


Abrasive Bosses and the Working Wounded

Abrasive bosses rub their coworkers the wrong way. Their words and actions create interpersonal friction that grates on subordinates, peers, and superiors, grinding away at trust and motivation. Abrasive bosses can inflict deep wounds and intense suffering in employees. The pain of working with an abrasive boss is often felt by the company as well, eroding effectiveness and paralyzing productivity. Few of us have escaped the pain of working under, over, or with an abrasive boss, and far too many of us have unwillingly entered the ranks of what I have come to call the *working wounded*.


I coach abrasive bosses of all kinds: executives, managers, supervisors, and professionals (physicians, attorneys, others) whose disruptive behaviors cause profound emotional distress in the people they work with. Over the past two decades I have had the opportunity to closely observe how and why these abrasive bosses rub coworkers the wrong way. I've also examined the individual and organizational wounds they inflict, listening to the pain experienced by their subordinates, peers, and superiors and, believe it or not, by the abrasive bosses themselves. I've written this book to share my observations and offer my insights on why abrasive bosses resort to aggression, why individuals and organizations fail to intervene effectively, and, most important, what you can (and can't) do about it. In medicine, *abrasion* refers to the physical trauma sustained when exposed skin rubs against a rough surface. In this book, *workplace abrasion* refers to the psychological trauma sustained when employees are exposed to

the unnecessary roughness of an abrasive boss. Both scenarios produce suffering.



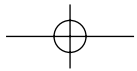
It Only Hurts When I Work



Suffering is a term rarely applied in the workplace. It's one of those emotionally loaded (also referred to as *touchy-feely*) words that seem out of place at work. Aren't we supposed to leave our emotions at the door so we can get on with business? Workplace *suffering*? Employers don't want to hear about it because they don't want to be perceived as perpetrators of suffering—they're there to get the job done, and social services aren't part of that picture. Second, it's a given that we all were meant to suffer at work—right? Showing up day after day to plug away at tasks we don't necessarily enjoy with people we don't necessarily like is a pain, a pain that most of us can't afford to avoid. What lottery winner doesn't jubilantly declare that his or her first act will be to quit work? Unless we are lucky enough to love what we do and the people we do it with, we endure the assorted discomforts of work to pay the bills and keep the wolves from the door. So since when *isn't* work supposed to be painful?



Work can be painful for other reasons, including the actual nature of the work. Early man learned early on that woolly mammoth hunts were no picnic if you were the one who ended up trampled or impaled. And it seems pretty obvious that pyramid building was no easy task for your average Aztec or Egyptian laborer. As a kid I remember teachers warning us of the physical and mental suffering we would endure digging ditches or screwing caps on toothpaste tubes if we failed to hit the books. It's not only the nature of the work that can be unpleasant or uninteresting, causing physical or emotional suffering—work can also hurt because of the circumstances surrounding our jobs: weak wages, bleak benefits, bad schedules, or looming layoffs. In short, work can be a pain.



But the pain of work itself is not the pain I'm addressing in this book. Nor am I talking about the pain caused by bosses who cut programs, pay, or people based on business need. I'm talking about the pain suffered from direct contact with an abrasive boss; the emotional wounds sustained from *direct interpersonal aggression* experienced in day-to-day interactions with abrasive bosses. And the suffering isn't limited to abrasive bosses' subordinates: all of their coworkers—subordinates, peers, and superiors alike—can be rubbed raw by the grinding force of disrespectful treatment:

"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."

"Everyone feels helpless, hopeless, out of control."

"She does what's best for her—she doesn't stand up for us, ever. If she's questioned by management, she comes back and attacks without exploring the issue."

"It leaves us feeling so unimportant—like we're not worth anything."

"We're all afraid of him; he walks around, sees something that sets him off and starts yelling. 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."

"Working here reminds me of the time I was in an abusive relationship. I find myself thinking 'What's wrong with me? What am I doing wrong? What can I do differently?' I've never had that experience in my work life until this new manager showed up."

"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."

"He's not a team player. It's never 'we'; it's always '*I want, I said.*'"

“When he shows up, we shut up. We don’t tell him any more than we have to because you don’t want to bring up anything that will provoke him.”

“Her behavior shouldn’t be tolerated. We shouldn’t have to constantly walk on eggshells.”

“People get a sick stomach when he walks through the department.”

“It all boils down to respect—when you feel your efforts are appreciated, when you see some interest in what you’re doing, that’s respect. I can’t deal with the contempt, the ugly mood swings, his refusal to treat his team with respect.”

To Kick or Not to Kick

The suffering caused by abrasive bosses is not only injurious, it’s also inefficient. Typically, at the outset of coaching, my abrasive clients will argue this point, insisting that unless they “kick ass,” the work won’t get done. In his landmark article “One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?” renowned management researcher Frederick Herzberg (1968) termed this the KITA (kick-in-the-you-know-what) approach to management. However, the KITA approach presents certain drawbacks. Herzberg listed the limitations of physically kicking one’s coworkers:

(1) it is inelegant; (2) it contradicts the precious image of benevolence that most organizations cherish; and (3) since it is a physical attack, it directly stimulates the autonomic nervous system, and this often results in negative feedback—the employee may just kick you in return [p. 54].

Physical KITA and psychological KITA appear to be equally ineffective in building internal motivation:

Why is KITA not motivation? If I kick my dog (from the front or the back), he will move. And when I want him to move again,

what must I do? I must kick him again. . . . But it is only when one has a generator of one's own that we can talk about motivation. One then needs no outside stimulation. One *wants* to do it [p. 55].

Abrasive bosses manage for movement rather than motivation. They are blind to the fact that external intimidation does nothing to build internal motivation; they are blind to the reality that employees respond more positively to carrots than sticks. Abrasive bosses flog their coworkers into movement, whereas insightful (or what I will term *adequate*) bosses use positive strategies to make their employees *want* to move. They rely on the carrots of positive reward, unwilling to resort to psychological horsewhippings. And in the rare instances where employees refuse to move at the required pace, adequate bosses understand that beating a nearly dead horse is not only cruel—it's also inefficient. Instead, they cut the employee from the herd through the civilized processes of formal termination. Abrasive bosses approach motivation very differently, and in the next chapters we'll be looking at how, when, and why abrasive bosses kick their coworkers.

Speaking of motivation, you may be wondering what motivates me to coach abrasive bosses. I'm going to confess something that I never reveal to prospective corporate clients. Ready? My *mission is to reduce suffering in the workplace*. I dare not speak of this mission when I talk with companies struggling with an abrasive boss—it absolutely reeks of touchy-feely. I don't want these hard-nosed business folks to suspect that they're hiring a bleeding-heart social worker, do I? Social service types are highly suspect in the work world; we're perceived as do-gooders intent on disrupting hard business objectives with the "soft" stuff of putting individual needs over organizational objectives. Woody Allen once described a nightmare in which he was pursued by a monster with the body of a crab and the head of a social worker. My body is quite human, but I spare my corporate clients the prospect of any such do-gooder nightmares by concealing my mission and instead making the case for coaching in a language they understand: facts and numbers.

The Costs of Abrasion

Let's ignore the soft stuff for a moment and take a hard look at the scope and costs of organizational disruption caused by abrasive bosses. For those of you who need numbers, I offer these: A Gallup study of 2 million workers at 700 companies found that poor supervisory behavior was the main reason that employees quit or were less productive (Work & Family Connection, 2005). A study of superior-to-subordinate aggression in the United Kingdom concluded that close to 2.5 million UK employees considered themselves to have been victims of managerial aggression in the previous six months (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). Research conducted by the Center for Creative Leadership (Lombardo & McCall, 1984) reported that 74 percent of successful executives in three Fortune 100 corporations said they had had at least one intolerable boss, and another study (Spherion Corporation, 1999) showed that employees are four times more likely to leave bosses who are not considered "nice" (another word rarely used in a business context). Attrition of valued employees is just one of the prices paid. In the past decade researchers have explored other costs incurred by abrasive bosses: decreased morale and motivation resulting in absenteeism and lowered productivity (McCarthy, Sheehan, & Kearns, 1995), higher incidence of stress-related illnesses (Quine, 1999) and substance abuse (Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty, & Freels, 2001), increased number of legal actions alleging a hostile environment or discriminatory behavior (Leymann, 1990), and retaliatory responses, including sabotage (Laabs, 1999) and homicide (McLaughlin, 2000; Rayner, 1997).

Had enough? Do I really need to swamp you with more statistics to convince you that abrasive bosses take a serious toll on both employee and employer? Employers not only lose employees; they lose hundreds of thousands of hours of productivity while workers focus on the pain of abrasion instead of the tasks at hand. Think for a moment—how many hours have you seen coworkers

spend around the coffee machine or behind closed doors processing the latest painful run-in with an abrasive boss? I have yet to see any formal research on the number of hours management (including human resource staff) devotes to abrasive boss-related issues, but those I have spoken with resent the “waste” (their word) of time that could be better spent on other concerns. I could devote many more pages to documenting the costs incurred by abrasive bosses, but the fact that you are reading this book suggests that you don’t need to be convinced—I suspect you’ve already paid a price.

A Bleeding Heart Is Born

Enough of the hard stuff—let’s get back to my soft-hearted goal of reducing workplace suffering caused by abrasive bosses. As I read this, I realize that I may be giving the mistaken impression that I aspire to be the Mother Theresa of executive coaching, which is not the case. I don’t do what I do because I am divinely inspired or in the least bit noble. *It’s my parents’ fault—I blame them.*

Too often parents are blamed for everything that we don’t like about ourselves, but I am pleased to blame my parents for teaching me that the most important use of one’s life lies in helping others. I learned about suffering from my psychiatrist father and hospital volunteer mother—not at their hands but through their hearts and eyes. I was blessed with a safe, loving home and only encountered suffering as I ventured out into the wider world.

My earliest lessons of suffering were taught by animals. When I was very little, my mother took me to a Tarzan movie where a mortally wounded elephant slowly found its way to the elephant graveyard to die. The pain and sadness that reverberated through me was excruciating—I was distraught. I remember my mother’s efforts to comfort her sobbing child, wiping my tears away, assuring me that the elephant was just acting and that it had

been given a special treat of canned dog food once it finished “playing pretend.”

A later experience of intense suffering also involved animals. I must have been six or seven years old, and my father, founder of a local children’s mental health clinic, hosted a charity carnival to raise funds for the clinic. It was a typical rainy day in Oregon, and the carnival had a kiddy ride with ponies tied to a rotating frame. I remember the wet, downcast ponies, trudging around and around in a circle of mud, and to this day the memory cuts through me like a knife. I believed they wanted to be free (or at least loved) instead of being chained to a muddy merry-go-round for human entertainment. I felt terribly sad, knowing that I could do nothing to relieve their suffering. I believe this childhood experience of helplessness in the face of suffering formed the foundation for my adult wish to reduce suffering by eventually becoming a psychotherapist and, later, an executive coach.

Intent on becoming a psychiatrist, I embarked on a premed track in college. As I wrestled with my courses, it gradually dawned on me that I was never going to succeed as a physician because, frankly, I didn’t have the patience or interest to memorize every bone, sinew, and organ of the human anatomy. I figured it would be pretty unethical to even consider the practice of medicine if I wasn’t willing to memorize everything (*“I’m sorry sir, but I’m hesitant to remove your appendix because I never bothered to learn what it’s connected to”*). I wanted to study psyche, not physique, and was fortunate enough to discover that I could become a psychotherapist without pursuing a medical degree. So I abandoned my medical pretensions and instead pursued a degree in clinical (or what was then called psychiatric) social work.

Working Wounded on the Last Frontier

Degree in hand, I moved to Seattle with the plan of paying my dues by working in respected settings and eventually opening a private practice to treat emotionally disturbed children. To that

end I enrolled in the Child Therapy Certificate Program of the Seattle Institute for Psychoanalysis, where I was privileged to be clinically supervised by Edith Buxbaum, a student of Anna Freud. After two years of seeing patients in a community mental health clinic and working nights as an emergency room social worker in a major trauma center, I experienced two revelations. First, I realized that if I were to become a private practitioner, I would have to sit in a room, *inside, all day, every day*. Whoa—this heart not only bled, it wandered as well. The prospect of being cooped up in the same clinical stall every day made me want to hightail it out of there. Second, it became clear to me that Seattle was overrun with psychotherapists—I'd have to wait until a fair number of them dropped dead before I could have any hope of opening a viable practice. I'm not the deathwatch type, and beyond this, I was (and still am) a total tourist—I lusted to explore the wider world beyond the four walls of a clinical office. So I heeded the call of the wild, purchased a ferry ticket north to Alaska, and bolted. There were jobs aplenty in the Last Frontier, and who knew what other experiences awaited?

Within a week of my arrival, I was hired as the first full-time clinician in the first stand-alone employee assistance program (EAP) in the state, embarking on the greatest adventures any tenderfoot clinician could hope for. EAPs provide confidential counseling services to employees and eligible family members experiencing problems in their personal or work lives. Our initially tiny company eventually provided counseling to Alaskan employees (and family members) of over 600 corporations throughout the state. I was trucked up and down the Alaska pipeline in -70°F (-56°C) temperatures to explain the benefits of EAP counseling to pump station employees and helicoptered out to Bering Sea drill rigs to deliver the same message to exhausted roustabouts. Back at the office igloo I counseled employees on the problems they experienced at work and home, learning that shooting a spouse's sled dogs was a reliable indicator of marital distress in Alaska. Another indicator of marital

peril lay in the discovery by one newlywed that her gun-loving, hard-drinking husband's past two wives were buried on her new love's wilderness homestead. I referred unwilling addicted air traffic controllers into substance abuse treatment and helped wildlife biologists cope with their fears of flying. It was truly the Last Frontier—right down to the guns.

Armed Defense

The *guns*? I encountered the guns in the course of my counseling work. The typical scenario consisted of a call from an employee for a same-day appointment because he (they were always men) “needed to talk to someone right away.” We took these quiet, urgent calls seriously, reshuffling our schedules for such sudden requests. I would find myself seated across from the client, who was usually withdrawn and obviously embarrassed to be sitting in a counselor's office. My questions of “How can I help you? Could you tell me what's going on?” would elicit a halting story of suffering. The suffering was inflicted by the employee's boss, whose behavior could take many forms, such as tyrannical control or public humiliation of the employee. The variations never failed to amaze me, but the common theme was of abrasive behavior that had pushed the employee to the point of . . . what? To find the answer, I uttered the psychotherapist's classic question:

Counselor: And how does this make you feel?

Employee: Like getting back at him.

Counselor: Have you thought of how you would do that?

Employee: Yeah. [*An embarrassed silence.*] With a gun.

Counselor: Do you have a gun?

Employee: Uh . . . yeah . . . out in my truck. That's why I called you.

The same pain that cut through me as a child when confronted with suffering now sliced through my adult soul. This man was

suffering—tormented by his impulses to silence his tormentor, shamed by his loss of control, and humiliated by his need to seek external restraint for his retaliatory impulses. He had reached the point where he saw his gun as his only remaining defense against his boss's aggression. He was one of many, and as the arsenal in our office safe increased, I wondered how this could be happening. Having experienced good parents and good bosses, I was mystified—why would bosses brutalize their employees, and how could companies tolerate this infliction of suffering? What were the dynamics of aggression and defense that created such profound anguish? These questions set this boss whisperer on a journey to understand these unmanageable managers and learn how to tame their abrasive aggression.

