

# Manage Abrasive Workplace Behavior:



Laura Crawshaw, Ph.D., BCC

Founder, The Boss Whispering Institute  
Portland, Oregon

[www.bosswhispering.com](http://www.bosswhispering.com)

# Manage Abrasive Workplace Behavior:

I.  
Understanding Abrasive Behavior

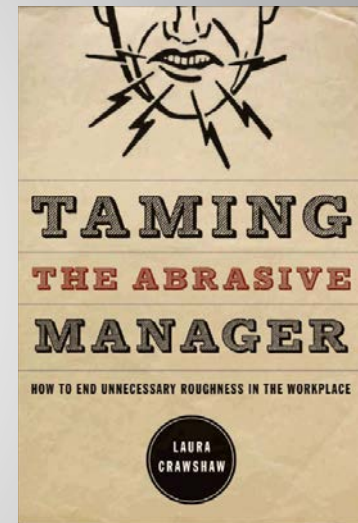
II.  
Growing Management Backbone

III.  
How to Intervene

IV.  
Dealing With Defensiveness

# THE·BOSS·WHISPERING·INSTITUTE

- Founded by Laura Crawshaw, Ph.D., BCC
  - Psychotherapist, Corporate Executive, Researcher, Executive Coach, Author
- Institute Mission: To relieve suffering in the workplace caused by abrasive leaders
- Dedicated to research & training in the field of coaching abrasive leaders
- Based upon research drawn from coaching over 450 abrasive leaders (including professionals such as physicians, academics, and attorneys)



I.  
Understanding Abrasive Behavior

# Definition: Abrasive Behavior

Any **interpersonal behavior** that causes emotional distress in coworkers sufficient to disrupt organizational functioning

Behavior that  **rubs people the wrong way**

= **Unacceptable conduct**

# Civil Conflict vs. Abrasive Behavior

- **Civil conflict:** opposing views generated by
  - Differing positions
  - Unpopular business decisions

VS.

- **Abrasive behavior:**
  - **Interpersonal interactions** perceived to be **disrespectful**
  - “Personality conflicts” are often the symptom of abrasive behavior by one or more parties

# How many of these abrasive behaviors have you observed at work?

- Shouting
- Swearing
- Storming out of meetings
- Name-calling
- Ignoring/shunning
- Intimidation: glaring, snorting, etc.
- Over-control
- Sarcasm: hostile humor
- Public humiliation
- Maligning another's character/reputation
- Inappropriate sexual comments or behavior
- Making threats
- Throwing objects
- Hitting objects
- Hitting people

# The Continuum of Abrasive Behavior



*We can all be abrasive*



# The Costs of Abrasive Behavior

In a study conducted at the University of North Carolina, 775 business people at varying levels described unpleasant interactions in which they were the target of rudeness, insensitivity or disrespect and were asked how they responded.

- 48% intentionally decreased **work effort**
- 47% intentionally decreased **time at work**
- 38% intentionally decreased the **quality of their work**
- 63% lost work time **avoiding the offender**
- 66% said their **performance declined**
- 78% said their **commitment to the organization declined**
- 12% **left their job** because of the experience

- Pearson, C. M., & Porath, C. L. (2009). The cost of bad behavior: How incivility ruins your business—And what you can do about it. New York: Portfolio/Penguin Group (USA).

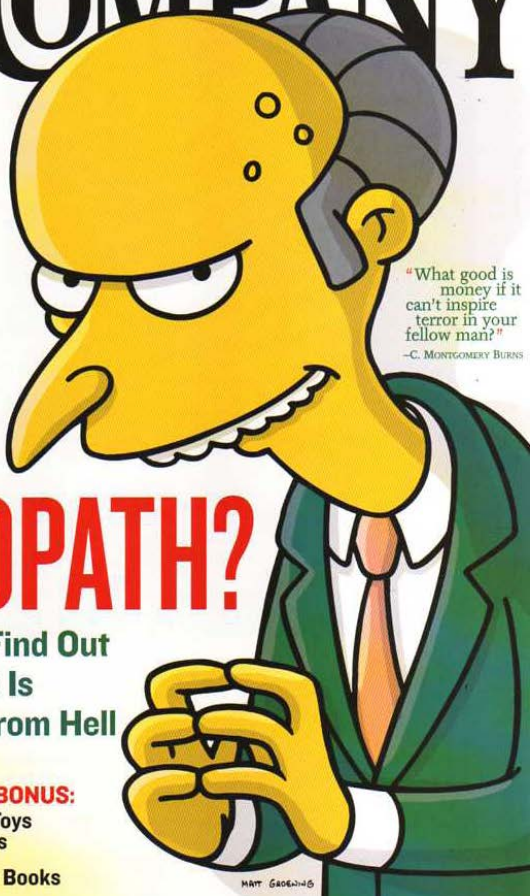
# Symptoms of Chronic Abrasion

- Continuing informal/formal complaints (*negative perceptions*) brought by coworkers, clients, patients, students, etc.
- Attempts by employees to transfer out of a department or avoid being transferred in
- Increased attrition, sick leave
- Covert cautions: *“Watch out for him- don’t get in his way”, or “Don’t get on her bad side – you’ll pay if you do.”*
- Excessive managerial time devoted to addressing employee distress.
- Leadership loses credibility: failure to intervene is interpreted as weakness, or worse, tacitly condoning the behavior(s)

# What causes abrasive behavior?



**FAST COMPANY**  
 JULY 2005  
 >> HOW SMART PEOPLE WORK  
 CRAZY



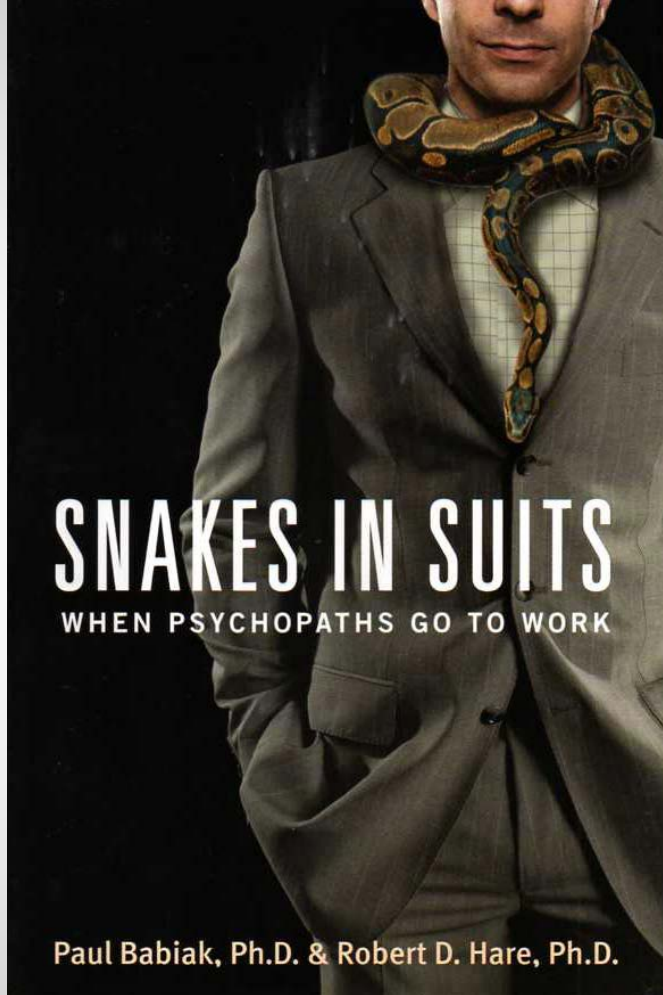
**IS YOUR BOSS A PSYCHOPATH?**

» Take Our Quiz to Find Out  
 » How to Cope If He Is  
 » All-Time Bosses From Hell

«What good is money if it can't inspire terror in your fellow man?»  
 —C. MONTGOMERY BURNS

4.00 US \$5.00 CANADA FASTCOMPANY.COM  
 0 74470 03101 7  
**SUMMER BONUS:**  
 Best Tech Toys and Gadgets  
 Best Beach Books

MAT 6862-1-05



**SNAKES IN SUITS**  
 WHEN PSYCHOPATHS GO TO WORK

Paul Babiak, Ph.D. & Robert D. Hare, Ph.D.



Your Corporate Survival Guide

"Compelling." —*Fortune* magazine

# BRUTAL BOSSSES

and Their Prey

How to Identify and  
Overcome Abuse in the Workplace

HARVEY A. HORNSTEIN, PH.D.





THE **NO ASSHOLE** RULE

ROBERT I.  
SUTTON, PHD



THE  
**NO ASSHOLE**  
RULE

*Building a Civilized Workplace  
and Surviving One That Isn't*



ROBERT I. SUTTON, PHD

# Threat-Anxiety-Defense (T-A-D) Dynamic



**T**HREAT

=>

**A**NXIETY

=>

**D**EFENSE



# “Threat-Anxiety-Defense (T-A-D) Dynamic

**THREAT** => **ANXIETY** => **DEFENSE**

***FIGHT***

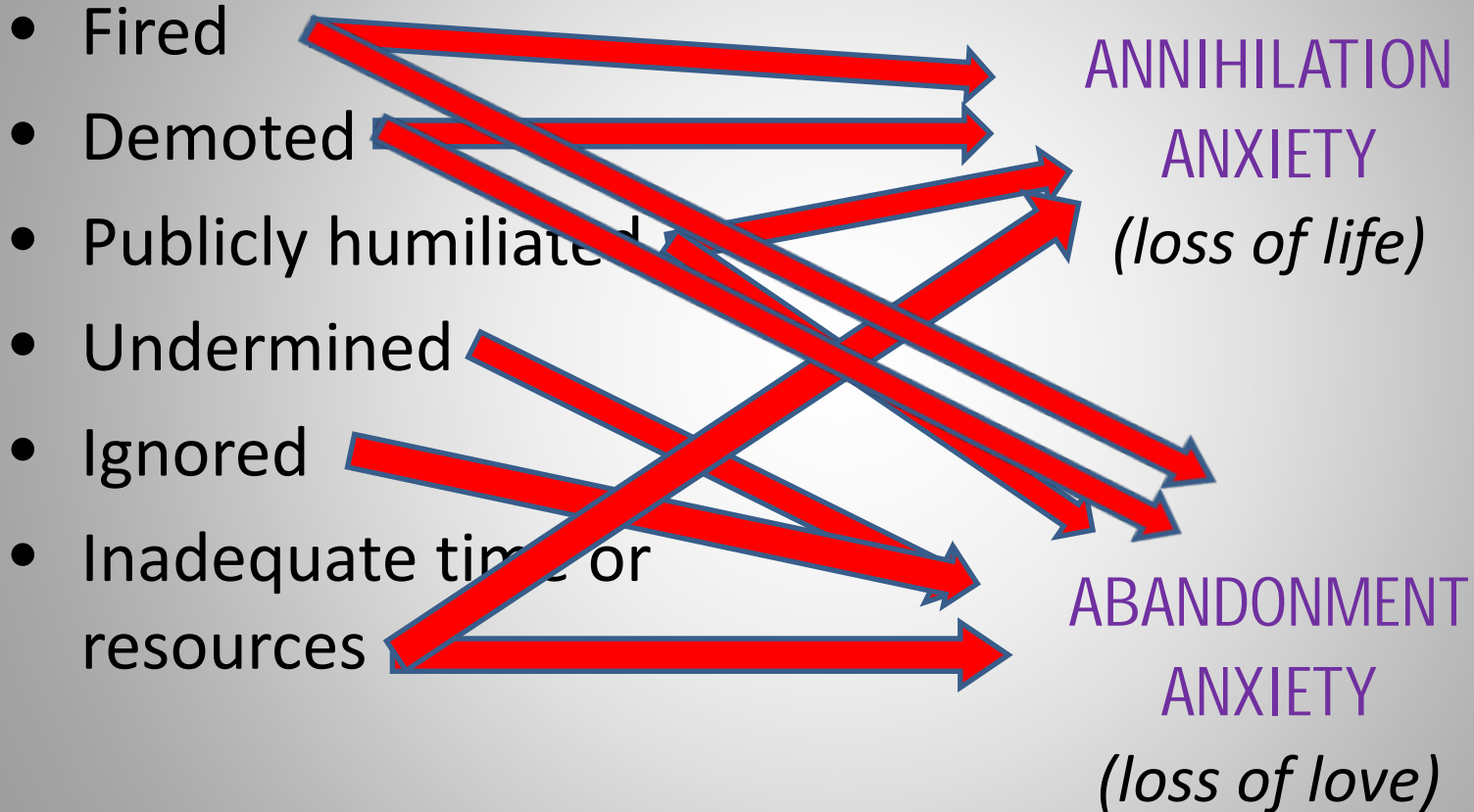


***FLIGHT***

# Life: The Greatest Threats

- Death
- Illness
- Loss of a loved one
- Isolation
- Financial catastrophe
- Fired from job
- Public speaking (!?)

# Work: The Greatest Threats



# T-A-D in the Workplace

How have you seen people react? Fight or flight?



**T**HREAT

=>

**A**NXIETY

=>

**D**EFENSE

# What Causes Abrasive (**Defensive**) Behavior?

*Anxiety in response to perceived threat:  
They're threatened*



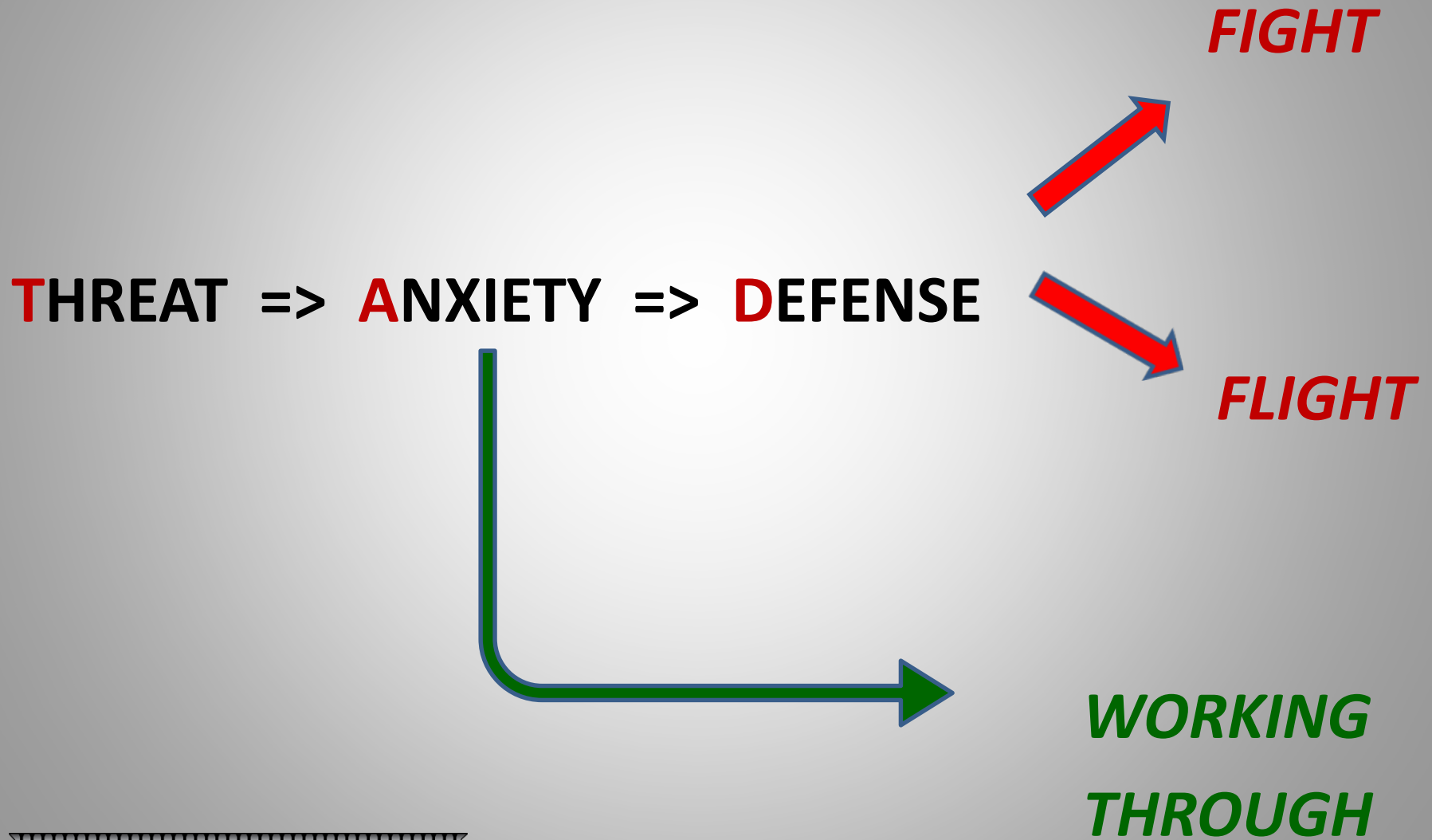
# Understanding Abrasive Behavior

- Abrasive behavior is **defensive** behavior.
- You are now equipped to analyze abrasive behavior:
  - An employee calls a coworker “stupid”:
    - This is fight mode – what threat is he/she “fighting” (defending against)?
  - An employee storms out of a meeting:
    - This is flight mode – what threat is he/she “fleeing” (defending against)?
- Using the **T-A-D** lens to analyze abrasive behavior will consistently give you more insight into underlying anxiety.

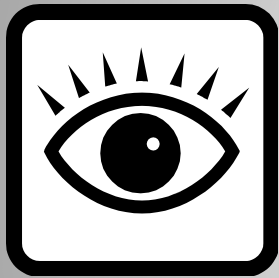
## *Assignment:*

*Observe fight or flight behaviors at work and analyze the underlying threat(s).*

# T-A-D vs. Working Through



# The Third Option: **Working Through**



**T**HREAT => **A**NXIETY =>

**WORKING THROUGH**  
**THREATENING ISSUE CALMLY**



# Other Contributors

- **Family interactive styles:** The individual may have grown up in a harsh environment where abrasive styles were acceptable and “normal.”
- **Cultural styles:** cultures vary in what might be considered acceptable vs. abrasive behaviors.
- **Some people hold the misconception that being direct excuses abrasive behavior:** *“I don’t believe in sugar-coating things.”*
- **Lack of training in working through issues:** unaware of effective non-abrasive alternatives, the individual, out of ignorance, defaults to the more primitive abrasive style, resorting to aggression (“fight”).
- **Many people focus solely on the deliverables,** unaware of the impact of their behavior. *“I’m here to get the job done, not to mess with all the touchy-feely stuff.”*

# II.

## Growing Management Backbone

Why don't leaders intervene?

# Prevailing Theories on Why Managers Don't Intervene

**THEY'RE EVIL**



**THEY DON'T CARE**



# THEY'RE SPINELESS



# Our findings: Afraid, Hopeless & Helpless

- Fear of being harmed or doing harm
- Fear of dealing with the individual's defensive response
- Focus on evidence vs. negative perceptions
- Belief that you are responsible for making people change
- Belief that people can't change
- Belief that the sole option to end abrasive behavior is termination

How do most leaders deal with  
abrasive employees?

Fight, flight, or working through?

# Flight





# Management's (Flight) Defense Mechanisms

## Rationalization:

- *"It's just a personality conflict."*
- *"Nobody's perfect – including me."*

## Projection:

- *"She's just got some difficult coworkers."*

## Minimizing:

- *"He doesn't blow up that often."*
- *"It's just his style – that's just the way he is."*

## Procrastination:

- *"It won't be long before she retires."*

# Differentiating Performance vs. Conduct

## Performance:

- Execution of technical requirements of one's job

## Conduct:

- Interpersonal behavior with coworkers, clients, patients, students, etc.

Abrasive behavior = unacceptable conduct

# What are the costs to your organization of not managing abrasive conduct?

- Chronic distress
  - including the time you spend processing distress
- Disrupted productivity, morale, motivation
- Attrition
- Contagion of abrasive behaviors
- Human suffering
- Perceptions of weak leadership/tacitly condoning abrasive behavior

# What price does the abrasive individual pay for failing to address their abrasive conduct?

- The person often doesn't perceive that their behavior is a problem.
  - Most people who are fired had satisfactory or high performance appraisals up to the point of termination.
- The person often doesn't know how to solve the problem.
  - How to achieve their objectives without being abrasive
- The person becomes isolated or alienated from others, not knowing why.
- Silence is cruel negligence: speaking up is compassionate.
  - Can you think of abrasive employees who were left in the dark?
  - Wouldn't you want to be told if you were perceived to be abrasive?

## II. Growing Management Backbone

What is the mission of your organization?

# What is your responsibility (as a manager) to the mission of your organization?

**I am the guardian of my organization's mission and the employees who work to fulfill it. ►**

**As such, it is my responsibility to promote performance and conduct that supports our mission & defend against unacceptable performance or conduct that threatens our mission. ►**

**It is also my responsibility to provide a physically and psychologically safe environment for our employees who work to fulfill our mission. ►**



# How do I guard our mission and our employees?



**It is my responsibility to monitor and manage for acceptable performance and conduct. ►**

**I have the right and responsibility to determine acceptable performance and conduct for my employees. ►**

**If I don't do it, who will? ►**

**My perceptions prevail. ►**

**As a manager, I have a duty to act on my perceptions of abrasive behavior. ►**



# MANAGEMENT·BACKBONE

I am the guardian of my organization's mission and the employees who work to fulfill it. ►

As such, it is my responsibility to promote performance and conduct that supports our mission & defend against unacceptable performance or conduct that threatens our mission. ►

It is also my responsibility to provide a physically and psychologically safe environment for our employees who work to fulfill our mission. ►

It is my responsibility to monitor and manage for acceptable performance and conduct. ►

I have the right and responsibility to determine acceptable performance and conduct for my employees. ►

If I don't do it, who will? ►

My perceptions prevail. ►

As a manager, I have a duty to act on my perceptions of abrasive behavior. ►



# Acceptable (Professional) Conduct:

Treating others with respect  
*whether or not you respect them*

- You don't have to like them, agree with them, or respect them. You can despise the person.
- You pay people for acceptable performance and conduct.

# How do you manage performance?

- Determine performance expectations
- Evaluate performance
- If performance is acceptable, **recognize & reward**
- If performance is not acceptable, **intervene**
  1. Present negative perceptions of performance
  2. Set **limits and consequences** for continued unacceptable performance
  3. Offer help
  4. Monitor for improvement

# How do you manage conduct?

- Determine conduct expectations
- Evaluate conduct
- If conduct is acceptable, **recognize & reward**
- If conduct is not acceptable, **intervene**
  1. Present negative perceptions of conduct
  2. Set **limits and consequences** for continued unacceptable conduct
  3. Offer help
  4. Monitor for improvement

# III. How to Intervene

# Detecting Unacceptable Conduct

You perceive the unacceptable conduct:

DIRECT NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS



Others perceive unacceptable conduct and inform you:

INDIRECT NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS



# Perceptions & Reality

- Your perceptions are your reality
- Employee perceptions are their reality
- The abrasive individual's perceptions are his/her reality

## **Perceptions are powerful**

Negative perceptions can severely damage the source, the perceivers, and the organization.

# Perceptions vs. Facts

- You can and should intervene based upon negative perceptions. You should hear “hearsay.”
- If you wait to intervene on “facts/evidence” (via formal investigation), you’ve waited too long –**too much damage has been done.**
- Early intervention promotes positive resolution.

If only indirect perceptions are available:

*“The **fact** is that I don’t know and cannot know exactly what happened – I wasn’t there when the incident(s) occurred. **But I do know one thing for a fact:** your coworkers perceive that they are being treated disrespectfully and these negative perceptions cannot continue.”*



# Determining Abrasive/Unacceptable Conduct

*There is no definitive listing, and never will be.*

## Government of Canada definition of **harassment**:

“improper conduct by an individual, that is directed at and offensive to another individual (...), and that the individual knew or ought **reasonably** to have known would cause offense or harm. It comprises objectionable acts(s), comment(s), or display(s) that demean, belittle or cause personal humiliation or embarrassment, and any act of intimidation or threat(...).”

## Government of Australia definition of **workplace bullying**:

“repeated and **unreasonable** behaviour directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety.”

- **Unreasonable** behaviour means behaviour that a **reasonable** person, having regard for the circumstances, would see as **unreasonable**, including behaviour that is victimising, humiliating, intimidating or threatening.

# Criteria

*I have the right and responsibility to determine acceptable performance and conduct for my employees.*

- Would you want your brother/sister/son/daughter to be subjected to this conduct?
- Are the negative perceptions disrupting organizational functioning?
- Is it in the abrasive individual's best interest to be perceived this way? Is it in the organization's best interest to ignore these perceptions?
- Don't be paralyzed by the question "Is this bullying?"

# Researching Negative Perceptions

- **Collect detailed descriptions** of the negative perceptions:
  - What did X do or say?
  - What was X's demeanor/tone?
- **History:** How long has this been going on?
- **Frequency:** How often does this occur? Just once or a chronic pattern?
- **Scope:** Negative perceptions from multiple parties?
- **Impact:** What effect did the behaviour have on the perceivers?

# As you research, possible responses:

- *“Have you addressed this with X?”*
- *“Would you be willing for the three of us to meet to discuss this?”*
- *“I will look into this – I cannot be specific about what might occur beyond that.”*

# Preparing for a Conduct Intervention

## THE PERCEPTIONS

- What are the negative perceptions?
  - List direct and/or indirect perceptions

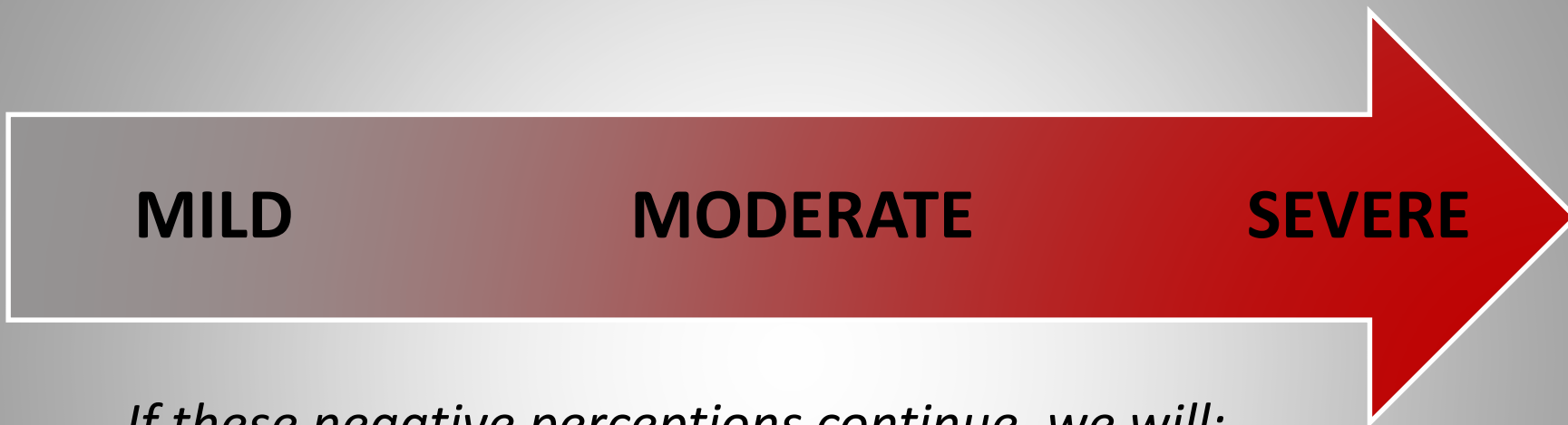
## YOUR LIMITS

- What has to change? The negative perceptions.
  - *“These negative perceptions cannot continue.”*
  - *“People need to feel they are treated with respect.”*
  - *“We don’t do that here.”*

## YOUR CONSEQUENCES

- What are you, the manager, prepared to do if they don’t?
- Have you consulted with Human Resources and Labor Relations?
- Consider scripting the main points.
- Should you present a written document at the intervention?
- Do you have your manager’s support?

# The Continuum of Consequences



*If these negative perceptions continue, we will:*

*“Need to revisit this issue again.”*



*“Not be willing to promote you.”*



*“Be forced to terminate you.”*

*“Consider disciplinary action.”*

*“Remove you from your management role.”*

# “Threat-Anxiety-Defense (T-A-D) Dynamic

**THREAT** => **ANXIETY** => **DEFENSE**

***FIGHT***



***FLIGHT***

# Preparing *Yourself* for a Conduct Intervention

- What are the threats posed by intervening?
  - To you?
  - To the organization?
  - To employees?
- What are your anxieties?
- What are your defensive tendencies (fight or flight?)
- What is the worst case scenario?
- How could you prepare for it?



***You have to work through your own anxieties  
before you can effectively help others.***



# Intervening on Unacceptable Conduct (pg.8)

*As a manager, I have a duty to act on my perceptions.  
My perceptions prevail.*

## The 4 Intervention Steps:

1. **EXPLAIN** why you're meeting
2. **MAKE THEM AWARE** of the negative perceptions
3. **MAKE THEM CARE** enough to want to change
4. **OFFER HELP**

*The earlier the intervention, the better.*

# 1. Explain Why You're Meeting

- Describe the individual's value to you and the organization *(and don't bother intervening if they don't have any)*.
- Explain that you believe you owe it to him or her to clue them in – to make them aware of a **growing problem**.
  - *"I had a choice whether or not to talk to you about this, and I feel a responsibility to let you know about these negative perceptions."*
- He/she is not the problem: **negative perceptions** about his/her interactions with others are the problem.
  - *"I don't want you to be perceived this way."*
  - *"These perceptions are doing you damage."*

## 2. Make Them Aware of the Negative Perceptions

- Describe the perceptions as specifically as you can:
  - *“I observed...you do/say....”* (DIRECT)
  - *“I heard.../ I was told...you did/said....”* (INDIRECT)
- Avoid generalities such as:
  - *“You are rude/harsh/aggressive/insensitive.”*
- Describe the impact on others:
  - *“The person felt they were treated disrespectfully.”*
  - *“People felt intimidated.”*

### 3. Make Them Care Enough to Want to Change: Set Limits & Consequences

- Set **limits** for further negative perceptions:

*“This cannot go on.”*

*“I cannot have people feeling that they are treated disrespectfully.”*

*“These negative perceptions cannot continue.”*

- Set **consequences** for further negative perceptions:

*“If this continues, I will have to .....(state consequence).”*

# 4. Offer Help

- Internal Mentoring by you or another skilled manager:
  - *“I am here to help. Come to me when you encounter this kind of situation in the future and we can talk about how to deal with it more productively.”*
- EAP for stress-related issues
- External Specialized Coaching *that will help you understand:*
  1. What are the negative perceptions?
  2. What causes them?
  3. What strategies will eliminate them permanently and prevent their return?

# Intervention: Your Perceptions Prevail

- Do not expect the individual to agree with you or even accept what you are saying. Anticipate defensiveness –it’s normal.
- Stick to your objectives to:
  - **Make him/her aware** of the negative perceptions to the degree of specificity that you are able.
  - **Set limits and consequences** for further negative perceptions.
  - **Offer help**
  - **Monitor for improvement**

# IV. Dealing with Defensiveness

# Dealing with Defensiveness

- It is normal to defend oneself against threat
- Prepare for employee defensiveness:
  - **Fight**
  - **Flight**
- Strive to **“work it through”** with the employee
- Express your hopes for, and belief in the employee
- **You’ve made your choices: let him/her make theirs**



# Stand Firm



**You are the guardian of your organization's mission.**

It is your responsibility to present the negative perceptions, offer help, and monitor for change.

*That's all you can do.*

# Make Him/Her Aware of the Negative Perceptions

- Describe the perceptions as specifically as you can:
  - *“I observed...you doing/saying....”* (DIRECT)
  - *“I heard that...you did/said....”* (INDIRECT)
- Describe their impact
  - *“The person felt they were treated disrespectfully.”*
  - *“People felt intimidated.”*
- Avoid labeling the person, e.g.:
  - *“You were rude/harsh/aggressive/insensitive.”*

# The Challenge of Indirect Perceptions

“ I didn’t do/say that!”

“That’s not true!”

“That absolutely did not happen!”



# Avoid “Fact Battles”: Your Perceptions Prevail

Don't get pulled into defensive “**fact battles**” of “*what really happened*” or “*who's really at fault.*”

Instead:



- “The **fact** is that I don't know and cannot know exactly what happened – I wasn't there when the incident(s) occurred.”
- “But I do know one thing for a **fact**: your coworkers perceive that they are being treated disrespectfully and these **negative perceptions** cannot continue.”

*“Who said that?”*

*“Did Robert tell you that?!”*

I cannot tell you who came to me.

They requested anonymity.

*“Don’t these people have the guts to tell me themselves?”*

I encouraged the individual(s) to address this with you, but apparently this hasn’t happened.

I suppose if people felt comfortable approaching you, they would have. Apparently they don’t.

*“People have it out for me.”*

I understand that’s how you feel. The **fact** is that we have continuing reports from coworkers who feel that they are being treated disrespectfully – who feel that you “have it out” for them.

We can’t have that here, and you need to turn these negative perceptions around.

*“I do it because my coworkers are the problem.”*

There are better ways to deal with these situations than doing (abrasive behavior).

Other managers/employees are able to deal with these frustrations without doing (abrasive behavior).

This behavior is not acceptable.



*“I do it because the system is the problem.”*

There are better ways to deal with these situations than doing (abrasive behavior).

Other managers/employees are able to deal with these system frustrations without doing (abrasive behavior).

This behavior is not acceptable.

*“I don’t agree with what you’re saying.”*

You don’t have to agree with what I am saying.

It’s your decision whether you want to work to change these negative perceptions.

But they cannot continue. We cannot accept having people feel they are treated disrespectfully.

# “Not Acceptable” / “Unacceptable”

*I have the right and responsibility to determine acceptable performance and conduct for my employees.*



Rely on your Management Backbone:

- *“I cannot have people feeling disrespected.”*
- *“These negative perceptions are not acceptable.”*

# Your Management Backbone

I am the guardian of my organization's mission and the employees who work to fulfill it. ►

As such, it is my responsibility to promote performance and conduct that supports our mission & defend against unacceptable performance or conduct that threatens our mission. ►

It is also my responsibility to provide a physically and psychologically safe environment for our employees who work to fulfill our mission. ►

It is my responsibility to monitor and manage for acceptable performance and conduct. ►

I have the right and responsibility to determine acceptable performance and conduct for my employees. ►

If I don't do it, who will? ►

My perceptions prevail. ►

As a manager, I have a duty to act on my perceptions of abrasive behavior. ►



# Advantages of Intervention: Everyone Wins

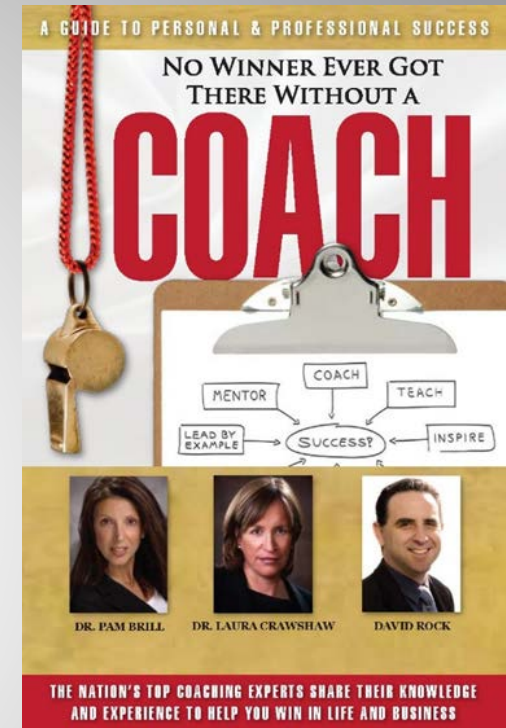
- Suffering ends
- Coworkers are heartened that the formerly abrasive individual cared enough to work to change.
- Coworkers regard Management positively for intervening.
- Formerly abrasive employee is grateful for Management's willingness to invest in him/her and offer "second chance" through offered help.
- Management reduces potential for litigation, attrition, anti-leadership sentiment.
- Organization retains the formerly abrasive employee's expertise.

# What if the abrasive individual can't change and must be terminated?

- Suffering ends
- Coworkers regard Management positively for intervening.
- Management reduces potential for litigation as they can demonstrate they intervened & offered help.
- Management has the peace of mind of knowing that they did everything in their power to remedy the situation.

# Thank you

## *Winners Who Become Losers: Abrasive Leaders*



<http://tinyurl.com/AbrasiveLeaders>

[crawshaw@bosswhispering.com](mailto:crawshaw@bosswhispering.com)