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*Abrasive leaders rub their coworkers the wrong way. Their words and actions create interpersonal friction—friction that grates on subordinates, peers, and even superiors, eroding employee motivation and organizational productivity. In its more extreme forms, abrasive behavior constitutes workplace psychological harassment, also known as workplace bullying. This article describes a coaching method—*boss whispering*—that engages abrasive leaders in action research with the objective of developing less destructive, more productive leadership styles. The method is based upon sociobiological and psychoanalytic concepts of threat, anxiety, and defense, the concept of emotional management, and findings from empathy research.*

Abrasive leaders at any level can inflict deep wounds and intense suffering in employees. The organization often experiences the pain of working with an abrasive executive, manager, or supervisor as well, eroding effectiveness and paralyzing productivity. Few of us have escaped the pain of working under, over, or with an abrasive leader, and far too many of us have unwillingly entered the ranks of what I have come to call the *working wounded* (Crawshaw, 2005). Listen to their voices:

- *"We're all afraid of him; he walks around, sees something that sets him off. . . . It gets so tense—to the point where no one wants to even talk. It's getting harder to come to work."*

- *"The best days at work are the days she isn't here—that's when we can breathe."*

- *"He's always talking down to people, interrogating them— 'Why didn't you do this? Why didn't you do that?' He makes people feel like idiots."*

- *"I used to enjoy coming to work, but since she's been here, all I can think about is finding a way to get out."*

- *"Her behavior shouldn't be tolerated. We shouldn't have to constantly walk on eggshells."*

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITIONS

The *boss whispering* coaching method evolved over 20 years of coaching and researching abrasive leaders, based upon the sociobiological and psychoanalytic concepts of threat, anxiety, and defense (A. Freud, 1936; S. Freud, 1923, 1926), and the concept of

emotional management drawn from emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 1998). This conceptual framework was then integrated with findings from empathy research (Hoffman, 2000; Ickes, 1997) to construct this method of coaching abrasive leaders.

- *Abrasive leader* is here defined as any individual charged with managerial authority whose interpersonal behavior causes emotional distress in coworkers sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning.

- *Abrasive behavior* (further defined in next section) ranges on a continuum, from minor or infrequent interpersonal infractions to more frequent or severe manifestations of aggression, commonly termed *workplace bullying*, *mobbing*, or, more precisely, *workplace psychological harassment* (Crawshaw, 2009).

- *Client* refers to the abrasive leader undergoing coaching.

- *Coworker(s)* are superiors, peers, and subordinates of the leader or client.

- *Organization* refers to the abrasive leader's employer and its individual sponsors of coaching (usually the leader's superior and/or human resources representatives).

ABRASIVE WORKPLACE BEHAVIOR

Examples of abrasive behavior include, but are not limited to, rudeness, demeaning another's capabilities, public ridicule, swearing, overcontrol, social isolation, threats, intimidation, deception, abusive language, insults, and name-calling (Bassman & London, 1993). Abrasive behaviors can manifest in a pattern over time, and are determined as disruptive because of the perceived cumulative effects of the behavior (Kowalski 2001). Occasionally, a single instance of abrasive behavior may prove egregious enough to merit identification as destructive. There is currently no business standard for abrasion uniformly applicable to all workplace behaviors, as different organizational cultures embrace differing standards of acceptable behavior. Abrasive leadership behavior has the potential to destroy individual well-being as well as organizational effectiveness. Such behavior can impact productivity to the point of paralysis. Examples of organizations, departments, and projects devastated by abrasive leadership are legion. The 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).

SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE

Descriptions of abrasive leaders in the popular and business literature share strikingly similar characteristics. Typically, books and articles on the subject use a highly adversarial tone, portraying the leader as evil, mentally disordered, or both. Titles tend toward the dramatic and inflammatory: *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), and *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work* (Babiak & Hare, 2006). Such books define and classify abrasive leaders using descriptors that are inevitably colorful, simplistic, and pejorative: *jerk* (Lloyd 1999), *backstabber* and *zombie* (Di Genio, 2002), *two-headed snake* and *screaming mimi* (Namie & Namie, 2003), or, more recently, *asshole* (Sutton, 2007).

Early in my doctoral research, I was taken aback by this sensationalistic and simplistic approach to perpetrators of workplace psychological harassment. In today's society, child, spousal, and elder abuse are treated as serious issues deserving of serious attention, and one does not find books titled *Evil Parents and Their Prey*, complete with categories classifying abusive parents as *kiddy kickers* or *toxic tot-tormentors*. Demonizing people who inflict pain on others is understandable, but irresponsible, and, more importantly, unhelpful. As practitioners and researchers, we have a choice: to view abrasive leaders as demons immune to change, or to seek to understand and address the phenomenon through objective research.

A review of research on workplace psychological harassment yields extensive studies of victims of this form of workplace abuse, but a marked absence of investigation regarding its perpetrators. The mystery of this void of inquiry was addressed by leading bullying researchers Rayner and Cooper (2003, p. 47), in their article "The Black Hole in 'Bullying at Work' Research:"

> Gathering data about black holes is difficult because we cannot see them. . . . We know that black holes exist only because of celestial bodies around them. . . . For those who study negative behavior at work, 'the bully' is the parallel of black holes–almost invisible to us. We gain all our data regarding bullies from other people and events that happen around them. . . . Finding and studying the bully is like trying to study black holes—we are often chasing scattered debris of complex data and shadows of the past.

Abrasive leadership behavior has the potential to destroy individual well-being as well as organizational effectiveness. Such behavior can impact productivity to the point of paralysis.

FINDINGS ON ABRASIVE LEADERS

Rayner and Cooper explained the dearth of data on abrasive leaders: Researchers have been unable to access them. Organizations could certainly be reluctant to admit that they have such individuals in their employ, and the recruiting of such leaders as research subjects could be complicated by the fact that most abrasive leaders do not perceive themselves to be abrasive. I first encountered abrasive leaders (and their suffering coworkers) as a psychotherapist, in the course of my work as an employee assistance counselor, and subsequently established a firm specializing in coaching this population. I collected data directly from abrasive leaders over 20 years, data that became the foundation of my research on why abrasive leaders behave as they do and what can be done to help them change. Key findings from this research (Crawshaw, 2005) affirm that abrasive leaders:

- reflexively experience perceived coworker incompetence as a direct threat to their own competence: *"I struggle with people who can't move ahead. I have the patience of a wounded rhino. I can't deal with people who stand in the way of my vision."*

- defend against this perceived threat with aggression: *"I have trouble when people put blocks in front of me. . . . I am ruthless; I hang them out to dry."*

- view their use of aggression as both necessary and noble to achieve organizational goals: "S*ometimes you've got to kick people to get them moving.*"

- are often aware that they are perceived negatively by coworkers, but deny any role in generating those negative perceptions: "*They have it out for me because they're not willing to put in the time or energy.*"

- are entirely unaware or only minimally aware of the nature and degree of their destructive impact on coworkers: *"I can't believe that people think I'm out to get them. I'm just trying to get the job done–it's nothing personal."*

These findings controvert the aforementioned popular belief that abrasive leaders intentionally commit harm, are fully aware of the impact of their actions, and inflict interpersonal wounds as a result of impaired moral or mental functioning. To put it bluntly, these individuals were *clueless*; they were profoundly lacking in psychological insight into the impact of their behavior on coworker emotions. These discoveries also explained the characteristic denial encountered by organizations when they attempt to intervene with abrasive leaders. *"We've tried to talk to him, but he denies that he's the problem–he blames coworkers and doesn't see his role in it."* Abrasive leaders do not see their behavior as unacceptable or abnormal, because most of them grew up with it. The familial origins of this abrasive style, as well as specific organizational strategies to deal

with this denial, are detailed in *Taming the Abrasive Manager: How to End Unnecessary Roughness in the Workplace* (Crawshaw, 2007).

THREAT, ANXIETY, AND DEFENSE

Darwin's (1859) theory of natural selection proposed that organisms with superior abilities to defend against threats to survival, could, through this selection process, live to reproduce. *Survival of the fittest* also applies to workplace habitats; those who can *defend against threats to survival* (i.e., professional success) and demonstrate *fitness* (i.e., organizational competence) will survive and increase their chances of moving up the organizational hierarchy.

Defensive behavior follows a fairly predictable course in all animals, including humans. When an organism perceives a physical threat, the perception generates fear (anxiety), which mobilizes the target to defend against this threat through *fight or flight*. This dynamic of *threat→ anxiety→ defense* is hereinafter also referred to as the *TAD* dynamic. Sigmund Freud (1923, 1926) and later, Anna Freud (1936), proposed that this same dynamic applied to the psychological realm (e.g., when a human perceives a psychological threat, this perception generates anxiety, which mobilizes the individual to defend against the threat through the mechanisms of *fight* or *flight*). *"He was always telling people that they were stupid, that they're worthless. Some would fight back and try to convince him otherwise, with no success. Others would just clam up – they'd withdraw."*

In the course of my work with abrasive leaders, I discovered that any perceived threats to their professional competence (and thus, survival) were vigorously defended against with the *fight* mechanism — with interpersonal aggression. Driven to demonstrate their superior competence (a defense against unconscious self-perceptions of inadequacy), they experienced immediate and intense anxiety when coworkers did not meet their expectations, and defended against these threats to their competence with aggression. I learned that most abrasive leaders are neither evil nor insane; they are *afraid,* fearful of perceived threats to their competence which could jeopardize their workplace survival. This realization became instrumental in the formulation of boss whispering, and would be shared with the abrasive leader as a conceptual framework with which to interpret the data we gathered through action research.

ENGAGING THE DEFENSIVE CLIENT IN COACHING

Because most abrasive leaders do not see themselves as abrasive, the majority are referred for coaching by their organizations upon determination that their destructive conduct disrupts operations to an unacceptable degree. At this point, the leader's interpersonal *incompetence* overshadows his or her technical competence, and the organization's negative perceptions now threaten the leader's continued professional survival. The involuntary nature of these referrals presents the coach with two primary challenges: forming

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a trusting coaching alliance, and engaging the client in coaching despite his or her denial of the need for coaching; *"I'm not the problem – others may think I'm too hard on people, but they're wrong."*

At the point of referral, these clients are understandably anxious about the role of the coach: Will the coach serve as the organization's spy, seeking evidence to convict the client of management "crimes?" In the first coaching session, abrasive leaders actively defend against the allegation of abrasion, testing whether the coach will render and communicate a guilty verdict to the organization, resulting in career annihilation. To defuse this anxiety, the client must be assured that the coaching process will be entirely confidential, and that no information will be shared back with the organization. Second, the coach must refocus clients' efforts to argue the facts of whether or not they engage in "bad" behavior to a more productive goal:

> *I'm not here to debate the facts of whether or not you are abrasive. I have no idea–I don't work here, and we've only just met. But I do know one thing for a fact: People perceive you to be abrasive, and those negative perceptions are jeopardizing your career–your effectiveness. My goal is to help you become more effective than you already are. Right now, people are focused on your behavior, not on your objectives–I'd like to see that change.*

This assurance resonates with abrasive leaders because of their deep need to be perceived as technically, and now, interpersonally, competent. Anxiety regarding coaching is significantly reduced as they begin to perceive the coach as ally rather than adversary in striving for competence, a valued goal. Once these foundations for trust are set, how does the coach then productively engage the client in coaching? Attempting to convince abrasive leaders to relinquish behaviors they consider both acceptable and necessary will fail. The client will immediately become defensive, claiming either that the abrasive behavior is not injurious, or that injury is necessary to achieve results. Instead, the coach offers to align with the abrasive leader in addressing his or her primary dilemma: confusion. "*I don't understand why the company is doing this to me—I don't see what people are so upset about.*" This lack of insight, this blindness to the impact of their destructive conduct, is characteristic of most abrasive leaders, as frequently reported by organizations: "*We've tried to talk to her about her behavior, but it doesn't work. She just doesn't get it; she just doesn't see.*" Abrasive leaders are generally blind to the pain they cause, and this condition is often compounded by deafness as well; most hear very little about their conduct from others, essentially functioning in a feedback vacuum. Subordinates are understandably reluctant to directly voice concerns for fear of adverse reactions, and peers normally don't see it as their role to provide unsolicited feedback. The abrasive leader's superior may not be aware of distress experienced by those lower in the organization's structure, or may accept the abrasive leader's description of "complaining employees."

The abrasive leader's intense anxiety and confusion over the organization's demand for improved behavior becomes the point of engagement for coaching.

> *You've told me that you don't understand why the organization is demanding that you change your management style – that you don't have clear information on the negative things people are saying about you. I can help you with this. I'd like you to engage me as your co-researcher, to interview your coworkers and discover* what the negative perceptions are *and* what causes them. *That data will give us an opportunity to develop strategies to eliminate these negative perceptions – to manage them out of existence so that they never disrupt your effectiveness again.*

This is a very appealing proposition to abrasive leaders. Instead of attempting to convince the client that he or she is a bully and needs to change, the coach offers the opportunity to gain greater insight into the factors that jeopardizing continued career survival. Never has a client declined this opportunity, which now defines coaching as a process in which client and coach engage in research to address the following questions:

- What are the negative perceptions that threaten the client's effectiveness?

- What generates these negative perceptions?

- What could eliminate them and prevent their return?

The coach collects data on the negative perceptions by conducting individual, qualitative interviews with coworkers. The coach informs coworkers that no information will be shared with the organization, and that the coach will analyze the entire body of data to identify feedback themes. In this process of *thematic analysis,* the coach purges the resulting feedback themes of any data that could identify specific contributors, assuring coworkers that their participation in the coaching process will not result in adverse consequences.

The data collected by the coach informs the client of the specific nature and degree of the distress generated in interpersonal interactions. Upon reviewing the feedback, the blinders blocking the client's awareness of other's emotions are removed. This dramatic transition from blindness to sight is illustrated in a case example that typifies client reactions to feedback. As I prepared this client for the difficult session ahead, he brushed off my comments with "*Let's get on with it – there's nothing they could say that could bother me–I've heard complaints before.*" After reviewing the extensive data, which conveyed in graphic detail the deep frustration, anger, and despair coworkers experienced in response to his aggression, the client clutched at his chest and choked out, "*This is the worst day of my professional life. I never meant to hurt people like this – I don't want people to see me this way*." His blinders came off, and when clients see the perceptions generated by their interpersonal interactions, they

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typically express shock, embarrassment, and sometimes, remorse. No longer blind to the negative perceptions threatening their effectiveness, their anxiety level escalates and generates strong motivation to defend against this threat—a manifestation of the *threat→ anxiety→defense* dynamic. "*How could people think that I'm out to get them? I'm just trying to get things done. What am I supposed to do? How do I turn this around?*"

ACTION RESEARCH IN THE COACHING PROCESS

Many believe that in order to change one's behavior, one must first acknowledge or admit that one engages in said behavior. Traditionally, organizations (and many coaches) strive to get these leaders to acknowledge their abrasive conduct, an effort that inevitably fails because the leader is in denial. Boss whispering solves this dilemma by redefining the research problem from *eliminating negative client behaviors* to *eliminating negative coworker perceptions*. This paradigm shift eliminates the potential for an adversarial client-coach debate on whether the client is "guilty" of bullying coworkers. Instead, coach and client collaborate to research the negative perceptions threatening the client's effectiveness. Now aware of these threatening perceptions, the client is anxious to defend against them (a manifestation of *TAD*) with the coach's help. To do this, coach and client conduct action research to explore the remaining research questions:

- What generates these negative perceptions?

- What could eliminate them and prevent their return?

Kurt Lewin (1958) conceptualized change as a process of *unfreezing, transition, and refreezing. Unfreezing* involves a process of "melting" or releasing old beliefs or patterns of behavior; *transition* consists of moving toward more productive behaviors; and *refreezing* represents the consolidation of new behavior into a consistent practice. In boss whispering, the objective is to unfreeze beliefs underlying abrasive behavior and move toward and consolidate interpersonally-productive behaviors. Lewin further asserted that social change could be achieved through the active participation of those involved in the problem(s) to be investigated:

> Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out. (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, p. 162)

Step I: Planning

Action research is "a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a spiral of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action" (Lewin, 1946, p. 38). The first step, planning, is applied in boss whispering as follows: *data gathering* (through coworker interviews), *analysis and feedback of results* (to the client), *preliminary*

diagnosis (negative coworker perceptions), and *collaborative action planning* (testing more productive management strategies). This step is carried out in the coaching process as follows:

Data gathering consists of the collection and categorization of coworker perceptions by the coach:

> *Public Humiliation*
> - *"He will criticize people in front of other people–really embarrass them with his bullying."*
>
> - *"During meetings, he will tell people that their ideas are stupid or worthless."*
>
> - *"He will degrade people by singling them out in front of others to tell them what they have done wrong; he does not know when to keep things private."*
>
> - *"If he does not like something you say or do, he will broadcast it to everyone."*

Feedback of results is provided to the client through this confidential compilation of the perceptions, as illustrated above. These data address the first research question: *"What are the negative perceptions that threaten the leader's effectiveness?"*

Preliminary diagnosis. Based upon the feedback, the coach asks the client to develop a hypothesis on the second research question and coaching goal, *"What generates these negative perceptions?"* The client hypothesizes, for instance, that when coworkers are criticized publicly, they might feel humiliated; a negative experience. In other words, coworkers experience the client's public criticism as a threat, generating anxiety, negative perceptions, and subsequent defensive fight or flight behaviors (*TAD*).

Collaborative action planning. Based upon the preliminary diagnosis (hypothesis), the coach presents the third research question and coaching goal, *"What could eliminate the negative perceptions and prevent their return?"* Here, the coach asks the client to develop another hypothesis, on what action(s) could potentially prevent the generation of these particular perceptions: *"I suppose that if I had a problem with someone, I could discuss it privately."*

Step II: Action
Now fully aware of the destructive impact of his or her past actions, the client takes action by consistently discussing coworker concerns privately. In doing so, he or she tests the hypothesis to determine if this new action will result in the elimination of negative perceptions of public humiliation.

Step III: Fact-finding
Approximately three months after coaching has begun, the coach re-interviews the client's coworkers, this time to gather their current

Anxiety regarding coaching is significantly reduced as they begin to perceive the coach as ally rather than adversary in striving for competence, a valued goal.

perceptions. This second cycle of fact-finding provides updated information on whether the client's actions have extinguished negative perceptions regarding public humiliation:

- *"He doesn't call people out in front of others anymore."*

- *"He had a problem with something I said, but this time he brought me into his office to discuss it."*

- *"He didn't say she was stupid, but everyone could tell from the way he rolled his eyes that he was thinking it."*

Upon receipt of this new round of feedback, the client discovers that his or her action (presenting criticism privately) has significantly reduced negative perceptions of public humiliation and, at the same time, learns that the negative perceptions are not entirely eradicated (signified by the third perception noted above). This finding leads client and coach into another spiral, or iteration, of the action research process:

- **Planning**
  - What generated this negative perception [third on the list above]?

  - Client hypothesis: "*Rolling my eyes—they picked up on my nonverbal signals of criticism.*"

- **Action**
  - What could eliminate this perception and prevent its return?

  - Client hypothesis for action and testing: "*I could be careful about my body language.*"

- **Fact-finding** (from a third cycle of data gathering)
  - *"He's more thoughtful about how he treats people; he doesn't dress them down publicly."*

  - *"He stopped snorting in derision and raising his eyebrows; you don't see that anymore."*

  - *"If he disagrees, he is more respectful about it; he doesn't make you feel like a fool."*

Action research exemplifies the scientific method, a method reliant upon data gathering, hypothesis development, and testing of hypotheses through experimentation. Organizational leaders are inherently comfortable with this approach, as they regularly utilize it in product and service development, where hard science carries more weight than soft ("touchy-feely") advice.

INSIGHTLESS: THE BLIND PEJORATIVE STATE

The action research spiral of investigation described above works well when negative perceptions clearly describe the abrasive behavior (e.g., public humiliation). The spiral works less well when data are limited or ambiguous. For example, a client reports that

he is disgusted with his team. The coach asks why: "*When I ask them for their input in management meetings, they don't speak up. I get nothing from them.*" The coach then calls for a hypothesis: "*Why do you think that happens? Why do you think they don't speak up?*" The client answers: "*Because they're stupid.*"

Here we see the emergence of the client's hypothesis on why his team sits in silence: coworker stupidity. Early in my coaching work, I was struck by the profound lack of insight displayed by my abrasive clients. Couldn't they see that people do not speak up because they fear the consequences of doing so? Couldn't they see that they played a role in engendering this silence? Couldn't they see how their aggressive behavior influenced their team's behavior? Over and over, the answer was no. Despite the fact that most of these individuals possessed superior cognitive intelligence, they lacked emotional intelligence, defined by Goleman (1998) as the ability to be aware of, monitor, and manage one's own and others' emotions. Deficient in their ability to read and accurately interpret others' emotions (also termed *empathic accuracy*; Ickes, 1997), they were blind to their role in provoking defensive behavior displayed by coworkers. This blindness was manifested in their extreme lack of psychological insight, so often voiced by others in the refrain, "*They just don't get it. They just don't see how they affect people.*"

Astonished by this lack of insight, I called for a second hypothesis: "*Can you think of any other reason that they don't speak up?*" His answer: "*I don't know–maybe because they're lazy.*" Again and again, these individuals failed to accurately interpret the meaning of behavior. They were either at a loss to decipher the meaning (e.g., "*I don't know - I have no idea why he/she/they did that*") or they interpreted it simply as a manifestation of stupidity, sloth, or insolence (e.g., "*They're doing it to get back at me*"). I ultimately termed this the *blind pejorative state*, in which the abrasive leader, blind to the emotions motivating his team's silence (anxiety in response to threat), attributes simplistic, highly pejorative, and inaccurate motivations to coworker behavior.

Why were these individuals so limited in their ability to analyze others' emotions? To what can we attribute this distinctive deficit in emotional intelligence? This question bears further research; however, in the later phases of coaching some clients would note that they had not had the benefit of growing up in emotionally-attuned families: "*We never talked about emotions.*" "*My dad didn't want to hear how I felt about things. He cared about what I did, and that's not all bad – he kicked my ass, and look where I am today: vice president!*" Children learn to read and interpret others' emotions (the exercise of empathy) through *parental induction of empathy* (Hoffman, 2000). Through this process of asking the child to essentially "step into the shoes" (and psyche) of others, emotionally attuned parents teach their children to read and accurately interpret emotions to develop their interpersonal competence in the wider world.

The abrasive leader's intense anxiety and confusion over the organization's demand for improved behavior becomes the point of engagement for coaching.

I offer my hypothesis on why abrasive leaders do not see the emotional impact they have on others: they did not receive sufficient education in the exercise of empathy. They were not trained to detect and accurately interpret others' emotions. Further, I propose that this blindness makes it impossible to care about others' emotions, because one cannot care about feelings one cannot see, emotions that (to the emotionally blind individual) do not exist: Sightlessness precludes insight. This realization led to the next step in the evolution of boss whispering: If abrasive leaders could learn to see what they do, would they then care enough to stop doing it?

The reduction of aggressive behavior shown by abrasive leaders in response to data analyzed through action research seemed to support this theory. Once clients saw the negative coworker perceptions collected by the coach, many spontaneously elected to abandon the abrasive behavior evoking those perceptions: *"Now I make a point of talking to people privately when I have an issue with them."* This spontaneous change in behavior occurred when the client (a) was able to make a direct correlation between his or her behavior and its negative impact on others (e.g., *"I can see why they feel this way"*), and (b) when the client derived personal or professional benefit in doing so. *"I don't want to hurt people"* characterizes the former sentiment, whereas *"I don't want to get in trouble"* expresses the latter. Finally, I propose that it does not matter whether abrasive leaders choose to change because they care about others or care about themselves – in either case, coworker injury ends.

FURTHER OBSTACLES TO INSIGHT: OVERCOMING EGOCENTRISM

Abrasive leaders' negligible capacity for insight was further impaired by their intensely egocentric perspective on human behavior. Once acquainted with the perceptions collected by the coach, clients voiced their mystification over coworkers' emotional reactions. Statements such as *"How can people be so sensitive? I don't mind if someone tells me I screwed up; I don't need it sugar-coated"* or *"It wouldn't bother me if I was criticized in front of others"* exemplified their beliefs that others should react as they do, and that failure to do so indicated human abnormality: *"There's something wrong with people if they can't stand up to criticism - it shows how weak they are."* I came to understand this as the "Everyone should be like me" principle that contributed to abrasive leaders' blindness to others' emotions. Despite the clear evidence of negative coworker emotions discovered through the action research process, clients frequently rejected these emotions as invalid, insisting *"People shouldn't feel that way."*

The client's rejection of evidence of coworker emotions presented a significant threat to the coaching process. I spontaneously and instinctively found myself defending against this threat by asserting that people are different and may react in ways that the client would not, and that the challenge of productive management is

to understand how others might react to the leader's words and actions. "*You say that people shouldn't feel what they feel, but you and I can see from our research that they do experience those emotions. The fact is, not everyone is like you. They didn't grow up in your home, with your parents, and they didn't have the same life experiences that you did.*" Clients almost inevitably responded to this simple assertion by expressing confusion on how to interact successfully with people who were not like them, who did not share their perspective: "*So what am I supposed to do? I'm no psychologist – how am I supposed to figure out how people are going to feel about what I say or do?*" Clients were expressing their belief that even if they were aware of negative coworker perceptions, they were at a loss to build hypotheses to explore what generated these negative perceptions, and what could eliminate them permanently.

ACCURATELY ANALYZING BEHAVIOR: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

"*How am I supposed to figure out how people are going to feel about what I say or do?*" I took this question very seriously, having pondered it myself as I saw these individuals rubbing people the wrong way in their blind pejorative state. Coaching is a process of profound questioning, and I found myself facing the most profound question ever asked of me by a client. How could a coach help remove the blinders to insight and provide a lens that would allow these leaders to accurately analyze and predict coworker emotions evoked by their words and actions? I turned this question internally: *What lens did I look through to analyze the emotions driving behavior? Could that perspective provide these clients with (in)sight, and end their emotional blindness?* I determined to explore these questions by providing them with the conceptual framework that guided my interactions as an individual, past psychotherapist, and executive coach: the *TAD* dynamic.

As noted above, Darwin (1859) proposed that organisms able to evolve mechanisms to detect and defend against physical threat would increase their chances of survival. Freud (S. Freud, 1923, 1926) theorized that corresponding psychological mechanisms operated to defend against threats to the human psyche. He proposed that upon detecting a psychological threat (e.g., loss of love) anxiety is triggered, which then mobilizes defense through fight or flight; again, *threat→ anxiety→ defense*. Individuals threatened with demotion (representing the organization's loss of regard) can *flee* the organization or *fight* to demonstrate their competence to ward off this threat. This *fight* to defend one's position can manifest in acceptable behavior (e.g., correcting deficiencies, highlighting accomplishments) or unacceptable aggression (e.g., attacking one's supervisor). Similarly, leaders can defend against threats to their competence posed by employees through acceptable behavior (e.g., coaching and/or disciplining poor performers) or unacceptable aggression (e.g., "barking," "biting," or "ripping"). Freud's identification of this psychodynamic of *threat→ anxiety→*

Boss whispering solves this dilemma by redefining the research problem from eliminating negative client behaviors to eliminating negative coworker perceptions.

defense evolved into the complex practice of psychoanalysis. Could this *TAD* dynamic, in its elegant simplicity, prove helpful to the layperson by providing a conceptual framework, an interpretive lens through which to more accurately analyze behavior? I determined to test this possibility, and shared this—what I consider an unintended trade secret of psychology—in a brief description, drawing analogies between survival in the natural and corporate realms.

People who work for a living readily understand this concept, reflected in business language. Organizations and employees alike *fight to survive* hostile business climates swarming with *threats* of rising costs, reduced revenues, and fierce competition. They *fight tooth and nail* to reach the top of the *food chain, fighting turf battles* to *defend their territory*. Although Darwin's (1859) theory of natural selection is contested to this day, I have yet to encounter a businessperson who does not accept *survival of the fittest* as the ruling principle of the corporate domain.

Let us return to the case excerpt, wherein the client offered "lazy" and "stupid" as hypotheses for his team's silence in meetings. I spent a few moments introducing the *TAD* concept, and then asked him for an additional hypothesis: "*We now have two hypotheses on why your team does not respond: (1) they're stupid, and (2) they're lazy. Is there a third? Can you think of* any other reason *that your team might not speak up?*" Interpreting their silence through the *TAD* lens, the client responded: "*Well, I've been told that I can be critical; maybe they're afraid of what I will say.*" I reflected this *TAD*-based hypothesis back to him: "*So, your third hypothesis is that they don't speak up because they're afraid – afraid that you'll be critical?*"

We then proceeded to action planning, where I suggested an experiment to test this new hypothesis: "*You could ask a question of your team, and then, if* anyone *says* anything, *respond in a calm tone with something like 'Tell us more,' or 'Why do you think that's the case?'— something nonthreatening, just encouraging more input. Of course, you'd have to control any impulse to criticize the individual's contribution.*" The client immediately expressed anxiety over the threat of colluding with incompetence: "*But I don't want to agree with something if I think it is stupid.*" I addressed his anxiety: "*Don't worry – you don't necessarily need to agree with anything. I am just suggesting that you encourage communication in a nonthreatening way, to see if people talk more.*" In the next coaching session, the client reported the results of the experiment: "*It was amazing—people started speaking up. I had to work hard to control myself, but, by the end of the meeting, almost everyone contributed. I guess the third hypothesis was right—they didn't talk because they were afraid I would attack them. When I stopped attacking, they started talking.*"

No longer blind to the emotions motivating the group's silence, the client could now *see into* the emotions driving behavior: He had developed *in-sight*. Examining behavior through the lens of *threat→anxiety→ defense*, clients quickly became adept at analyzing

the dynamics of defensiveness and their role in provoking coworker fight or flight: Their newfound ability to accurately analyze the meaning of behavior, or *empathic accuracy* (Ickes, 1997), developed in further iterations of the action research cycle. Clients were now able to answer the second research question of what generates negative perceptions: *the perception of threat.* Armed with this insight, they applied it to the third and final research question of what could eliminate these perceptions and prevent their return: *reducing the perception of threat.* Through subsequent tests, they confirmed their initial finding that reversal of the *TAD* dynamic made them more effective. This increase in effectiveness was twofold. First, through action research, clients discovered that, by controlling the impulse to defend their competence with aggression, coworker negative perceptions and resulting defensiveness ended. Second, the absence of aggressive behavior shifted attention from the leader's conduct to the leader's management objectives, exemplified in this case excerpt:

> CLIENT: *"I need to find a way to get employees to put their tools away without yelling at them. It drives me crazy when they don't – it's a major safety risk."*
>
> COACH: *"So your objective is to get them to put their tools away."*
>
> CLIENT: *"Yeah, and I know that if I yell at them, they'll complain to human resources about how I treat them."*
>
> COACH: *"So how could you achieve your objective without your behavior being perceived as a threat?"*
>
> CLIENT: *"I could bring the ones that don't comply into my office individually, explain the policy, and let them know that if they choose not to follow it, I will be forced to take further disciplinary action. They won't like it, but they can't complain about how I treat them."*
>
> COACH: *"So the threat becomes* the policy, *not you, and the focus would be on* their performance, *not your behavior."*
>
> CLIENT: *"Yes—which is where the focus should be."*

THE EMERGENCE OF INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCE THROUGH INSIGHT

In the above coaching excerpt, the client's independent decision to relinquish earlier intimidating management strategies (e.g., verbal aggression, public humiliation) in favor of civil conduct reflects the emergence of interpersonal competence through insight. Having researched the psychodynamics of defensiveness through the *TAD* lens, clients learn to see the psychological and professional injury caused to self and others by their destructive behavior. Clients also see direct benefit in modifying their behavior, as negative coworker perceptions are replaced with positive regard, evidenced in successive follow-up interviews with superiors, peers, and subordinates. Finally, clients who initially fear that so-called *soft-skills* coaching may impair

Despite the fact that most of these individuals possessed superior cognitive intelligence, they lacked emotional intelligence, defined by Goleman as the ability to be aware of, monitor, and manage one's own and others' emotions.

their effectiveness ("*You're not going to try to turn me into Mr. Softy, are you?*") realize an increase in leadership impact after discarding the abrasive behaviors that distract others from their objectives: *"Now people listen to what I say, instead of complaining about how I say it."* These perceived advantages reinforce client efforts to accurately monitor (analyze), and manage their own and others' emotions, known as the exercise of *emotional intelligence* (Goleman, 1998), ". . .so that they are expressed appropriately and effectively, enabling people to work together smoothly toward their common goals" (p. 7).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the boss whispering coaching model, abrasive leadership behavior is understood to be a defense against perceived threats to the leader's competence. Aggression *(fight)* is enacted to ward off this threat. Much like horse whisperers, who calm the fears of unmanageable horses, boss whispering strives to help unmanageable leaders monitor and manage the anxiety that drives them to trample on coworker emotions in their crusade for competence. This is achieved through collaborative action research and the introduction of a conceptual framework describing the psychodynamic of *threat→ anxiety→ defense.*

Distinctive features of this coaching model include

- overcoming initial client defensiveness by aligning with the client's distress over negative perceptions;

- introducing the *TAD* dynamic to support evolution from the blind pejorative state to a more insightful understanding of human behavior; and

- developing increased empathic accuracy to guide leaders in their independent design of productive management strategies after coaching has concluded.

This method can also prove beneficial with clients who are not necessarily aggressive, but whose behavior rubs coworkers the wrong way for other reasons (e.g., an individual whose incessant talking alienates coworkers and jeopardizes his or her future employment). Such clients are, similarly, blind to their impact on others, and can benefit from coaching by developing the requisite insight to support permanent change.

Coaching specifically designed to help abrasive leaders can provide a win-win scenario for all involved parties. Coworker suffering ends, and coworkers are heartened that the formerly abrasive leader cared enough to change. Coworkers regard the organization positively for intervening, dispelling any prior perceptions that management condoned bullying behavior. The client's interpersonal conduct achieves an acceptable level, ending coworker distress that may have impeded organizational productivity. The client experiences gratitude for the organization's willingness to offer a second chance

through coaching (vs. demotion or termination), increasing loyalty in response to the organization's willingness to invest in his or her leadership development. Finally, organizations retain the leader's expertise, while reducing the potential for litigation, attrition, and anti-organization sentiment.

Workplace psychological harassment is a serious and growing problem worldwide. While antibullying legislation can impose societal constraints and require organizations to intervene, simply terminating abrasive leaders will not solve the problem of workplace abuse – they will only go on to work (and cause distress) elsewhere. We know that domestic abuse toward children, spouses, and elders requires a comprehensive approach encompassing legislation and rehabilitative help for abusers. Why has it taken so long to apply this same thinking to this form of workplace abuse? Is it that organizations suffer from organizational psychopathy and, according to common belief, "just don't care?" Is it that abrasive leaders are, as the popular literature would have us believe, intractable psychopaths or incorrigible (to quote Sutton, 2007), "assholes?" I believe the answer to both questions is a resounding "No." Certainly, some organizations care only about profit and display no concern for their employees, and there are some leaders who have no conscience—but this represents a minority. I find that most employers care not only about their economic health, but also about the psychological well-being of their employees. These organizations want to solve the disruption caused by abrasive leaders, but feel helpless to do so: "*We've talked to him, sent him to training—everything we could think of, and nothing worked. What else can we do, short of firing him?*" Coaches who can help abrasive leaders develop sufficient insight to manage productively are perfectly positioned to help organizations end workplace psychological harassment and, in doing so, change the world of work.

Much like horse whisperers, who calm the fears of unmanageable horses, boss whispering strives to help unmanageable leaders monitor and manage the anxiety that drives them to trample on coworker emotions in their crusade for competence.

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Issue 30, 8(2): Organizational Coaching to Create a Coaching Culture
Issue 31, 8(3): Organizational Coaching in Health Care
Issue 32, 8(4): Organizational Coaching and Change

Issue 33-36 themes

Issue 33, 9(1): Planning for the Future in Uncertain Times: Organizational Coaching and Strategic Planning

Issue 34, 9(2): Organizational Coaching in Non-profit Organizations
Issue 35, 9(3): Organizational Coaching and Psychometrics: The Role of Testing and Assessment in the Coaching Process

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