaks up when I present a new idea in our meetings. They just sit there with blank looks on their faces.*"
>
> Coach (call for interpretation): "*Why do you think they don't speak up?*"
>
> Executive (interpretation): "*Because they're lazy. Because they don't care.*"

At a very early point, my coaching work with abrasive executives came to focus on this recursive iteration of the perception (*what*)/interpretation (*why*) cycle, which I later discovered resembled the two-stage helical or circular model of empathy described by Feiner and Kiersky (1994b). I reapplied the cycle to new instances of behavior in the hope that each new perception/interpretation would refine or build upon the last iteration. The executives seemed to have no problem with the first step of empathy, perceiving coworker behavior, once they committed to this activity. Striving to master emotional intelligence (which I had equated with interpersonal competence), they became hyperalert to the words and actions of their coworkers.

However, the empathy cycle tended to fall apart at the second step: accurate interpretation, earlier defined as insight. They were either at a loss to decipher the meaning ("*I have no idea why he/she did that*"), or they interpreted it

through the pejorative split lens of coworker incompetence (stupidity, sloth, insolence). To me, the failure of this second step indicated a failure to achieve insight, which is examined in greater detail below.

<div align="center">Executives' Empathic Capacity</div>

My efforts to evoke empathy by calling for the perception and interpretation of behavior assumed that the abrasive executives were capable of empathy. The empathy literature supports the case for this capacity, "the capacity to understand intimately the thoughts and feelings of another person, to put oneself in the other's place." (Pigman, 1995, p. 238). Theorists posited the capacity for perception, also known as *perspective taking* as innate (Brothers, 1989; Buck & Ginsburg, 1997) and essential for later social competence (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997); only autism and personality disorder were cited as obstacles to perspective taking (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Kernberg, 1979; Kets de Vries, 1984). Genetic endowment influences empathic capacity (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997; Emde et al., 1992; Lochlin & Nichols, 1976; Rushton et al., 1986; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1992), however the genetic inheritance of these executives is unknown.

In terms of endowments received through parental behavior, two of the executives described childhood abuse. Without adequate data, one can only wonder if their parents, through possible early experiences of parental deprivation, may themselves have suffered impairments in empathic capacity (Harlow & Suomi, 1970), and subsequently influenced their offspring through

omission or commission. If the parents received little or no empathic training, this would have reduced their ability to break the chain of familial empathic deficiency (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Kestenbaum et al., 1989; Koestner et al., 1990).

<div align="center">*Executives' Empathic Competence*</div>

Having established that these executives were capable of empathy as they were neither autistic nor personality disordered, the question arose as to their competence in the skills of perceiving and interpreting. This is difficult to answer definitively: I did not have or attempt to take a baseline reading apart from the 360-degree feedback itself. In coaching sessions, I began introducing techniques to increase empathic skill immediately following the feedback meetings. As a result, I had minimal opportunity to observe their empathic competence prior to initiating coaching interventions. But in the introductory meetings (held prior to the feedback meetings), there was little evidence that they spent much time perceiving behavior, and in those few instances where they recognized resistant behavior, they interpreted it pejoratively as a sign of coworker incompetence manifested in sloth, stupidity, or insolence:

> Abe: [X] reports to me. He's the chief troublemaker, very passive aggressive. I struggled to get him to talk to me. He will talk to anybody but me … he is incredibly prideful.

> Ben: People love or hate me. [They] have the mentality that "He is a new guy; I should be in that position. I know more than he does."

> Chris: [X] and [Y] are doing worthless stuff. . . . [I ask them], "Why don't you be more proactive?" Any time you have a point, they take it personally and get defensive.

In his very first coaching session, Abe made reference to sociobiological anxiety and defense in describing a member of his team:

> Abe: [X] reports to me. Bit of a whiner; animals sense fear in people. He was trying to bail out [of getting in trouble]. This guy was terrified. That instinct, that instinct rose. He is a guy who lacks the confidence, has a very self-doubting personality. I have tried to build his confidence. [I] have never grabbed him by the face mask; that would really damage [him].

Significantly, this comment reflects a pejorative view of the coworker ("whiner"), while at the same time indicating some insight into the reasons for behavior (fear based on insecurity). It supports the proposition that aggressive abrasive executives are aware of their ability to cause harm and are capable of doing so intentionally, reflected in Abe's conscious decision to refrain from "really damaging" his subordinate.

I suspect that most abrasive executives unconsciously view their aggressive behavior as *threat displays* rather than actual acts intended to harm.

> In their quest to survive and reproduce, animals of the same species inevitably compete for resources such as food, territory, and mating opportunities. Contests may occur when two animals simultaneously attempt to gain control of a single indivisible resource. If both individuals want the resource, but only one can have it, then their genetic interests conflict and we might expect the question of possession to be settled aggressively, through fighting. However, one of the curious facts about animal contests is how often all-out violence is avoided. From spiders (Reichert, 1982) to elephants (Poole, 1989) we find that most of the time contests stop short of serious injury and are settled by what appear to be threats, signals of strength or determination, or even arbitrary conventions (Quinn & Noble, 2001, p. 1)

> Sometimes these contests consist of a fight to the death, or at least to serious injury, as in the case of honeybees. However, much of the time, and across many species, contests stop short of violence and are settled by what appear to be threat displays, signals of strength or aggressive intent. (Noble, 2000, p. 1)

Sociobiological researchers explain this tendency to stop short of all-out assault as a manifestation of evolved self-interest (Maynard Smith & Price, 1973). The contested resource may be important, but not worth risking one's life. Winning the contest through the suggestion of aggression (threat display) eliminates the possibility of death or serious injury.

I strongly suspect that these abrasive executives viewed their intimidating behavior not as a sword to kill in the crusade for competence, but instead as a display of weaponry designed to inspire fear. The intent is not to destroy, but to motivate, and if this can be achieved through threat (as opposed to actual perpetration) of harm, all the better. The executive benefits by overcoming coworker resistance without (in his blind view) having to continually inflict severe interpersonal damage.

Although there was little immediate data to go on in these first sessions, I recall my immediate impression from initial encounters that these abrasive executives were highly judgmental and lacking in insight. I later understood these to be attributes of what I term the *blind pejorative phase,* which is discussed in greater detail below. This retrospective exploration of the empathy literature sheds light on the possible reasons for these executives' lack of insight, their blindness to the significance of coworkers' emotions.

Blindness: Empathic Inattention

Obstacles to empathizing may occur before perception, the first step of empathy. Empathy is impossible if one fails to direct attention toward another's behavior. Returning to an earlier analogy, reading cannot take place until one's eyes are cast upon words and sentences. The fact that there was very little description of coworker behavior beyond pejorative labeling in the introductory session could be indicative of deficits of attention given to the emotive displays of coworkers.

Research has demonstrated that animal and human social isolates will not learn to attend to the behavior of others if they have been deprived of social interaction with members of their species (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997). Certainly these executives are not social isolates, but one can hypothesize that they came from family or organizational environments where minimal attention was paid to the emotional signals of others. In terms of family environment, it has been shown that abusive parents manifest less empathic distress, previously defined as distress resulting from empathizing with someone in actual distress (Hoffman, 1981) than non-abusive parents (Miller & Eisenberg, 1988). The same findings held for abused children compared to non-abused children, suggesting a correlation between abrasive behavior and empathic limitation.

Ickes (1997) identified three factors that can diminish empathic accuracy: lack of shared history, estrangement, and stereotyping. He found that intimacy enhances accurate interpretation of emotions underlying behavior, as past shared

knowledge of another's thoughts, feelings, and perceptions contribute to the empathizer's ability to accurately decipher another's emotional state.

Men tend to avoid sharing personal information or history in the workplace, as it could imply weakness or anxiety, both executive taboos (Derlega, Metts, Petronio, & Margulis, 1993; Weiss, 1985, 1990). The prevalent business ethic of *leave your feelings at the door* promotes segregation of personal knowledge and interaction from the work environment. Although all of the executives in this study generally avoided socializing with coworkers, Ben, in his adamant insistence on divorcing "business from personal" presented a particularly strong example. The avoidance of shared personal knowledge by these executives could contribute to empathic impairment.

Ickes (1997) also determined that estrangement—minimal and/or declining interest in issues deemed important by another—inhibits empathic accuracy. Why should the executive even bother to empathize if coworkers' issues are of little or no interest? And why consider "wasting the time" if coworker objectives diverge from (and thus thwart) those of the executive? Ickes also suggested that stereotyping impairs empathic accuracy. Why should the executive go to the effort to read and interpret coworker feelings if he feels he already knows everything there is to know about "these people?" Familiarity can breed inaccurate empathy, along with contempt. The stereotyping phenomenon may be compounded by stereotypes developed in prior experiences with other work environments ("*Everyone here is lazy compared to my last company*") or with

other departments ("*Those guys over in IT could care less*"). New managers can also be vulnerable to stereotypes developed by past managers.

I hypothesize that an additional factor obstructing empathic accuracy is devaluation of emotions. If executives embrace the no-room-for-emotions-at-work ethos, they will perceive emotions as immaterial to the work at hand and thus unworthy of attention. In this view, emotions have no place at work, and can only drain and disrupt energies channeled toward goal achievement. In such workplaces, the odds would seem stacked against developing the relational intimacy and attention to emotion requisite for empathic accuracy.

All of these factors contribute to impairments in perception, the first step of empathy. Problems can also occur in interpretation, the second step of empathy.

Pejorative Blindness: Empathic Misinterpretation

Factors beyond genetic or family influence can impair empathic competence. Empathizers could conceivably display high levels of competence in the first step of empathy, devoting much attention to behavior and carefully observing social signals. Despite this vigilance, empathic competence can break down at the second step: that of interpretation, of inferring the emotional meaning of observed behavior. Careful monitoring of behavior is not enough: Skilled empathy demands the accurate interpretation of emotions underlying behavior (Ickes, 1997). The caribou who interprets the grizzly's grimace as an

expression of affiliative rather than annihilative intent will pay a high price for such misinterpretation. As with humans, accurate empathy requires accurate interpretation insight. I have previously defined insight as the accurate interpretation of the emotions underlying behavior, the ability to *see into* behavior and decipher its emotional significance.

The executives in this study devoted little attention to behavior unless it obstructed their strivings for mastery. When they did engage in perception of behavior, their interpretations were invariably categorical (split) and derogatory (pejorative) in manner. These interpretations, described in their responses to provocation, portrayed resistant coworker behavior as *all incompetent* (characteristic of the defense of splitting) and *all bad* (slothful, stupid, or insolent).

In the earlier dialog with the executive who complained about his team's silence in meetings, he formulated and offered his interpretation of their behavior in response to the coach's request. In his eyes, they do not speak up because they are incompetent, and they are incompetent because they are lazy and uncaring. His interpretation is both split and pejorative, in that *all* of his senior managers are incompetent, and all because of their sloth and insolence. Splitting is a defense mechanism in which the self and others are split into perceptions of either ideal (all good) or despicable (all bad) (Allcorn & Diamond, 1997; Kernberg, 1980). By splitting the self off from others, executives can protect against the unconscious threat of personal incompetence by differentiating the all-good self (super-competent SuperManager) from the all-bad others

(incompetent coworkers). In the course of coaching these executives, I became fascinated with these consistently split-pejorative interpretations of coworker resistance.

Their interpretations were fixed and simplistic: Coworkers resisted the executive's initiatives because of their incompetence, and they were incompetent because they were bad. As noted briefly above, I term this the *blind pejorative stance* or *blind pejorative phase*, because the executives are both blind to the destructive impact of their abrasive behavior, and inevitably interpret resistance pejoratively, as evidence of inadequacy or malevolence.

I found that the executives in this study made minimal effort to perceive behavior, and when they did, their interpretations were inaccurate, lacking insight into the emotions motivating coworker resistance. The outcomes of their inaccurate empathy are considered below, prior to a discussion of the specific methods developed with the intent of increasing their interpretive accuracy.

Consequences of Empathic Incompetence

What were the outcomes, or consequences of empathic incompetence in these executives? Davis (1996) defined the interpersonal outcomes of empathy as behaviors directed toward another that result from the process of empathy, specifically, perceiving and interpreting. These behaviors occur in response to empathic distress, defined by Hoffman (1981) as distress experienced by an individual as a result of empathizing with someone in actual distress. These

outcomes of empathy can include prosocial behaviors such as helping, asocial behaviors such as avoidance, or antisocial behaviors such as aggression.

I have already proposed that the three executives were empathically incompetent, perceiving resistant behavior that signified anxiety only minimally and through a pejorative lens. It is also clear from their aggressive responses that the executives did not respond prosocially, defined as engaging in voluntary behavior intended to benefit another (Eisenberg, 1986). They were not moved to help their coworkers, instead electing to threaten. Although research indicates that empathizing can lead to prosocial behavior (Barnett, 1982; Barnett et al., 1981; Davis, 1983; Eisenberg et al., 2002; Eisenberg & Miller, 1987; Penner et al., 1995), and inhibit aggression (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Gibbs, 1987; Parke & Slaby, 1983), it can also result in asocial (avoidant) or antisocial (aggressive) responses (Hoffman, 2000). This seemed to be the case with Abe, Ben, and Chris.

Empathy is a neutral process that leads to knowledge (Kohut, 1982, Basch 1983).

> By itself [empathy] neither prescribes nor proscribes behavior any more than does the knowledge gained from logical reasoning alone. What one does with the insight provided by empathic understanding remains to be determined by the nature of the relationship between the people involved and the purpose for which the empathic capacity was engaged by its user in the first place. (Basch, 1983, p. 122)

I suspect that on the rare occasions in which the executives did engage in the process of empathy, they did so for the purpose of combating resistance in the interest of self-preservation. Use of empathy for such defensive ends would

explain how the executives could read (however minimally) and infer the emotions of coworkers without feeling concern for them, without experiencing empathic distress.

Batson (1987) concluded that empathy may produce personal distress or anxiety about one's own welfare, *without interest in the other*. In these cases, the executive empathically reads the emotions of another (accurately or inaccurately), but consciously or unconsciously elects to avoid responding in a prosocial manner. I have previously referred to such individuals as avoidant empathizers: In transgressive situations the empathizer is aware of the pain he or she inflicts, but does not react prosocially. Hoffman (2000) proposed that avoidant empathizers are defending against diversion from egocentric (self-serving) objectives, perceiving oneself as harmful, and their helplessness to respond.

This study was undertaken to determine the theoretical bases for a coaching method and was not designed to determine the specific nature and causes of empathic incompetence displayed by these executives. It is not certain whether and to what degree their deficiencies may have stemmed from insufficient perception, inaccurate interpretation, or defensive avoidance of responding to whatever empathic distress they finally experienced. However, it can be concluded that the executives spent little time engaged in perception of coworker behavior unless it directly threatened their objectives, they interpreted

these perceptions as indicators of coworker incompetence, and they responded aggressively.

Their characteristic aggressive responses to threat would suggest that these executives avoided responding to whatever empathic distress they may have experienced in order to defend against diversion from their egocentric strivings for super-competence. In their eyes, "soft" or "touchy-feely" responses stemming from empathic distress for coworker emotions could only undermine these SuperManagers' heroic missions to achieve and surpass their (and their organizations') objectives.

In summary, I hypothesize that these executives transgress against their coworkers not out of malevolent intent, but instead to defend against diversion from their quest for superior competence, their quest for accolades that would assuage their unconscious anxieties over adequacy. In considering aggression as an acceptable mode of motivation, they were *sightless*: blind to the destructive impact of their abrasive behavior. They were also *insightless*: blind to the emotions motivating coworker resistance. As previously noted, it was not my intent in their coaching or in this study to determine the exact causes for the empathic incompetence that rendered them blind. However, the literature on empathy and statements of these executives (forthcoming in summaries of their coaching experience) suggest that inadequate childhood empathic training and/or conditioning in adulthood in abrasive organizational cultures may have been contributing factors.

I too was blind, to the research on empathy and its behavioral outcomes, when I first started coaching abrasive executives, but I was acutely aware of my impression that they were sorely lacking in insight. Armed with this hypothesis, I set my next coaching goal as helping them develop insight, unaware at the time that I would do this by focusing them on the perception of behavior and accurate interpretation of its emotional significance.

Lenses On: Executive Insight

I have previously described the impact of coworker feedback on the executives: The blinders that obstructed their recognition of distressed coworker emotions were now off. After this step, they began devoting careful attention to the first step of empathy: perception. Initially in the *blind pejorative phase*, the executives now entered the *sighted* phase, characterized by the ability to perceive the presence of behavior. However in the majority of instances they clung to their split pejorative interpretations. They could see the behavior, but they could not see (accurately interpret) the emotions underlying the behavior: They were sighted but *insightless*.

Earlier I described how I asked these executives to undertake recursive iterations of perception and interpretation. Rising to the challenge of overcoming this new form of incompetence with which their coach had confronted them, the executives immediately began monitoring the words and actions of their coworkers. As noted above, the empathy cycle fell apart at the second step:

accurate interpretation (insight). Like the reader of words, the reader of behavior will interpret meanings according to accumulated internal and external referents, "dog" as canine versus errant spouse (Buie, 1981). The executives were reading behavior but interpreting it incorrectly (coworker resistance as incompetence).

I, on the other hand, interpreted the resistance from an entirely different set of referents: sociobiological and psychoanalytic responses to threat. Coworkers were resisting not because they were incompetent, but because they felt threatened. As unscholarly as this sounds, based on my years of personal experience, study, and past psychotherapy practice, I had the audacity to believe that my interpretive framework was right and that theirs was wrong.

In my early coaching work, I found myself pushing for a "better" interpretation, what I now understand to be an insistence on insight. Returning to the executive frustrated over his team's silence in meetings:

Coach (call for interpretation): *Why do you think they don't speak up?*

Executive (interpretation): *Because they're lazy; because they don't care.*

I responded to this split pejorative interpretation by calling for a second hypothesis:

Coach (call for second interpretation): *So your hypothesis is that they don't talk because they are lazy, because they don't care. Can you think of any other reasons that they don't speak up?*

In the majority of cases the executive responds with a second, and (in my sociobiologically/psychoanalytically biased view) more insightful, hypothesis:

Executive (second interpretation): *Maybe they're afraid to speak up. I've been told that I can be pretty critical.*

Coach: *So we've got two hypotheses for why they behave as they do: that they are lazy and uncaring, or that they are afraid.*

I then ask the executive to elaborate on the second hypothesis:

Coach: (call for insight) *What would they be afraid of?*

Executive: (insight)*That I'd be critical, that I'd attack what they had to say.*

In the rare instances that executives could not conceive of a second hypothesis, I would supply it (e.g. "*Perhaps they don't speak up because they fear negative consequences*"), and then ask the executive to speculate on potential negative consequences.

I then called for a test of the second hypothesis. I suggested that the executive conduct an experiment with his staff, where, at their next meeting, he would ask for their input and offer positive and/or encouraging responses to anything that surfaced. I supplied him with examples (e.g. "*That's an interesting perspective, say more,*" or "*Tell me more about why you think X is important.*" The executive was cautioned to abstain from any comments that suggested criticism or negative perception on his part. The executive would then conduct the experiment and report in amazement that his team began to talk.

Coach: *Why do you think they spoke up this time?*

Executive: *I guess they weren't afraid of me. I encouraged them instead of criticizing them*.

I frankly believed that I had more insight than these executives, and that this capacity to accurately interpret emotions underlying behavior reliably informed my safe navigation of the sometimes threatening world of *Homo sapiens* and other assorted animals. I am now able to see that I based my coaching method entirely on my belief that insight into my and others' emotions was critical to survival and success, essential to overcoming obstacles and achieving objectives.

This realization led to the evolution of my technique for helping these abrasive executives develop their skill with interpretation, the second step of empathy. I distinctly recall the moment years ago when I decided to provide an abrasive executive I was coaching with the same lexicon used by ethologists and psychoanalysts to interpret behavior: the conceptual framework of threat-anxiety-defense. If it worked for me to read emotion through this interpretive lens, could not this same lens give them the perceptive acuity of insight, thus helping them see the psychological defensiveness *emoti*-vating behavior? These SuperManagers lacked the superpower of x-ray vision into emotion, and I was determined to supply them with the interpretive lens that I had found so useful.

Second Framework: Threat-Anxiety-Defense

Once the executives absorbed their feedback, I was confronted with the demand for tools to overcome their blindness. I offer this representative dialogue to illustrate my method of imparting my conceptual framework of the dynamics of psychological defensiveness:

Executive: *All right, all right, I can see that my behavior causes more problems than it solves: It hurts and demoralizes others, makes me look bad, and focuses their attention on their distress with me instead of on the tasks at hand. I see that. But what do I do to change it? How do I get people to do what I want them to do without blasting them?*

Coach: *Let's take an example. Your feedback showed that your employees deeply resent being called "stupid" or "idiots."*

Executive: *I only do it when I'm frustrated.*

Coach (call for interpretation): *Do you know why you do it?*

Executive (split pejorative interpretation of coworker flaccidity*)*: No. Well, come to think of it, I do. I feel like they've really screwed up on a project, and that they need to realize that, and that blasting them a bit will get them to realize that they've got to shape up.

Coach: *So you do it to be sure that they understand that they've made a serious mistake?*

Executive: *Yes—but I suppose they already know that. I don't suppose it helps to call them names.*

Coach: *Why not?*

Executive (perception of emotion): *Because it's clear from the feedback that it alienates them —that they get resentful. I didn't need the feedback to tell me that. I can see it when I do it.*

Coach (call for interpretation/insight): *Why then, knowing that calling them names will alienate them, knowing that it is counterproductive, do you think you still do it?*

Executive (emotional hijacking): *I just get so ticked that I lose it. I just start yelling.*

Coach (call for interpretation/insight): *What are you ticked about?*

Executive (interpretation/insight): *I'm afraid that they just plain don't have what it takes to do the job, and that the whole project will fail.*

Coach (reflection of interpretation/insight): *So you are afraid that they, the project, and ultimately you will fail, and you yell at them as a way of dealing with that fear, of defending against the prospect of failure?*

Executive: *Exactly. I can see how stupid it looks, but that's what happens. So what am I supposed to do? How do I get people to do what I want if I don't blast them?*

Having introduced the executive to the dynamic of psychological defensiveness, I move to a discussion of the theories supporting this framework. Experience has taught me that executives prefer concise and compelling substantiation of the "business case." My case for psychological defensiveness, in their eyes, had better be good. At this juncture, I ask the executive's permission to launch into what I have come to term "my 7-minute view of how the world works."

Coach: *Let me first tell you that I base my answer on a belief in the unconscious. I believe that there are parts of ourselves that we are conscious of, and that we also have feelings that we are not conscious, or aware of. I also believe that these unconscious feelings can influence what we say or do without our being aware of it. With that, let me ask you this question: What two things are people most afraid of? More than anything else in the world, what do people fear most?*

Executive: *Death? Getting fired? Going bankrupt?* (Other typical responses include divorce, illness, harm to children, taxes, public speaking, and demotion.)

Coach: *You're really close. Let me get a little psychoanalytic on you. Freud believed that there were two things that people feared above all: loss of life, and loss of love. He called these fears annihilation anxiety and abandonment anxiety. (I deliver these terms in a Viennese accent for effect). Loss of life and loss of love. But we're not just talking about loss of physical life, say, through illness or accident. It could be loss of one's professional life, through job termination. Or loss of economic life, through bankruptcy. Loss of love could occur through death of a loved one, divorce from a spouse, rejection from a friend, loss of respect through demotion. One can lose the "love" of an employer, a boss, which we often think of as loss of approval or respect. What anxiety do you think people might experience when they are demoted? Perhaps loss of their professional life, of their*

career, because they might be afraid the next step is termination. And loss of the respect of others.

Executive: *Right—loss of love; they might be feel abandoned because the boss has lost respect for them.*

Coach: *We're not that distant from other animals, in that their greatest fear is loss of life. When the caribou spots a grizzly bear, it perceives a threat. The bear could kill it and eat it. Upon perceiving the threat, the caribou experiences fear and tries to figure out a way to avoid annihilation. What two options do organisms have when confronted with a threat?*

Executive: *Fight or flight. They can either flee or fight for their life.*

Coach: *I believe it's the same with people. When faced with a threat, whether threat of annihilation or abandonment, people can flee (withdraw), or they can fight (attack). For instance, if a person fears they are going to be demoted they can withdraw by quitting, or they can fight the threat by attacking their boss's capabilities. Or they can attack the threat by working harder or longer. Let's apply this concept to our discussion of calling employees "stupid." You were anxious that they wouldn't be able to complete the project and that you would fail. What is the threat?*

Executive: *Loss of life, because my job might get annihilated, and loss of love, because I would lose respect if I couldn't deliver.*

Coach: *And did that create anxiety?*

Executive: *Yeah, I was afraid that both could happen.*

Coach: *And how did you try to protect, to defend yourself against these threats?*

Executive: *I yelled at my people to get their act together.*

Coach: *So you were afraid that you would fail, and to reduce that anxiety, to defend against that threat, you yelled at your people. You perceived a threat, experienced anxiety and defended by attacking your team.*

Executive: *That about describes it.*

Coach: *So, this is the way I see things. Everyone feels threatened at times, and the threats fall into the two categories we discussed: loss of life, and loss of love; or in psychoanalytic terms, fear of annihilation and abandonment. And when people*

feel threatened, they get anxious, and they understandably try to protect themselves from the threat, either by fleeing or fighting, by escaping or confronting. So if we are able to identify what people feel threatened about, and we can find a way to reduce their anxiety, they will be less defensive, and more open—more open to listening and cooperating.

Executive: *But I don't mean to threaten people. I just want to get the job done.*

Coach: *You may not have intended to threaten them, but unconsciously they perceived you as a threat because of your attack behavior. And even if you hadn't attacked, they could still perceive you as a threat.*

Executive: *What do you mean?*

Coach: *This is key, this concept of unconscious perception of threat. You need to remember that even though you have no intent of threatening or harming others, you can't help but be a threat by virtue of your position. Many times other people don't perceive you as a threat consciously; they experience it on an unconscious level. Let me give you an example. Even if you were the kindest boss in the world, do you have the power to threaten employee's financial lives?*

Executive: *Yeah, I suppose so, because I can terminate them if they don't perform.*

Coach: *And if you are more knowledgeable on a topic than your boss, could you threaten his self-respect even though you didn't intend to?*

Executive: *I knew someone like that. He was really threatened by any subordinates who were more competent than he was, and he would find a way to get rid of them.*

Coach: *So you see that you can be a threat to anyone, anytime, even if you don't intend to?*

Executive: *Yes.*

Coach: *Let's go back to your question. What could you do to make your team feel less threatened?*

Executive: *I could quit with the criticism.*

Coach: *Why do you think you've chosen not to do that?*

Executive: *Like you said, I just get anxious and defensive because they are frustrating me.*

Coach: *How do you think they feel about you?*

Executive: *Pretty uptight. They're afraid to speak up.*

Coach: *They see you as a threat.*

Executive: *A threat they have to protect themselves from.*

The depiction of executive threat and coworkers' defensive response to perceived threat intrigued these executives. It seemed the first time that they considered the possibility that coworker resistance could represent defense against perceived threat.

Over the years I found that framing psychological defensiveness in sociobiological as well as psychoanalytic terms proves highly effective as far as conveying this conceptual framework and permanently embedding it in the executive's consciousness. As noted earlier, executives are all too familiar with the struggle to survive and prevail in the dominance hierarchies of their organizations. This conceptualization of threat triggering anxiety and resulting defensiveness resonates deeply. I have yet to encounter any challenge to this conceptual framework.

Introducing the interpretive lens of psychological defensiveness gives the executive insight into why coworkers resist his initiatives. They resist not because they are stupid, slothful, or insolent (although this may be the rare case). They resist because they are threatened, they are afraid of being annihilated or

abandoned. The executive is then encouraged to test this sociobiological-psychoanalytic proposition by applying the empathy cycle of perception, interpretation, and verification. In the business world, seeing, not hearing, is believing. Through continual iterations of this cycle, the executive perceives behavior, hypothesizes the emotions underlying the behavior, and then tests his or her hypothesis by constructing and applying a less threatening management strategy.

Coach as Empathic Pacemaker and Inductor

I now realize that I had assumed two roles described in the literature on empathy development: behavioral pacemaker and empathy inductor. Harlow and Suomi (1970) discovered that when communicatively-impaired wolf and primate isolates were placed serially with younger members of their species just learning social communication, they were able to achieve near—or seemingly normal—communicative behavior. Further research supported the finding that exposure to non-threatening behavioral pacemakers enabled isolates to develop the ability to communicate accurately (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997; Ginsburg, 1991; MacDonald & Ginsburg, 1981). "Because experienced 'tutors' are not present such social experience must evoke rather than shape accurate communication" (Buck & Ginsburg, 1997, p. 29).

These abrasive executives manifested empathic incompetence, incompetence in perceiving behavior, interpreting behavior, or avoiding

empathy altogether to pursue egocentric objectives. From this study it appears that I unconsciously undertook the role of empathic pacemaker, modeling empathic perception and interpretation while encouraging the executives to use empathy to reduce perceptions of threat. Here the coach functioned as a non-threatening empathic pacemaker, tutoring these individuals in the accurate practice of empathy.

I unknowingly used the technique of induction, described by Hoffman (2000), wherein the parent takes the victim's perspective and discusses how the child's behavior harms the victim. Through induction, the parent asks the child to consider the implications of his or her transgressive behavior, to read the feelings of the victim and imagine himself or herself in the victim's place. I now understand that I was applying this same practice, asking the executive to see the implications of his or her threatening behavior, to read the feelings of the victim and imagine the consequences.

Stotland (1969) found that self-focused role-taking (asking the child how he would feel if someone committed that transgression against him or her) was more effective for inducing prosocial responses than asking the child how the victim felt (other-focused role-taking). Close examination of inductions in the coaching process revealed that I engaged exclusively in *other*-focused role taking, asking the executive to envision how coworkers would react rather than envisioning his or her own reaction. I suspect that I limited myself to other-focused inductions because executive bravado based on self-perceptions of

super-competence would drive executives to deny that their abrasive behavior would have a negative effect, e.g., "*It wouldn't bother me to be yelled at—I enjoy conflict.*"

From my experience with the literature on prosocial behavior and moral development, I now realize that my coaching method evolved from a practical rather than moralistic foundation. From the beginning of my coaching career, I knew that my mission was to reduce suffering in the workplace. Work is hard enough without having to endure unnecessary suffering caused by abrasive behavior. My strategy was not to instill guilt in these executives for behaving badly, but to evoke anxiety over behaving incompetently and induce insight that would increase interpersonal competence. Much like the "this is business; no room for emotions" dichotomy, I adhered to a "this is practical; no room for moralizing" approach.

I now realize that technique of asking executives to engage in the aforementioned empathy test cycle (perception and test of hypothesized interpretation) was designed to attain accurate and immediate feedback. Each time the executive generated a hypothesis based upon the threat-anxiety-defense construct, he or she then developed and applied a less threatening management strategy to test whether it reduced defensiveness and increased cooperativeness. These tests produced immediate feedback on whether his new hypothesis was accurate: on whether employees responded as the hypothesis predicted. That this test cycle served to enhance these executives' empathic competence is supported

by findings that empathic accuracy is a direct function of accurate and immediate feedback (Ickes, 1997; Marangoni et al., 1995). Re-interviewing of coworkers for pulse checks every 3 to 4 months served as a second method for obtaining fresh, accurate feedback on the executive's efforts to reduce coworker defensiveness through the use of empathy.

Case Studies: Executive Use of Empathy

Summarized excerpts from each of these executives' cases illustrate the executives' use of empathy in the course of their coaching, beginning with Chris.

Chris

Session 1

Chris's first coaching session resonated with his impatience:

[When I first arrived here], I think [my coworkers] found me hard to understand. I was the bull at the gates. . . . I struggle with peers. . . . I have the patience of a wounded rhino. . . . People are expecting change because you are new; [it's] a great opportunity. . . . Then we changed a lot of things, and the pace of change was a great concern [to coworkers]. . . . I have trouble when people put blocks in front of me.

Session 2

Chris elaborated on his frustrations with slow-moving coworkers: "They waste my time making up answers. . . . I am ruthless, [I} hang them out to dry…. They don't like change; I felt like I was wading through syrup." His coworkers

were, in his words, "dumb people: lazy and worthless." Chris interpreted their

resistance as an indicator of stupidity, of incompetence that thwarted his

strivings for super-competence. He perceived their behavior, but was blind to its

meaning, interpreting resistance pejoratively.

Sessions 3 and 4

I began to call for empathy by the third session, asking Chris for his

hypotheses on why his coworkers might fear change (his earlier interpretation

for indecisiveness). Initially he had little patience for this activity, but by his

fourth coaching session was engaged in empathic reading of both his and other's

emotions:

> I was hugely frustrated [by peers]. Why can't I do something [that I want
> to do]? I just blew. Come hell or high water, I'll do it without them. They
> don't want to play.

 I asked him what he thought his peers were worried about. His response

reflected his hypothesis:

> The area of the unknown: they are afraid to go into Adventureland. If we
> keep the environment comfortable, then [they] can do their job. [They're]
> feeling frightened, feeling incompetent, out of control, guilty, blamed,
> bad.

Deciding to test his hypothesis, he worked to reduce the anxiety that he had

empathically perceived and interpreted:

> [I told them] "We want to try these things, and if it goes wrong, I will take
> the blame." . . . [I told them] "Share your concerns with me: What are you
> worried about? We want to be successful, a no-blame culture."

This was a dramatic shift from Chris's past pattern of assaulting resistance. Not only had he read the resistance and interpreted the underlying anxieties in response to the threat of change: He spontaneously devised a strategy to reduce that anxiety through reassurance. Chris had evolved from his earlier impatient "rhino" charges for action. He was now demonstrating emotional intelligence through the use of empathy in his astute monitoring and management of his own and his coworkers' emotions.

At this point, I introduced the sociobiological-psychoanalytic conceptual framework of threat-anxiety-defense. I concluded my 7-minute lecture with a radical, albeit humorously phrased, claim: "*Those who can understand and manage anxieties will* rule the world." I was unknowingly appealing to the SuperManager's drive toward mastery, offering this conceptual framework as the key to such power. I then challenged him to test his hypotheses through experimentation, asking questions of coworkers to get accurate feedback that could serve to decipher their anxieties.

Session 5

Chris opened the fifth session by volunteering that he had had difficulty controlling himself on the previous day. He was incensed over another department's inaccurate assessment of an issue:

> I walked away, wanted to rip his head off. . . . I did walk away, clutched my head. [My coworkers] later heard [from others] that I wasn't happy.

Chris was now devoting significant effort to resisting emotional hijacking. I asked if he brought his frustrations to Michael (also a pseudonym), head of that department.

> I haven't done it with him, one-on-one. When anyone has challenged him on anything, he gets defensive. To the point, I've known him to walk; [his style is] "I can't do anything right, so I'm leaving." He sulks. You have to skirt around him so you don't hurt his feelings. When you attend a meeting in his office, he will spend most of the meeting looking at emails or doing stuff on the computer. Writes notes, doesn't want to hear. He runs from some meetings. I am threatening. He withdraws and isolates.

Chris's insightful analysis reflected growing mastery of his capacity to use empathy. He continued on to construct a strategy to deal with Michael's defensiveness: "I can't hit him front on. [I have to] indicate I am friendly, reassuring him I am not out to hurt him. This strategy reflected Chris's insight into his own role in provoking Michael's defensiveness.

In the earlier blind pejorative phase, these executives failed to see their role in the threat-anxiety-defense psychodynamic. To them, coworker resistance was a manifestation of incompetence that was entirely the fault of the coworkers. Through the defense of splitting, the executive could blame the all-bad coworkers for the problem, distancing himself from any potential culpability for the situation. He could also use the defensive mechanism of projection to place any unconscious anxiety over his own managerial capabilities onto his coworkers: "It's not my fault they don't cooperate: it's *their* fault."

No longer in denial about his role in provoking Michael's anxiety, Chris abandoned these primitive defenses (Vaillant, 1977) of splitting and projection.

He was now striving to reduce, rather than escalate, Michael's perception of threat in an attempt to lessen Michael's anxiety and resulting defensiveness.

> I could reassure him that all is okay. . . . The easiest thing is to describe the issue . . . impartially, [to ask him] what he needs to [get it done]. I could talk to [reassure] him of his competencies. . . . It would be an effort to do it. . . . It's the thought of that [very] long journey. . . . Do I want to waste my time?

Chris was calculating the potential return on investment of emotional management: Was it worth this very impatient executive's time to manage the emotional distress motivating Michael's resistance? This question would be answered by his eighth coaching session.

Later in this session, Chris reflected on his tendency to abandon those who frustrated him:

> I do discard guys. . . . It's not fair. . . . The ones I don't value, I write them off.

I asked him what it would take for him not to "write people off." He responded by talking about a subordinate with performance problems who initially was afraid of him:

> I helped [X understand something], spent time with [X] to get [X]'s trust. [X] couldn't learn unless [X] could trust me.

In this instance Chris dealt with perceived incompetence through education rather than attack.

In all three cases, I noted a transition from aggression to supportive intervention once the executive developed greater insight into the anxieties motivating coworker resistance. Each came to recognize that aggression only

served to increase defensiveness, while supportive interventions reduced

coworker perception of threat and opened the door to developing coworker (and

consequently the executives') competence.

When this milestone transition from attack to support was reached, I

would again request permission to give "my 3-minute lecture on the "burden of

superior intelligence."

> Coach: *You've talked about how frustrated you get when others don't "get it,"*
> *when they can't handle change as well as you, be as decisive as you, see things as*
> *quickly as you. You expect them to be like you, and it drives you nuts that they're*
> *not. Well, there's a reason for this. I call it the burden of superior intelligence.*
> *There's a reason that you are their superior and they are your subordinates. You*
> *know more. You have more experience. You can size things up faster. The fact is,*
> *they* aren't *exactly like you, and they aren't going to perform up to the standard*
> *you hold yourself to. They can't. But if you want them to get to that point some*
> *day, you can help them by sharing your knowledge and experience with them, by*
> *developing them. You carry the burden of superior intelligence. . . . It's a lonely*
> *place, and you can either attack others for being deficient, or help them develop.*

Admittedly I am proffering a split perception; the more intelligent executive

burdened with less intelligent coworkers. I do so to point out the executive's

options to either despise or develop others' deficiencies, encouraging them to

respect rather than revile coworkers' anxieties. Coaches who encounter abrasive

executives face the same choice. They can either castigate these executives for

their emotional unintelligence, or empathically work to help them develop their

ability to monitor and manage emotions. Chris later reflected his commitment to

developing his subordinates:

> I think the biggest impression I wanted to make is with my own people. I
> want to build and strengthen those people. I want them to be first class.

People have to learn not to be scared. There is a whole area of trust that I want to build.

As the progressively less abrasive executive develops competence in emotional management, I use an additional technique to enhance insight, which I term *conjectural interpretation*, defined as inference in the absence of conclusive evidence. I usually do this as the executive struggles to understand why a perceived adversary resists him or her.

> Coach: *You described Michael as fearful of disapproval, fearful of making mistakes and being wrong. You also told me how important it is to have his boss's approval. Sometimes kids who grew up in homes where they were punished or ridiculed for making mistakes carry that into their adult lives.*

This layman's description of transference helps the executive understand that defensiveness manifested in avoidance (flight) or aggression (fight) could have very early origins unrelated to the executive. This is essentially a variation of the "burden of superior intelligence" concept, except that in this version the executive is made aware of the burden of inferior parenting carried by some employees.

Chris related that his parents had great confidence in him, nurturing and encouraging his initiative and intelligence. This description of superior parenting stood in dramatic contrast to the childhood I had conjectured in Michael's case.

Following this stage of intervention, I noted that executives no longer took coworker resistance so personally; instead they reacted with more prosocial, helping responses. This is discussed more fully in the case of Abe, who had suffered under the burden of inferior parenting.

Session 7

Chris was now closely monitoring his former adversary's emotions:

It has been noticeable for the last 3 or 4 weeks that [Michael] has been miserable. He has been down, to say the least. . . . I had a discussion with him [about a work problem]. We managed to get through the meeting without pouting, defensiveness. . . . I eased him into [my recommendation] gently.

He then speculated on Michael's experience:

He must live under a lot of stress. He must be running all the time. He has to behave in ways he doesn't [want to]. He wants to get out [of the situation] and run away and can't. He's measured on failure.

Chris was now able to *see into*, to have *insight* into his coworker's suffering by putting himself into Michael's shoes, by imagining what it must be to live in Michael's world. I now interpret this as a manifestation of Chris's empathic distress for Michael, which he responded to prosocially. His efforts to help Michael experience less anxiety, by working to reduce perceptions of threat, emerged in the next coaching session.

Session 8

Chris spoke:

These [issues] are worth fighting for. I could have gone in 5 months ago and jumped up on Michael's desk. But this time I controlled my emotions. I have been stewing on [Michael's resistance] ever since. All that was brewing. I waited a couple of days. I sat down . . . we started fishing around. . . . [I thought] "I'll go for it." I closed the door and sat down. [I said I had] serious concerns about the [problem]. [I said it was a] shame, because it had gone well [before]. [I said "I've got a] number of things that concern me; I've got a number of your guys blaming each other in their

department. [They are a] group of guys with knowledge and skill, they are so proud, don't want interference. As a result, we miss things. We could avoid some issues. You need to ask your guys to communicate, [because] one side will watch the other and let them make mistakes. We have to help each other, no blaming. I don't think we are focusing on the root issues because of the blaming. We need to discuss it. I can offer you help. I can offer you time and labor. If it is important to you, I will make it important to me." He listened. He didn't get upset; he made contributions. He mentioned [to someone else that] he'd had a very constructive [talk with me].

I congratulated Chris on this demonstration of mastery in emotional management, stating *"This is leadership."* He responded:

I though it would be very difficult. Do you know what made it easy? Talking quietly and slowly. . . . I wouldn't have believed it, I came out on a real high. For once I got through.

I asked him why he had thought his talk with Michael would be difficult: "my fear of losing it" (his temper). I then asked Chris if he could see how powerful he had been in that moment.

I got so much fun out of it. . . . You have to be monitoring all the time. That's why taking the stance, sitting down, talking slowly, kept me in control. Once I started, I went much further than I intended. It provoked [Michael] enough to call his men in [to hear what I had said].

I expressed my reaction to Chris: *"Power comes through empathy,"* privately observing his transition from SuperManager, who achieves power through force, to HuManager, achieving power through empathy.

Chris's case illustrates his initial blind pejorative stance: coworkers were "dumb people: lazy and worthless." These so-called incompetents frustrated his strivings for excellence, and he responded with "ruthless" motivational

aggression, "hanging them out to dry." This case also portrays the coach's call for use of the empathy cycle and Chris's responsive perceptions of coworker behavior and hypothesized interpretation of underlying emotions. He then devised a strategy to lessen coworker anxiety over the threat of blame, reflecting a beginning understanding of his role in escalating, or reducing, coworker anxiety.

Chris's progression from the blind pejorative phase to the insight phase was evident by his fifth coaching session, as he offered detailed observations and interpretations of his coworker Michael. The earlier defensiveness, characterized by splitting and projection, fell away as he, with the coach's assistance, conjectured on the early origins of Michael's defensiveness. Chris was able to see that he stirred anxiety over abandonment: "I do discard guys . . . the ones I don't value; I write them off;" and he responded with supportive rather than aggressive emotional management strategies intended to develop trust. This case also illustrates Chris's struggle to resist emotional hijackings: "[I]wanted to rip his head off. . . . I did walk away, clutched my head."

No longer avoiding empathy through inattention, devaluation, and estrangement, Chris's interpretive accuracy generated insight into the psychodynamics of his interactions with coworkers. This awareness of coworker emotion evoked a cost/benefit evaluation of emotional management: Was it worth his effort? He decided it was, illustrated in his emotionally intelligent, prosocial intervention with Michael. His depiction of this incident portrays the

challenge of managing his own emotions (by talking quietly and slowly) in his

efforts to manage Michael's anxiety.

Abe

Session 1

In the first session prior to receipt of feedback, Abe expressed positive

feelings for his boss, stating that he though his boss liked him. When asked for

his goals for the coaching, he spoke first of his subordinates and then

immediately referenced his children:

> What I want to get out of it . . . I want to understand what management style most closely fits me and is true to what I am, and to go the next level down, how to deal with people below me who aren't performing. I have high expectations of them. [I have] three kids [all below the age of 6], you can choose to understand how to deal with that better.

He continued, this time referencing his mother:

> I feel that my issues are not managing up; [I am] good at up. Indy 500, and you are driving a Rabbit. You are not going to win. So you can get mad, or you can decide to do what it takes. For whatever reason, my mother is a good example. She hates to hear bad news, so I just stopped telling her. My point of the car analogy: I am good at discerning personality types above me; I am more sensitive . . . than [my boss].

He later drew a parallel between his boss's management style and parenting as

he described his frustration with a coworker:

> When I get time with [my boss], the thing that I am learning, because my kids are so young. I can send [the children] to their room. I wanted to give the bastard [coworker] a time out.

Session 2

Abe received his feedback in the second coaching session, and in his third session was talking about his efforts to secure resources for his team:

> I may not get thanked. They didn't say anything. I'm trying to build a foundation here, being more sensitive to following through.

Abe's thoughts immediately shifted to his children:

> This became apparent to me with my kids. I realize I am heavily influenced by fear. I was creating that same fearful environment with [my team], but also with my kids. My son . . . spilled a big bin of crayons. He spilled them, was terrified that I was [angry]. . . . I have really let fear instill itself in my kid's life. . . . I didn't get mad. I couldn't find his shoes, [told him to] go down and find them. I came downstairs and he had the whole shoe basket, and I could tell he was really nervous. . . . This physical ability to turn myself into Darth Vader, intimidation . . . it makes me nervous.

Abe clearly perceived and interpreted his son's terror in response to falling short of his father's expectations and depicted himself as the omnipotent super-villain father. This display of empathic reading followed immediately on the heels of his expressed desire to build a better foundation with his team. Hearing of his son's fear, I asked Abe what he himself was afraid of:

> Failure, not executing. Fear of failure or success, or whatever. Those are the questions. If I can unwrap those things.

This demonstrates the first evidence of anxiety over the prospect of failure *or* success. The anxiety emerged as he contemplated his competence as a father, and resurfaced later as he came to see—developed insight into—parallel dynamics between his team and his children, and between his boss and his mother. Later on in his coaching process, Abe interpreted these parallels as indicators of

transference, a phenomenon in which feelings and attitudes attached to past

relationships are unconsciously attached or transferred to an individual, group,

or situation in the present (Allcorn & Diamond, 1997).

Session 3

By the fourth session, Abe's efforts to develop his emotional intelligence

by monitoring and managing his and others' emotions were yielding results:

> I sat down with [a particularly challenging subordinate]. . . . That went really well. I am almost noting more peace, more manageability in my personal life, also in work life. My [team] is a lot lighter. . . . I feel like if I learn what I am supposed to learn [in the coaching], there is a big carrot there. I've noticed with my kids. [Referring back to earlier instance], one daughter bit the other daughter. She hid, and that sent [my] meter off the scales. I wasn't quite the raving lunatic I would have been in the past. She is more needy; she takes it really hard, because she will be denied affection.

Abe was actively perceiving the behaviors and interpreting the emotions of his

children: He was using empathy and reported responding less aggressively with

them. He went on to reflect on his leadership skills:

> I have been given the ability, skills, calling to be a leader. I have for whatever reasons chosen not to embrace that.

Later in the session he related a tense interchange with coworkers:

> I couldn't manage my emotions, and couldn't think through the coaching angle. I didn't want to offend them. That manage/monitor thing is having its effect.

A few moments later, Abe related his daughter's similar struggle:

> [She] comes up and says "[My brother] is kicking me". . . . She is having a hard time managing her emotions.

At a later point he described his frustration over dealing with an issue in his local community: "One of the things I am trying to get in my head is manage/monitor."

Abe's language indicated that he was working to embrace the core concept of emotional intelligence theory: monitoring (through empathy) and managing one's own and others' emotions. He went on, perceiving his own behavior and interpreting the underlying emotion:

> A lot of what drives my technical tinkering is my insecurity. Now I have to pour everything in to leadership and management. I'm picking it up and it is not as hard.

He then spoke warmly of his boss, who he felt was personally invested in and supportive of Abe's success. This was immediately followed by expression of a core anxiety:

> [My] fear: the fear of failure, [of being] revealed to be a fraud, that I am incapable of doing what I've been given . . . fearful of being destitute.

Abe elaborated on his fears of abandonment and annihilation: fears that he would be discovered to be incompetent, and thus worthless. These emerged as he related his definition of happiness:

> The key word is *execute*. To be happy at the end of this trip is to be successful, doing the best I can. If you hit the ball, do it just right, I raised my kids right. In my professional life, I hit the ball just right. In my personal life, I hit the ball right. To maximize my value. I didn't shortchange myself. What I want to do is do the best I can and pass that test and having given the best of my abilities.

In Abe's world only "just-right" competence can bring happiness. Superior execution is required to "pass the test" and avoid disaster. Abe struggled in his

efforts at self-empathy, expressing continued confusion over his fear of both

success and failure in leadership: "I couldn't define [the fear]: [I] need to allow

my[self] time to figure out what is bugging me."

Although this may sound like therapy, it wasn't. We were hard at work

applying the empathy test cycle to various work frustrations, and as we did this,

Abe would spontaneously introduce material related to his inner fears and

childhood experiences.

Session 4

Abe had past experience with abuse when he worked in a boiler-room

telephone-sales operation:

> I found out we weren't doing customers any favors. Ever since that . . .
> experience where people got hurt, I've avoided sales. . . . People (old folks)
> got hurt, I have to work my way through that. . . . I had crossed the line
> where I knew better.

It appears that the perpetration of harm in the interests of achieving

organizational goals was an accepted practice in Abe's past job. Abe's description

indicates that he was aware of this intent to harm, and that for him this act was

ego-alien.

It is not uncommon for an abusive organization to defend against

perceptions of the organization as harmful by avoiding empathy. To resolve

empathic distress, portrayed so well in Abe's comment, the organization projects

blame from itself and onto the victim, rationalizing that the customer is

undeserving of help (e.g., "They should know what they're getting into. They're stupid if they don't; no one if forcing them to buy.") Here empathic avoidance defends the organization against the threat of its perception as harmful, and from diversion from egocentric objectives (Hoffman, 2000).

Abe's struggle to understand his own anxiety over his work role surfaced yet again:

> I don't feel like I've gotten the fear thing unwound. It kind of bugged me, not [the] conversation on being happy, [but on being] careful on making one thing your idol. There is some deep-seated, freaky, mom stuff.

His reflections then unfolded in rapid succession:

> I had a knack of blowing myself up professionally. I would leave at the first hint of success.

He went on to describe an early work situation where he was given unclear expectations and deprived of the resources to fulfill those expectations:

> I hate it when people don't tell you what they want. I couldn't control everything. . . . That is a theme that did violence to my disposition . . . given a reasonable, doable demand. . . . You aren't giving me any input, any control. Don't ever put me in a position where I can fail. I have to be *successful*. [If] I can't control the parameters, it would be worse for me to have my name on it, muck it up.

Without pause Abe went on to describe his terrifying childhood. He talked of his biological father "who beat [his mother] to death" and whom she divorced when Abe was in kindergarten. Mother and children went to live with his maternal grandmother "who threw us out . . . couldn't handle us after a year." Once they found housing, his mother was rarely home, as she worked the graveyard shift to support the family:

> I remember explicitly . . . when she woke up at 4:00 in the afternoon, one of the things I could do was make dinner. I was in second grade. . . . I had become used to being the man of the house. I was a barbequing second grader. . . . I don't want to be in a position where I have to be right. I would screw it up. It wasn't good. I was made to fail. . . . Being a parent, I can empathize with how horrible her situation [was], but . . . one of her coping mechanisms . . . She would lose it and threaten to send us to the evil, alcoholic dad. She would start packing her clothes. . . . If it is going to be wrong, I don't want my name on it. If it is going to be right, I want my name on it.

A few years later, Abe's mother married a military man who was not physically violent, and the threats of abandonment subsided. Still,

> Every other week was your week to be in the doghouse. It doesn't matter what I do, I am in the doghouse. [She would lecture me] on being inconsiderate and disrespectful.. . . He [my stepfather] chimed in. He deferred to her.

Using empathy to understand his fear of leadership failure, Abe displayed painful insight into the origins of his anxieties over leadership. The risks of failing were enormous, learned from his horrific childhood experience of threats of abandonment from his mother and annihilation at the hands of a violent, alcoholic father. His grandmother had abandoned his mother in her time of need, and she, in turn, would threaten to abandon her son, perhaps to avoid the pain of failing as a mother. The risks of leadership success were equally harrowing, because he could be annihilated at the slightest indication of incompetence. Abe related a management decision of his that nearly led to his being fired the previous year:

[What I did] was a bad idea. I was in pure terror [afterwards]. I am being exiled and going to be abandoned. I lived in hell all weekend. [My boss] has shown me [that he is] a merciful, gracious leader.

Session 5

In this session, Abe shared his newly developed insight, the apparent result of empathizing with his coworker, his children, his mother, and ultimately, himself:

The thing that was the most epiphanal thing: realizing what a thin margin of error I had lived with so long. When I was in second grade, and mom woke up, and if you did something wrong, all these variables, if they didn't go right, then you will be shipped off. The thin margin. What it made me think about, in reflection, with [my boss], I have never gotten the snot beaten out of me. There was a penalty with [my boss], but there was no abuse. If I make a mistake, it is not going to be the end of the world. There is part of me that is motivated to be very good and excellent. I want the bad part to go away. . . . I have been blessed with this gift of leadership, I am going to pour all of my time and energy [and] focus on the things I have control over. It is really nice to let go of trying to control [things I don't have control over].

Sessions 6 and 7

Abe was now deeply involved in the analysis of behavior, becoming more familiar with the emotional intelligence and threat-anxiety-defense frameworks, and continually testing his empathic accuracy. He reflected:

Emotional intelligence provides the physics: a system for understanding psychodynamics. . . . I think emotional management is what leadership is all about.

He then spoke of his son:

It dawned on me Sunday. My son is no longer terrified. Whatever I am doing differently, the reaction is no longer fear. [Now] he has the confidence to pout. Then you move to open rebellion.

He smiled in a relaxed fashion as he said the last. His satisfaction over releasing his son from threat was evident; his son now lived in a world where it was safe to feel sad, to rebel, and to be himself.

Session 8

Abe continued to display insight into his past Darth Vader management and parenting styles. Three sessions earlier he had described his mother's response to his childhood incompetence:

She was inconsistent and moody. Spilling milk one day was okay, but the next day it meant getting the snot beat out you. She beat me up with whiffle ball bat.

In this session he described a regression to his past style:

It was interesting, I had a relapse. Saturday my son spilled some water in my office, and it spilled on my computer. I was making breakfast. He freaked out; he said he was sorry. My instant reaction was to get mad at him, [but] I didn't freak out. Then he spilled his chocolate milk all over the place. This milk went everywhere. I lost it. He wasn't paying attention [and] I got mad. I didn't hit him. I unleashed terror. . . . I have this look about me; looks can incite terror. I know I am losing control but I don't know at this point.

Abe could see that he was transferring his own childhood experience onto his child. He terrorized his son as his mother had terrorized him, and as her husband and mother had battered and abandoned her. He then spoke of his boss:

I told him how much it meant for me that he was willing to give me this opportunity to go through [the coaching]. The real value he provided me

was coming to terms with my mother's demands for perfection. His patience let me see that I did not have to be perfect.

Abe's case portrays his deep anxieties over his leadership role, resonating in concomitant reflections on his role in relation to his children. His almost immediate association of his children's fear and his subordinates' resistance deepened into insight into his fearful responses to threats experienced in his childhood. His childhood cage was continually rattled through threats of abandonment, annihilation, and accusations of inadequacy. Abe unconsciously carried this early learning into his treatment of subordinates (whether employees or children), illustrating transference of past psychodynamics into his current situation. His response to his unconscious perception of the equivalent threats of failure or success (which could lead to failure) was to alternate between isolation from his coworkers through empathic estrangement and aggressive enactment of Darth Vader-like paternal intimidation of his subordinates and his children.

Following reassurances from the coach that emotional management could and should be used for prosocial ends (an anxiety stirred by guilt over his earlier emotional manipulation of boiler-room customers), Abe embraced the concept of emotionally intelligent management of self and others' emotions, and engaged in recursive iteration of the perception-interpretation-test cycle. His use of empathy precipitated the aforementioned painful insights into his past and its powerful effect in his present life. Deeply grateful to a boss who treated him with "gracious mercy," his terror abated and he devoted his efforts to becoming a

more merciful father and executive. Abe's progress was put to the test when his

entire department was eliminated through restructuring. He was able to see that

this abandonment was not an indictment of his abilities, and had the confidence

in his newly developed leadership skills to subsequently found his own

company.

Ben

Ben's objectives for his life were clear, having evolved through time. He

had wanted to be a good son, a good student, a good soldier, a good employee,

and a good father. When I met Ben he was pursuing a degree at a local college,

sat on their board of directors, and had initiated training classes for his

subordinates. He placed great pride and value in education and felt little respect

for those who avoided learning:

> I have over 232 college hours. I have a knack for remembering things. We
> were talking about my hometown. I was limited to what I could do then; I
> was going to be limited in life unless I experienced more. In the military I
> [tested] with an IQ of 141. I have a hard time relating to people who don't
> have the same values that I have; I think that is one of my largest
> weaknesses, is being able to relate to people who keep their minds
> stagnant. Some people want to be lifelong learners. People learn better
> when they are leading the pack.

Ben became a good employee by solving his past employer's problems:

> I was known as the axman, the problem solver. I don't tolerate people
> who are lazy, I expect every one to be just like me. . . . I follow directions,
> rules and regulations, will not compromise safety. . . . I am very rule
> oriented. . . . I have extraordinary work ethics. . . . [In a past job] I was
> known as the axman. My job was to take care of [the problems}. That was
> viewed very positively by upper management. I loved it. . . . I loved going

in there and cleaning up. I was good at it. I want to be a better person. I
used to thrive on this, but it's not for me anymore, not fun anymore.

But his goal had changed:

After awhile, after [that job], it wasn't fun anymore; by then I didn't like it.
The kids really changed me; that really changed me. You might have
thought [you knew] what love is: I held my baby girl up and said, "I don't
want to do this. I don't want to be mean anymore." It was great. You find
out what unconditional love is. . . . I would like to be more like that here
[at work], like home life. I never new what joy was until I got to hold that
[baby]. There are no words to describe the feelings.

Ben expressed that he no longer wanted to be the axman, the executive

executioner. However, it appeared that he had been hired by his current

employer to do exactly that:

They brought me in because of my style. . . . The [last] person [in this
position] was not as aggressive in getting the job done. He was very hands
off, let everybody do their own thing. . . . It made him successful [in the]
popularity contest [with employees]. Popularity is not in my vocabulary.

Ben's company was located in a small community and had employed local

families for generations: "The company is changing. It is so large now, it cannot

maintain the 'touchy family' deal." The company had been struggling with

employee non-compliance and hired Ben to address this problem. Ben recounted

a discussion with a superior:

[X] is very people-oriented. I think he likes me, thinks that I do a good job.
His words [to me were] "[You] follow directions, rules, and regulations,
will not compromise safety." . . . He told me "You are one tough son of a
bitch."

Ben's management style turned out to be a little too tough for his employer's

sensitivities:

> This is one place that didn't want me to be an axman. I still crave that – get an adrenaline rush—the axman stuff. [A superior higher than X] said I was a tough son of a bitch. He said "Other people see you as being tough; we are going to get you a coach to take the rough edges off."

Ben described the issue that became the primary focus of our coaching work:

> I am not here to fire everyone. I need help understanding the part about if you have a problem, how would you address it, and attack the behavior and not the person. How do I treat non-performers with respect, because that's what [this company] expects. . . . It is a double-edged sword. They send mixed messages. I don't see how you treat non-performers with respect and dignity. It's the driver in me. The job to get done is business. I am caught between a rock and a hard place. [This company] doesn't like to get rid of anyone.

Ben was at a loss: How could a crusader for compliance function without his sharp sword of intimidation? Ben relied heavily on logic in his management style, and if coworkers ignored (resisted) his logic and persisted in non-compliance (incompetence), he escalated to intimidation and abandonment. He became frustrated when his rational approach to seemingly irrational resistance didn't work:

> I explained it to [X] using logic. . . I am asking people to be logical. They get emotional.. . .You don't leave people behind, but if people are dragging you back, you cut them loose. . . . I tried to be empathetic. I tried to explain things; I used logic with illogical people. . . . If it is going to come to a showdown, I am prepared for anything. . . . I have tried to logically talk about it: [the] analytic style doesn't work. I am going to revert to my old ways.

Very early in the coaching process, I challenged Ben's conviction of the superior power of rational logic over the irrationality of coworker emotion. He had asked his boss's superior to be a mentor, first securing his boss's permission:

Coach: *I think you are naïve in believing that if you use logic, and that if you explain things, it will be understood and accepted and people will feel fine. I speak the language of emotion: I think you are being too naïve in thinking that logic will overcome [a superior's sense of] threat with you going over his head. I think you are naïve in believing that if you use logic, and explain things, it will be understood and accepted and people will feel fine.*

Ben struggled with this concept, but his reluctant acceptance was expressed in the following comments made over the course of many coaching sessions:

I am sitting here thinking that I have programmed my entire life on logic, working with machines, [processes]. It is the people side that I am missing. I need to understand the people stuff more. I am getting into the people side. It is starting to come together for me. It is not my natural way of thinking. . . . [You told me] "*If you think logic is going to work, forget it.*".... I am getting mixed signals, and that galls me. . . . [A trusted coworker] said you may be right. Logic has nothing to do with it. . . . You were right, people don't respond to logic at all.

Ben's reflections on logic and emotion were the result of empathic reading. Ben was clearly adept at perceiving behavior, and by his third coaching session became skilled at interpreting behavior through the threat-anxiety-defense conceptual lens. Ben exhibited familiarity with this concept before I had an opportunity to introduce it. In the second coaching session he described his response to his coworkers' tendencies to leap to blame:

Let's sit down and look for the solutions. I try to stay out of the finger pointing. If I make a statement, I have my facts together. . . . I have done a good job. If I feel threatened, in any way, shape or form, I will come out swinging. There is survival, tooth and nail, but [there] shouldn't have to be. This is a very good company. You shouldn't have to develop a reputation by pointing fingers, and belittling.

Once acquainted with the sociobiological-psychoanalytic framework, Ben had no difficulty accurately interpreting coworkers' underlying anxieties. He worked

hard to apply his new insights by using education rather than aggression to address coworker resistance. Interestingly, he viewed his new strategies through a warrior's eyes:

> By being able to control feelings, theirs and mine, it makes me feel good in a powerful way. It's the extra weapon in my arsenal.

It became clear that the previously mentioned love/hate polarity of coworker responses to Ben resulted from his prior ability to empathize with those he respected and his rejection of those who provoked his defenses. With coworkers who were motivated to learn, Ben was an empathic educator, caring and helpful: "I have the patience of Job with my students." With coworkers who resisted his teachings (logic), he became the aggressive warrior. His aggressive style mixed verbal assault with paradoxical statements and cryptic humor intended to confuse his opponents, throwing them off-balance:

> One of my coworkers came in having a fit. I said "I love you more than a brother, because my brother wouldn't get away with this much crap."

We eventually came to call this Ben's "trickster" style, and began to explore Ben's responses to perceived threat. Why did he take up the sword of the warrior when some resisted his logic, yet respond as the helpful educator toward others who had similar difficulties accepting his ideas? Ben's early experiences with aggression and defense suggest that his style originated in family life. As a child, Ben wanted to be a good son:

> I love my parents; my dad was my hero . . . but there was not that much love in the family, not expressed in the family until I was in the [military]. I always had food, clothes, had a great childhood. [My] father was a very

good provider, no abuse, so we can get that out of the way. . . . He worked all the time. The necessities of life were the most important thing.

Ben sought his father's approval through hard work:

We had a [family business]. It was always my . . . job to do that. . . . I have extraordinary work ethics.

However, it appears that he failed to succeed in his quest for his father's love: "I was the black sheep of the family." He later revealed his father's intolerance of independent thinking that challenged his paternal authority:

They had stringent rules, you didn't break them. . . . [My father] would say "I want you to plow the front track," [but] he would remove the front cultivator. I would do it my way; it was easier. I put the plows back on. He would accuse me of not doing the job. I told him, "This is what I do." [My father said], 'That's not the way I do it."

This is a family dynamic in which the son is accused of incompetence if he functions independent of his father. Following an occasion when he was (as it turned out) unjustly accused of laziness by his boss, Ben reflected: "It makes me feel bad to be treated like that. My dad did that for years."

Later, describing another incident where he was attacked by his boss, Ben commented: "My father was 1000 times worse than [my boss]." It should also be noted that Ben's aggressive workplace language consisted almost exclusively of words describing direct physical aggression (e.g., "slap," "kick," "stab," "strangle," "shoot," "cut your head off," "destroy," "crucify," "rip," "whip," "whipping boy"). Despairing over his boss's accusations, he replied:

This . . . department is being used as the whipping boy, even though we have faults. I told [him] I was whipped. "I will come in, do the job, and go home."

It seemed that Ben had learned much about the warrior style from his father.

Discussing discipline of his employees, he stated:

> I don't want this [coaching] to be a charm school. [I don't want to be] someone so politically correct. . . . When [employees] get chastised, they shouldn't feel good about it. In the mountains I got switched.

His anger at his father's insistence on compliance resonated in Ben's anger when his boss would not agree with his logic:

> If I think my boss is wrong, I won't back him. I will comply, but I won't like it. And he is going to know I don't like it. I won't give him the grief; The old Ben would say, "I told you so; I tried to convince you. I tried it your way. Now try it my way."

As a child, Ben found himself in a no-win situation. To please his father, he would have to abandon any attempts at individuation and submit to his father's definition of success through hard manual labor. Ben escaped this oppressive prospect through education, but got little support in the process:

> I knew that I didn't want to be like my dad, who never finished school, but he was a hard worker. [I] never got help with homework.

On a later occasion, Ben spoke proudly of the different stance he took toward his daughter's education. He explained that she was in an advanced reading class:

> I have a [tutor for her]; I am going to do tht. My dad would never do that for us. She is going to excel. I bought her a laptop.

This highly intelligent executive's experiences with education were initially negative: "School was not that challenging. School was boring." I once asked Ben when his trickster style emerged:

> Seventh grade. I used to get my butt beat regularly in grade school. They weren't going to whip me in junior high. I had a school principal who was

my hero. [He told me], "It is okay to be who you are; it is okay to be yourself." That got me through my military career. You bet it did. I have letters of commendation.

As coaching progressed, Ben would quickly revert back to his warrior style if his newly devised, emotionally intelligent management strategies didn't work:

When [people don't cooperate], I will revert back to my old Neanderthal self.

He described his warrior style as "physical power:"

People [coworkers] didn't want to listen to logic. Emotional power. I revert back to physical power." I asked Ben how power had worked in his experience: "Physical power: of hard work and parents beating my ass. Strong back, weak mind, make a living, have kids.

It appears that Ben inherited both his warrior and trickster styles from his father:

My daddy was the trickster with me. There was never a big cutup than my dad. You didn't know if you were in trouble. Dad got whipped for being a trickster. He wasn't that educated. You had a basic trust.

Ben wanted to be a good son, striving to overcome his black sheep status. He never abandoned the effort, rushing to his father's side and nursing him in his later years. He had also wanted to be a good student, soldier, and employee, and had succeeded at all of these until recently. He wanted to please his current employer, and understood from the workplace admonitions and his newfound discoveries as a loving father that this would require relinquishing his warrior/trickster sword to become the educator.

Unfortunately Ben did not come to this realization until it was too late. He had entered his new position with his warrior/trickster sword drawn, intent on defending assaults on his and the company's competence. In this 2-year period

before the coaching began, his behavior had generated perceptions of persecutory threat in many of his coworkers, including superiors and human resource personnel. Compounding his dilemma was his growing realization, through the use of empathy, that he had ventured into a company that was itself highly defensive. Despite their stated wish to enforce employee compliance, the prospect of alienating members of the company "family" proved too threatening to management.

At one moment, Ben would be told to get a previously unmanaged situation under control. But when he calmly and civilly attempted to enforce standard discipline policies, management would undermine his authority, accusing him of being "too tough" because he was enacting progressive discipline. The disciplinarian was still seen as the axman. Over and over again the dynamic was repeated: Ben would be asked to intervene, would do so in an emotionally managed manner, and would then be controverted by management, rendering him impotent. This analysis was supported not only by Ben's comments in the coaching, but also by data obtained in ongoing pulse check interviews with coworkers, including management.

Over many sessions, Ben came to the painful realization that his company was run by a socially defensive "old-boy" clique that operated on social currency rather than performance competence. To hold employees accountable evoked the risk of being seen as "mean" and "bad" in this small-town family of an

organization. The threat proved too great, and management was unable to support Ben in his efforts to slay their dragons of incompetence.

Ben's efforts to apply these strategies with management were further impaired by his past trickster persona. On several occasions coworkers had said that they "didn't know where Ben was coming from – whether or not he was being serious." They would frequently wonder whether his seeming helpfulness was just another setup for humiliation.

In the earlier quote, wherein Ben described his father's trickster behavior toward his son, Ben had noted, "You had a basic trust," implying that the impact of his father's behavior was mitigated by parent-child trust. No such trust existed between him and his company, as he had destroyed it with his earlier warrior/trickster strategies. The potential for new trust was further hampered by his company's deep-seated defensiveness, and the damage appeared irreparable. More often than not, Ben's new, empathically-based strategies were met with continued distrust and accusations of incompetence. I have since interpreted these relentless, aggressive charges as defensive projections of management's failure to set limits with the employee population and risk being "tough" and "mean."

In this later phase, Ben would become deeply threatened when he was accused of failing in his efforts to be the good employee: "I don't like the insinuations that I'm not pulling my weight." Such allegations would precipitate emotional hijackings wherein Ben would lose his capacity for emotional

management and erupt into violent verbal (and on two occasions, threats of

physical) assault. He became trapped in a cycle where the educator would

become provoked when confronted with coworker distrust, triggering regression

to the older warrior style. These events only served to reinforce coworker's

convictions Ben had not changed and was not to be trusted.

Repeatedly hijacked out of the empathy cycle and regressing into his

earlier blind pejorative, "Neanderthal" stance, Ben was now truly set up to fail,

both by his past and his present. In the past, he could not meet his father's

expectations of submissiveness. Now he was failing to meet his company's

expectations of improved employee performance. He was damned if he held

employees accountable (no matter how civilly), and damned if he didn't.

"Trapped," as he termed it, in an untenable position, the situation deteriorated,

at one point requiring hospitalization for physical symptoms:

> Rage is in there; it disgusts me. . . . I go home [with] chest pains, headache,
> [thinking] "What can I do to please this person?" . . . because of the
> [projects] that have failed, and they sit there and dumb down. I can't stand
> that. It is gut wrenching, headaches, very severe, chest pains set in; I just
> want to go down and find a board and beat it with my fists. . . . I can't
> keep going the way I am going. I do it, because I am a driver. I go into
> withdrawal, I worry too much, and then when it isn't done right. . . . It
> kills me when they slack, they pull into my chest and pull my heart down.

Ben was finally terminated over an incident where a humorous admonition

(reminiscent of the trickster), this time intended to save a coworker from

embarrassment, was misinterpreted and deemed inappropriate. Exhausted by

the cycles of trust-distrust, both Ben and the company appeared relieved that the

struggle was over and parted ways:

> Empathy helps me keep my defenses down. . . . This is the hardest work
> I've ever done. I've worked hard on it. . . . One thing I will thank you
> personally for is helping me to be able to see people in a different light. I
> am going to the next job with more power, more education, more
> reasoning. . . . I have been showing more empathy for people. . . . I need to
> live my life to make my kids proud of me. [I want them to be able to look
> back and say] "He never settled for second best. He showed [us that]
> school is important."

In summary, Ben's unconditional love for his children stood in stark contrast to

his father's demands for compliance from Ben. This experience appears to have

triggered his growing dissatisfaction with his earlier axman role, a role

replicating his father's defensive aggression toward his non-compliant, black

sheep of son.

Like the executives in the previous cases, Ben had no difficulty in

applying empathy to interpret the psychodynamics of his interactions with

coworkers. But unlike Chris and Abe, Ben was faced with his company's

paradoxical demand to address non-compliance without any negative emotional

consequence for employees. Armed with insight, Ben transformed his previous

warrior/trickster style into the educator, and proceeded to intervene with

inadequate performers in an emotionally intelligent manner.

Suspicious that he might still be a trickster, and faced with the threat of

alienating powerful members of the company family, Ben's employer defended

by undermining and thus sabotaging his revised strategies toward management

mastery. This reaction hijacked Ben's emotions into rage over having been "set up to fail." Coaching did not succeed in overcoming this destructive cycle, a case showing that an executive's use of empathy will not necessarily be enough to reduce perceptions of threat in a socially defensive individual or organization.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Evolution of Theory

This study was undertaken to research the theoretical bases of a coaching method intended to help abrasive executives construct less destructive interpersonal management strategies. The study purpose was to analyze and explicate the underlying conceptual framework of a coaching method that has been evolving over the past 10 years, and to bring it into the developing literature of coaching. In doing so, I also wanted to see whether the practitioner's coaching model is strengthened or destabilized by the scholar's discoveries from the literature and case studies.

Prior to this research, I had only a very general understanding of this coaching method's theoretical foundation, a sketchy blueprint, but a blueprint nonetheless. I knew that it had evolved from my acquaintance with psychoanalytic theory and my sociobiological orientation toward all behavior, *Homo sapiens* included. I knew that my motivation was to reduce suffering and that I would have to find a way through the executive denial that obstructs this mission. I also knew that in practice, moralistic lecturing does not work, and that the coaching has to appeal to, rather than attack, the defenses surrounding these individuals.

There was much more that I *did not* know: I did not know why these executives engaged in abrasive behavior, nor how they felt about their

management styles. I was vaguely aware that I was trying to get them to *have* more empathy, but initially I had no understanding of empathy as a process; that it was something to *do*, not have. Nor did I, the emotionally hyperattuned social worker/psychotherapist, understand how these executives could be so insensitive to the pain they inflicted. I set out to explore these questions in typical social worker/psychotherapist fashion: by talking with my clients. I now see in retrospect that I was also recruiting them as participants in our (action) research journey, unaware at the time that I was signing them on for a quest for psychological insight. We were going to figure this out, one way or another, and in doing so, stop the suffering; if their experiences as managers were enriched, so much the better. I have since discovered that this journey pioneered new territory by directly involving abrasive executives in an action research process, something never before documented (Rayner & Cooper, 2003).

As the coaching process evolved, we learned through observation, developing hypotheses about why coworkers resisted these executives' objectives, and then testing our hypotheses through experimentation with alternative, less threatening management strategies. Our work was the hard work of empathy, of struggling to understand the emotions motivating behavior.

This, too, is the work of psychoanalysts and sociobiologists. This research study itself also demonstrates an exercise in empathy. As a researcher, I analyzed the behaviors of coach and executive and worked to sharpen the theoretical lens I use to *see into* the meaning of these behaviors, to develop insight. The insights

thus developed constitute new building materials for ongoing construction and refinement of a nascent theory of coaching abrasive executives. I offer these conclusions in a summarized explication of my theory of this method.

Explication of Theory

The method is built first and foremost on a foundation of sociobiological-psychoanalytic theory. Abrasive behavior is understood to be the executive's maladaptive defense against threat. Threatened by unconscious self-perceptions of inadequacy manifested as incompetence, the executive defends against fears of abandonment and/or annihilation by incessantly striving to reassure himself of his superior competence. Coworker resistance to the executive's quest is experienced as further threat to the executive's efforts to defend against anxieties of loss of self-control through incompetence.

To defend the threat perceived in coworker resistance, the executive unconsciously splits off his or her "bad"/incompetent self-perception and projects it onto coworkers, interpreting their resistance as indicative of incompetence rather than anxiety. Any potential association with failure is to be avoided by attributing it entirely to one's coworkers. This maneuver temporarily defends the executive from external perceptions of incompetence, alleviating the executive's anxieties until the next encounter with coworker resistance.

Aggression is the weapon of choice in this crusade against unconscious self-perception, and this sword is now turned upon coworkers to battle against

threats posed by their resistance. Unlike avoidant -type abrasive executives who flee the unconscious conflict through isolation, the aggressive abrasive executive elects to motivate coworkers through fight strategies, attacking perceived incompetence. Because extreme attack would debilitate the incompetent adversary, jeopardizing strivings toward achievement, the executive relies primarily on threat displays designed to motivate through intimidation. The objective is to motivate, rather than harm: Only when under extreme direct attack does the executive see the need to respond with extreme verbal or physical aggression.

Methods (mechanisms) of defense are learned from the teachings of past instructors whether family members, teachers, or other executives, and resonate through the executive's management style. Past psychodynamics are unconsciously transferred onto the current work situation and the executive responds to these threats with the adaptive defensive style that worked well in childhood but is proving maladaptive in his adult executive role.

Empathy can be used by the executive to develop insight into the maladaptive nature of his aggressive management style, illuminating the counterproductive consequences of his motivational strategies. This concept is conveyed through the interpretive lens of threat, anxiety, and defense derived from sociobiological and psychoanalytic conceptual frameworks. This description of the psychodynamics of defense is readily understood and

incorporated by the executive struggling for survival in an intensely competitive business environment.

For coaching to be effective, the coach must overcome initial resistance to the coaching process stemming from executive anxiety over being rendered impotent (and thus incompetent). This threat is countered through the coach's claim that inattention to emotion (emotional *un*intelligence) contributes to the executive's interpersonal incompetence. This claim is supported in the coaching sessions by references to emotional intelligence research and the overwhelmingly negative revelations in coworker feedback. In essence, the executive is gently accused of attempting to manage performance without having measured (monitored) the emotions influencing performance. Such behavior is the antithesis of emotional intelligence.

Having charged the executive with this new incarnation of incompetence, the coach then moves to help the executive eliminate this threat by representing coaching as a method to restore the SuperManager's super-competence. Conveyed in business language, the sales pitch for coaching encourages abrasive executives to weigh the costs and benefits of their current aggressive styles, thus calculating the potential return on investment of committing to the coaching process.

Once motivated to engage in the coaching (if only provisionally), the coach begins the process by calling for empathy. The executive usually has no difficulty accomplishing this first step of behavioral perception, most likely

because of years devoted to vigilant detection of coworker incompetence long before coaching was ever initiated.

Once the rationale for using empathy is understood, the coaching method relies heavily on recursive iterations of the empathy cycle, the two-step empathic process of perceiving behavior and interpreting its emotional meaning. Congruent with ego's psychology's focus on defensive operations, the empathic cycle is intentionally directed first toward analysis of coworkers' defensive resistance. Premature focus on the executive's behavior could prove too threatening and provoke defensiveness. From the split pejorative stance of the abrasive executive, working to develop insight into what, in their words, is "wrong" with coworkers temporarily shields the executive from the threat of being perceived by the coach as inadequate in the executive role. Conversely, this challenge to develop insight into coworkers' behavior is designed to provoke the executive's drive for mastery, thus redeploying the quest for competence toward a more emotionally intelligent management style. The second phase of interpretation presents greater difficulty, as the executive invariably misinterprets coworker resistance as a sign of inadequacy. These inferences are generated from references to the executive's own past experience in family, school, and work and represent transference of past psychodynamics into the work environment. Misguided and thus blinded by this archaic defensive orientation, the executive concludes that it is his or her duty to mobilize (blast) the incompetent (inadequate) coworker (child) into competence.

Other-focused inductions are used as a technique to encourage the executive to step into his or her coworkers' emotional shoes. Throughout the coaching process, three core questions are asked in order to stimulate empathic reading:

- *"What were your coworkers' reactions?"*

- *"How do you imagine your coworkers felt?"*

- *"Why do you think your coworkers have those emotions?"*

From these questions, the executive generates hypotheses on the emotional meaning of behaviors, and is then challenged by the coach to conduct research using the scientific method. The executive tests these hypothesized interpretations in the human laboratory of the workplace and returns with sharpened empathic accuracy derived from immediate coworker feedback.

Now that the executive is alert to the presence and power of emotion , the coach offers an interpretive conceptual lens of threat => anxiety => defense, a lens designed to further hone the accuracy of the executive's interpretive efforts. Reading behavior through this sociobiological-psychoanalytic lens gives *sight into* emotions underlying behavior: *executive insight.* This improved emotional acuity reveals a new interpretation: Coworkers resist because of anxiety, rather than inadequacy.

In many cases insight appears first in response to empathic reading of coworkers, who are then unconsciously associated with the executive's children , and finally with the executive's own childhood and adult experience.

Incompetent coworkers are now seen to be anxious in response to the executive:

The executive also sees that his or her children are frightened in response to their

parent. These empathic readings lead to insight into the executive's own

childhood fears and adult anxieties, which the executive now sees as responses

to past and present threats of annihilation and/or abandonment.

Enlightened by his newfound insight, the executive envisions a new

strategic approach: to motivate by reducing, rather than escalating, perceptions

of threat. The executive now uses empathic reading to decipher and lessen

anxiety, thereby decreasing defensiveness and resulting resistance: This

management approach is termed *emot-ivation*. The transition to this *emot-ivational*

management style can be observed as the executive progressively abandons the

warrior's intimidation in favor of the educator' supportive interventions.

Empowered with psychological x-ray vision, the executive sees that

coworkers suffer from anxiety, not inadequacy. They defend against threat by

resisting. The executive then looks inward, observing the same dynamic in his or

her aggressive defense against that same threat. This new insight into, and

acceptance of his or her own and other's less-than-perfect humanity, relieves the

executive of the burden of having to be perfect to ward off the dual threats of

annihilation and abandonment. Coworkers are also released from earlier

demands to meet the SuperManager's standards of super-mastery. No longer the

SuperManager driven to continually prove omniscience, and omnipotence, this

new HuManager abandons the earlier primitive defenses of splitting and

projection in favor of less aggressive, thus less destructive interpersonal management strategies.

The executive's concerted efforts to change from an abrasive to more constructive style are eventually noticed by coworkers, and as the executive's skill in managing anxiety grows, coworkers' perceptions of threat abates. The increasingly positive feedback that the executive receives throughout and beyond the coaching process gives the executive a clear and continuing indication of the positive return on the once threatening investment of time and emotion in the coaching process.

Coworker feedback obtained through repeated pulse checks was not included in the study because of the threat of jeopardizing the executives' anonymity. Therefore, unfortunately, these data cannot be presented as further evidence of these executives' progression to less destructive interpersonal management styles. Other indicators of satisfaction with the coaching process could be interpreted in new referrals from employers and past coaching clients.

The abrasive executive's evolution from SuperManager to HuManager is neither immediate nor absolute. That, too, is an imperfect progression. The executive's defensive style undergoes metamorphosis but his or her very human anxieties remain unchanged and will never completely disappear. The executive will struggle with new provocations in future episodes of coworker resistance and family frustration. The executive will discover that insight does not guarantee mastery of anxiety, for despite masterful efforts to manage others'

emotions, he or she will inevitably encounter individuals and organizations whose defensive structures are sufficiently entrenched to resist the executive's best, most insightful efforts. Anxiety in self and others cannot be fully eliminated in a world fraught with old and new threats: One will always encounter new threats in the struggle for physical and psychological survival.

Such experiences will, on occasion, precipitate temporary relapse, wherein the executive becomes overwhelmed by threatening stimuli and temporarily regresses to the former, archaic, abrasive-defensive style. Such regressions are also characterized by depression, as the HuManager comes to terms with the painful realization of the inherently limited power of emotional management; it cannot overcome all resistance all of the time. This new and rather bleak insight replaces the SuperManager's past expansive fantasies of super-power over resistance. Mastery of empathy's read-interpret-insight cycle does not automatically imply mastery of the threat-anxiety-defense cycle, and the executive will have to work hard to manage responses to new threats and provocations with emotional intelligence.

Empathy is hard work for those who were not blessed with the gift of superior empathic training in early life. The executives in this study worked very, very hard to change their management styles despite the fact that their early efforts at empathy met with coworker suspicion and disdain. They continued this work as they encountered painful revelations into the psychodynamics of their past and current lives. They worked even harder as

they developed insight into the implications of their abrasive style on coworkers, family, and self. This proved to be an emotionally arduous journey for each, and each rose to the challenge. They have my deepest respect and admiration.

<div align="center">Recommendations</div>

Developing and explicating the theoretical bases for this coaching method has also proven to be an arduous journey, and I now offer recommendations drawn from this work, for practice and for future research.

There is growing interest in suffering caused by aggression in the workplace, evidenced in increasing research on what, unfortunately (for the reasons mentioned earlier) , has been termed *bullying*. Efforts to illuminate this "black hole" (Rayner & Cooper, 2003, p. 47) in research on abrasive executives are encouraging, and I hope that the insights developed from this research will help bring an end to theorists' blind pejorative stances characterized in demonizing abrasive executives. Splitting these individuals off into an all-evil category ignores the possibility that all of us are capable of abrasive behavior under the right circumstances (Bassman & London, 1993).

Such splitting and projection distances us from these executives, preventing intimate exploration of the subjects of study. I suspect that this may be an unconscious factor in the fact that with the exception of this study, no known research to date has engaged directly with abrasive executives as study participants. Much as I encouraged the executives in this study to apply the

empathy test cycle in their interpersonal research, I suggest that researchers in this field adopt the same practice, testing their hypotheses by speaking with abrasive executives. Engagement with the parties involved has been a long-standing approach in efforts to understand the phenomenon of domestic abuse; should it not also be applied to study workplace abuse? It would be irresponsible not to do so.

Abrasion can occur at any level of the workplace hierarchy, and any method developed to address workplace abrasion should be applicable at any level, from front-line supervisor to CEO. I am concerned about what I perceive to be a growing elitist attitude in the field of *executive* coaching, wherein certain coaches and coaching organizations point to their top-level clientele as testimony of their coaching expertise. Consider the case of the social worker intervening with an abusive parent: Is the parent's socioeconomic level or political status indicative of the social worker's competence? Suffering deserves our attention, no matter where it is found.

Interventions for abrasive executives should be both time- and cost-effective. Working under intense pressure, executives have little time or energy for extensive reading or writing assignments. Prescribing such tasks ignores that fact, and can damage the coaching process by evoking executives' guilt over failure to do their homework. With this population especially, coaches should be careful not to set up opportunities for incompetence.

Similarly, employers willing to enlist the aid of executive coaches and invest in these abrasive executives have little time to wait for improvement and will not tolerate lengthy coaching processes that show little result. Methods that yield significant results by the third session, thereby alleviating employer anxiety over workplace distress and return on investment, and that do not extend beyond 6 to 8 months in total, will have the best chance of surviving the selective pressures of human and organizational cost considerations.

Further research is needed into the effectiveness of this and other coaching interventions designed to improve workplace interpersonal management skills, especially over the long term. Such research is complicated by the challenges of confidentiality for all parties in the workplace, including executives, coworkers, and responsible organizational authorities. This study demonstrates that highly personal revelations can play a pivotal role in the coaching process. Confidentiality is essential, for no progress can be made if individuals fear negative consequences from speaking openly with a coach or researcher.

Coaching abrasive executives requires empathy not only for the executive, but also for the organization suffering the effects of executive abrasion. The confidentiality of the coaching process does not relieve the coach of the responsibility to monitor and manage organizational anxiety. Balancing the inevitable organizational demands for information and guidance with the executive's need for confidentiality is a challenging and very complex enterprise, requiring careful consideration of all parties.

Unlike cognitively based, didactic training methods, emotionally based coaching requires the executive to engage at an emotional level. Coaches working at this level should be both psychodynamically informed and qualified to deal with the emotions generated in both executive and coach. They must be able to unfailingly fulfill the role of empathic pacemaker in the face of defensive displays, seeing that these threat displays toward coworker and coach reflect the executive's underlying suffering.

Because of the nature of this method, coaches employing this method must be psychodynamically informed, qualified to deal with the kinds of issues that arise, and capable of managing their own emotions. Modelling empathy is critical, and if coaches experience continuing difficulty doing this, they should get out of the business. The coach must be able to maintain respect and caring and understand that despite initial defensive displays, such displays are reflections of the executive's subliminal suffering.

The now-explicated theory informing my method of coaching abrasive executives is just that: a theory. As such, the contents of this theory cannot be viewed as validated propositions. Further research is required to evaluate the theory's validity, but it is hoped that the work of this study will stimulate further research on optimal methods of reducing workplace abrasion and resultant suffering. Closer examination of the origins of and influences on abrasive executive behavior will bring deeper insight into the phenomenon of workplace abrasion.

One may justifiably question whether the theory developed from this study could be applied to all abrasive executives, regardless of personality types. The theory addresses a dynamic (threat => anxiety => defense) found across all species, including *Homo sapiens*. Further research is needed to support the evolution of this or any theory into methods specifically adapted to variables including, but not limited to, personality, gender, age, and cultural background. Survival of the fittest should also apply in the evolution of coaching theory and method.

The reader may recall that I began coaching executives by winging it, by flying blind without a defined method for reducing executive abrasion. I flew on what I knew, a rudimentary manual comprising a few sociobiological and psychoanalytic concepts. I decided to share this flight manual with the executives in the hope of mutually discovering better ways to navigate the unending turbulence of workplace emotion. I intended to include our insights in the manual, but knew I had to keep it short for the reasons noted above: Executives have little time and vary in their (empathic) reading abilities.

In the course of my doctoral studies I encountered systems theory researcher Reynolds's (1987) discovery that highly complex computer coordination of computer simulations of bird (termed boids) flocks could be achieved by following a very brief set of rules, or guiding principles, as opposed to a complex set of top-down specifications. The concept was illustrated by simulating a flock of migrating birds: How did they manage the very complex

task of flying in formation, navigating complex and ever-changing environmental conditions, without a lengthy flight manual?

Reynolds (1987) built a simulation of successful flocking behavior by programming three simple guiding rules for the flock following its leader: (a) steer to avoid crowding proximal flockmates, (b) steer towards the average heading of flockmates, and (c) steer to move toward the average position of flockmates. With this model, Reynolds demonstrated that effective, complex behavior (changing altitude, avoiding obstacles, maintaining direction) could emerge from a few very simple rules.

> The most surprising lesson we have learned from simulating complex physical systems on computers is that complex behavior need not have complex roots. Indeed, tremendously interesting and beguilingly complex behavior can emerge from collections of extremely simple components. (Langton, 1987, p. 16)

Managing flocks of people is inherently complex, demanding a flexible, adaptive repertoire of management strategies. From my initial experience as a coach, winging it, I found that my seemingly blind flight emerged from four guiding principles, that I now offer as a flight manual for abrasive executives and those who coach them:

1. Use empathy to read emotions (yours and others').

2. Interpret defensiveness as response to perceived threat.

3. Manage your and others' anxiety over threat to reduce defensiveness

And the fourth and final principle, adapted from medicine's Hippocratic Oath:

4. Above all, do no interpersonal harm (*primum non nocere*)

I conclude this dissertation with a reflection on the dominance of emotion over

logic, expressed in this interspecies reflection on irrationality:

> *"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.*
> *"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."*
> *"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.*
> *"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."*
>
> *-from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (Carroll, 1865/1941)*

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APPENDIX A: TELEPHONE SCRIPT FOR RECRUITMENT

Hello *(name of possible participant),*

       I am calling you about a research project I am conducting on the use of empathy in constructing less destructive interpersonal management strategies. In the course of our coaching work we focused on finding ways to manage employees that would minimize emotional distress and support positive working relationships. I am now conducting research for my doctoral dissertation on this process, focusing on the role of empathy.

       I am calling to see if you would be willing to volunteer to be part of this research project. To research the role of empathy in the coaching process, I plan to analyze notes of the coaching sessions. I also wish to assure you that your participation in this project is confidential. To explain this more fully, I would like to read the Informed Consent Form that participants will be asked to sign. This form explains the process and procedures to guard confidentiality in specific detail: can I review that with you now so that you have all the information you need to consider whether you wish to participate? *(Researcher then reads through consent form).*

       Having considered all of the information I have given you, would you be interested in participating?

       If individual says no: Thank you for your time.

       If individual says yes: Thank you for considering participation. As the next step, I would like to send you two copies of the Informed Consent Form. If you wish to participate, please sign both copies and return one copy to me in the attached stamped envelope. If you choose to participate, I will then send you a copy of your coaching session notes, and request that you strike out any material you would like deleted directly on the notes and return this to me in a stamped envelope that will be attached.

       I thank you for your willingness to listen to my request. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me at any time.

Sincerely,

Laura Crawshaw
WK: 801.535.4340
CELL: 801.634.3434
Email: crawshaw@executiveinsight.com

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

COACHING ABRASIVE EXECUTIVES:

Exploring the Use of Empathy in Constructing Less Destructive Interpersonal Management Strategies

Informed Consent Form

Dear: _____   Date: _____

My name is Laura A. Crawshaw and I am a doctoral student at the Fielding Graduate University. As part of my dissertation for a Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Development, I am conducting research on how empathy can be used to help executives construct less destructive interpersonal management strategies. "Abrasive" in this context is defined as managerial behavior that creates emotional distress sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning.

You are being asked to participate because you have been coached by me, in what I term an "empathically grounded" approach. Granting your informed consent would mean:

That you agree to allow the notes taken by me during your coaching sessions to serve as a data source for this research. These notes consist of detailed summaries of conversations conducted during the coaching sessions. You will be asked to review these notes and delete any material you do not wish to be used in the research. You will be asked to give separate written authorization to use the notes you have reviewed and edited in the research process.

No records will be kept on anyone who chooses not to participate. Please note that all information listed above will be kept confidential and anonymous. Your name, title, location and type of industry will not be identified: any information that could identify you will be eliminated. Because of the personal nature of the material, please be assured that both anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained: *you will be the only person who will know of your participation in this research.* If I use direct quotes, a pseudonym will be used, and I will verify the accuracy of any quotes and gain your permission before using them. To assure that you are able to exclude any information from the project, you will have the opportunity to review the researcher's notes of your coaching process and will be asked to approve, or delete material in these notes prior to inclusion of this material in the final completed dissertation. It is important for you to know that even if you choose not to participate in this research for any reason, your name will be kept strictly confidential. All data will be stored on a computer with special encrypted access, in a secure location to which only I have access. You will be provided with a copy of the summary of the final dissertation.

By participating in this research you may develop greater insight into your coaching and management experiences, and hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of how executives can be helped to develop more effective interpersonal management strategies. If you feel that there has been any emotional discomfort as a consequence of participation, a list of referrals to therapists will be provided to you. In addition, you will be provided a copy of the results from the dissertation research for your own records and review. You have the right to withdraw from the research process at any time without any negative consequences, and your data will be removed from the dissertation research and destroyed.

In addition to discussing the preliminary results with me by telephone, you may also request a copy of the summary of final research results by indicating your interest on the attached form. If you have any questions about any aspect of this research or your involvement, please discuss these with me before signing this form.

It would be perfectly understandable if you chose to decline participation, as many individuals involved in confidential processes such as coaching may not wish to particpate in research: I will fully understand and respect a choice to decline participation. Your decision to accept or decline participation will held in strict confidence: no other person will be informed that you were contacted with this request. Participation in a research project may entail a burden upon your time.

If you choose to participate, you have the right to withhold any information regarding your coaching process. You will be asked to review the researcher's material prior to analysis.

Two copies of this informed consent form have been provided. Please sign both, indicating you have read, understood, and agreed to participate in this research. Please return one of the two signed copies to me and keep the other for your files. There is no financial remuneration for your participation. The Institutional Review Board of Fielding Graduate University retains access to signed informed consent forms. Summaries of the data will also be made public through my dissertation. Results of this research will be published in my dissertation and possibly published in subsequent journals and/or books

Please accept my deepest gratitude for your participation in my dissertation research. Again, if you have any questions at any time, please call me at (801) 535-4340 or write to: Laura Crawshaw, Executive Insight Development Group, Inc., 299 S. Main, Suite 1700, Salt Lake City, UT 84119, or email at: crawshaw@executiveinsight.com. In addition, if you have any questions or concerns and would like to speak to my research advisor, you can reach her at the following address and telephone number: Dr. Marie Farrell, the Fielding Graduate University, 2112 Santa Barbara Street, Santa Barbara, CA 93105, telephone 805-687-1099.

I look forward to working with you on this project.

 Sincerely,

Laura A. Crawshaw

Printed Name
Of Participant: _____   Date: _____   Time: _____

Signed Name
Of Participant: _____   Date: _____   Time: _____

Yes, please send a summary of the research results to:

Name of Participant   _____

Street Address   _____

City, State, Zip   _____

APPENDIX C: LETTER REQUESTING CONSENT TO USE NOTES OF

COACHING SESSIONS

Dear *(name of participant)*

I have attached a copy of the notes I took during our coaching sessions. I would like to request that you review these notes and strike out any material that you would like deleted directly on the printed notes. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions you may have.

Also, I will need your signed authorization to use the final version of the notes (the version reflecting the deletions you have indicated). I have included two copies of this authorization form, and request that you return one signed copy with your reviewed notes in the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope.

Sincerely,

Laura A. Crawshaw
WK: 801.535.4340
CELL: 801.634.3434
Email: crawshaw@executiveinsight.com

APPENDIX D: REQUEST FOR CONSENT TO USE NOTES OF COACHING

SESSIONS

I hereby authorize Laura Crawshaw, L.C.S.W. to use the enclosed notes (except for the indicated deletions) as part of her doctoral research project. I have reviewed these notes, and marked all material that I wish deleted from the notes. I understand that all deletions will be made prior to initiation of the research project.

Printed Name
Of Participant: _____   Date: _____   Time

Signed Name
Of Participant: _____   Date: _____   Time:

CURRICULUM VITAE

Laura A. Crawshaw

1975	B.S. in Zoology, Smith College
1977	M.S.W. in Clinical Social Work, Smith College School for Social Work
1977-80	Emergency Room Social Worker, University of Washington Emergency Trauma Center
1978-80	Child Therapy Certificate Program, Seattle Institute for Psychoanalysis
1980-90	Clinical Director, Human Affairs Alaska Employee Assistance Programs
1988	Institute of Brief Therapy, Harvard Community Health Plans
1990-94	Operations Director, International Employee Assistance Programs, Aetna Health Plans
1995	Founder and President, Executive Insight Development Group, Inc.
2004	M.A. in Human and Organizational Systems, Fielding Graduate University
2005	Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Systems, Fielding Graduate University