



Stop the Suffering

An EAP Approach to End Workplace Bullying

"The majority of employers need help to overcome their anxieties about intervening with an abrasive leader, and this is where education on managing abrasive behavior comes in. All managers should understand the importance of differentiating performance from conduct, and know how to manage both."

| By Laura Crawshaw, PhD, BCC

Back in 1980, I boarded a ferry headed to the Great North, my MSW diploma in hand. Signing on as the first full-time clinician at the initial external EAP in Alaska, I eagerly anticipated helping employees with their problems. Unfortunately, I discovered that I was helpless to address their work-related suffering caused by bullying.

This experience led me on a lifelong professional quest to understand why bosses would treat their employees badly, and why most employers did nothing about their bullying bosses – managers that I prefer to call “abrasive leaders.”

False Assumptions of Abrasive Leaders

A review of the popular literature on workplace bullying would lead one to believe that abrasive leaders are either mentally disordered (psychopaths, narcissists) or morally disordered (“predators or jerks”). It is commonly assumed that abrasive leaders are fully aware of the nature and impact of their behaviors, that their intent is malevolent, and that their behaviors are intractable—they cannot change.

That’s what we’re *told*, but my extensive experience in this field disputes these assumptions.

Specifically, most of the leaders had little or no awareness of the nature and impact of their abrasive behaviors. Their intent was not to harm but “*to do what it takes to get the job done.*” More

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significantly, I discovered that even though abrasive leaders may *appear* supremely confident, this stance masks underlying insecurity about their own competence. Their aggression was a defense against the threat of being perceived as incompetent. In short, *they were afraid.*

Finally, I discovered that if properly motivated (usually through employer intervention), the majority could abandon their destructive management style with the help of specialized

executive coaching (Crawshaw, 2005, 2007).

A Typical EAP Scenario

In discussions with former colleagues, it seems that EAPs still play little or no role in helping employers resolve the problem of abrasive conduct in the workplace (another term for workplace bullying). To outline the typical EAP scenario:

An employee (*target*) reports distress related to bullying; the EAP provides short-term intervention. If the employee elects to stay in his or her current position, the EAP may refer the individual to mental health services for costly and often ineffective treatment of the ongoing trauma.

The target may also be encouraged to report his or her concerns to the employer, which rarely occurs for fear of retaliation and a belief that the employer does not care. Additional employees affected by the abrasive leader may contact the EAP, and this scenario is then repeated.

From the EAP point of view, the bullying is not reported to the employer, as this would be a breach of client confidentiality. And even if targets granted permission, EAPs are understandably hesitant to be viewed as “bully hunters,” risking alienation of the corporate client’s management.

In this scenario, nothing is resolved – the bullying continues, as does the suffering of employees and the inevitable destructive impact on organizational productivity (Pearson & Porath, 2010).

Executive Coaching Perspective

Now let me open a window into my world—that is, executive coaches who specialize in working with abrasive leaders. It begins with a call from the employer: *“This can’t go on. We’re losing good people. We’ve tried everything and employees are talking about litigation. What can we do?”*

We then provide *intervention consultation*, which helps management:

- Work through their anxieties about intervening;
- Determine the limits and consequences for continued abrasive conduct; and
- Prepare to deal with the abrasive leader’s predictable defensiveness.

In the course of the intervention, the employer also offers the abrasive leader help in the form of internal mentoring (for milder behaviors) or specialized coaching, indicated for abrasive leaders with entrenched aggressive management styles. The employer then monitors the leader’s ongoing conduct, moving to disciplinary action up to and including termination if the conduct does not improve to an acceptable level.

What if the abrasive leader improves his or her management style? Employee suffering ends, and employees are heartened that the formerly abrasive leader cared enough to change. Further, employees regard the employer positively for intervening: *“They cared, and they listened.”*

We find that in the majority of cases, the formerly abrasive leader is grateful for the employer’s willingness to invest in him or her and offer a “second chance” through coaching. Finally, the employer reduces potential for litigation, attrition, and negative management sentiment while retaining the leader’s expertise.

And what if the abrasive leader cannot change and must be isolated or terminated? Employee suffering still ends, employees regard the employer positively for intervening, and employers have the peace of mind of knowing that they did everything in their power to remedy the situation. This offers further protection against litigation.

Both of these scenarios stop the suffering created by workplace bullying.

Essential Elements of Workplace Bullying

I present five essential elements that are drawn from my many years of interacting with employers who have successfully resolved the problem of workplace bullying.

1) Employer education on how to manage abrasive behavior. I’m not referring to the standard one-hour presentation on bullying that instructs employers to put an anti-bullying policy in place and “enforce it at all times.” These simplistic seminars fail to address the core challenge of managing abrasive behavior: overcoming a manager’s anxieties on how to intervene with an abrasive employee.

I earlier shared my findings that abrasive leaders don’t treat their co-workers badly because

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they're evil, but because they're insecure. Interestingly, I found the same principle applies to employers who fail to intervene with abrasive leaders. They avoid intervening not because they're bad or uncaring people, but because they are also afraid of being harmed or doing harm. For instance, "If we talk to him about his behavior, he might sue us!" "She's a key player, we can't risk losing her."

The majority of employers need help to overcome their anx-

eties about intervening with an abrasive leader, and this is where education on managing abrasive behavior comes in. All managers should understand the importance of differentiating performance from conduct, and know how to manage both. They should feel confident in defining unacceptable conduct, as they have the right and responsibility to determine how their employees and customers should be treated.

Employers should be trained to detect unacceptable conduct

voiced by distressed employees, and they should be trained on how to intervene calmly and confidently in the face of extreme defensiveness. This education can be delivered in a one-day management training, or on an individual basis for the manager preparing to intervene with an abrasive leader. The latter is termed *intervention consultation*.

2) Employer-supported channel for employees to report abrasive behavior. The employer sets

How Can EAPs Stop Workplace Bullying?

How can EA professionals help stop the suffering and assist employers in solving the problem of workplace bullying? Consider this projected sequence of events:

- Bullied targets seeking help from the EAP are provided with short-term counseling and informed of their employer's "bullying hotline." The EAP also educates them on the employer's informal and formal complaint options. The fact that the employer has put this channel in place is viewed as a positive step by employees and encourages targets and bystanders to voice their distress to the employer. Impact on mental health services is reduced because the trauma does not continue.

- The employer responds to formal complaints with a formal investigation and adjudicates if unacceptable conduct has occurred. If abrasive conduct is found, intervention takes place. Conversely, informal complaints are communicated to the manager

of the possibly abrasive individual for supervisory exploration and monitoring, which may result in intervention. Multiple informal complaints are indicative of shared distress and should serve as a strong indicator for intervention.

- A manager who detects abrasive behavior through direct observation or informal complaints to the hotline calls the EAP to speak to a trained *Bullying Intervention Consultant*. Intervention consultation is provided and, if needed, the EAP identifies specialized coaching at the time of intervention.

- The abrasive individual is referred for voluntary specialized coaching (which can be done telephonically) by an EAP team of trained specialists or an executive coach in the EAP's affiliate provider network.

- The employer's ongoing monitoring of conduct is supported by climate surveys recommended or performed by the EAP.

In this approach, the EAP forges a strong and enduring

partnership with the employer to stop workplace bullying without jeopardizing client confidentiality or risking perceptions of "bully hunting."

From a design standpoint, intervention consultation could be provided in the overall capitated rate (as with general management consultation). If provided by in-house EAP coaches, specialized coaching should be offered on a fee-for-service basis to cover the cost of co-worker interviews, coaching, and follow-up support.

Having been told that "companies won't pay for that," I beg to differ. In our experience, companies *will* pay to retain valued leaders and avoid the greater costs of attrition, litigation, and disrupted productivity stemming from abrasive conduct. With cost-effective coaching, the cost is minimal when compared to the costs of terminating and replacing an abrasive leader. ♦

- Laura Crawshaw

up a hotline that offers informal or formal complaint options for targets and bystanders. The informal complaint process does not require the employee to self-identify or to submit to interviewing, and may or may not result in intervention by the employer. However, multiple informal complaints about a given leader indicate significant distress and should call for intervention.

Formal complaints require investigation. In these cases employees must self-identify, submit to interviewing as part of the investigation, and are informed of the investigation's findings. Employee information is treated confidentially, and employees who self-identify are protected against retaliation.

3) Employer intervention.

This consists of employer representatives meeting with the abrasive leader to (a) set limits and consequences for further unacceptable conduct, (b) offer help to the individual in the form of internal mentoring or external specialized coaching, and (c) hold him or her accountable for improved conduct. Intervention is no easy task, as abrasive individuals are generally blind to their destructive behavior and become extremely defensive when it is brought to their attention. But employers equipped with these insights and techniques are prepared to intervene calmly and confidently, in turn bringing workplace suffering to an end (Crawshaw, 2013).

4) Specialized coaching for abrasive leaders. We have found that leaders with entrenched

abrasive management styles require more intensive help by a specialist. Through many years of research and practice, we have identified essential elements for successfully coaching abrasive leaders. First, the employer must exert pressure on the individual to change, rather than expecting the coach to provide this motivation. The coaching must be confidential and based upon detailed anonymous data from co-worker assessment interviews. This data is instrumental in helping the leader understand what he or she does to generate negative perceptions.

The coaching should be designed to develop the individual's empathy and resulting psychological insight. This brings leaders to a point where they can generate more productive management strategies. Finally, the coaching process must prove effective from a results and cost standpoint, producing significant change by the third session and usually completed within three to four months (Crawshaw, 2010).

5) Employer monitoring for continued acceptable conduct.

In this element, employers consistently monitor employees for acceptable performance through regular performance reviews. The same should hold true for reviewing *conduct*. Evaluations can occur through direct observation of the (formerly) abrasive individual, ongoing co-worker interviews, and surveys to gauge cultural health.

Summary

As a former clinician, clinical manager, and product

designer in the EAP field, my goal was to reduce employee suffering and support organizational function. Employers have learned how to protect the physical safety of their employees while at work. Shouldn't EAPs play a role in helping them protect their psychological safety by partnering to end workplace bullying? ♦

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