



# Abusive Leaders, Wounded Workers

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"I hate to have to speak to you about this Paul [all names have been changed]... but I feel I have to... I can't go on like this... Sarah's bullying is too much for me". Sarah reports to Paul and is his star performer. "She often humiliates me in team meetings: 'You're dropping the ball Jake! You're letting us all down! Hell, you're letting me down! Get a grip!' Paul, it's reached the point where I can't sleep at night. I'm stressed out ... It's affecting my home life..."

This is one of the most distressful conversations an employee and executive can have. The extremely competitive work environment of Paul's company produces executives and managers with high-pressure, often aggressive working-styles. Sarah's was at the very high end of the spectrum and she alienated many of her co-workers. Jake's accusation of bullying was very serious, and Paul knew he had to act. The company has a robust workplace harassment policy and Paul immediately launched an investigation plan. After a thorough investigation by HR, Sarah's interpersonal behaviour was judged abusive and unacceptable. Many of her co-workers were deeply wounded emotionally and psychologically. It would take time and support for them to heal. The company hired coaches to work with the *working wounded*. I was engaged to coach Sarah.

Abusive leaders, such as Sarah, lack psychological insight into the emotional distress their aggressive behaviour causes co-workers and the disruption it brings upon the organization. They have blinders and are in denial. They don't realize that their behaviour is unacceptable or abnormal. Their organizations see them as being immune to change and often tolerate/enable their destructive behaviour. For management, executive coaching often represents the last chance these employees have prior to dismissal.

When we look more deeply into their behaviours, we detect that abusive leaders are fundamentally fearful that perceived threats to their competence will jeopardize their professional survival. Their anxiety then escalates, leading to increasingly defensive and aggressive behaviour.

For these leaders, perceived threats include people who may challenge their points of view: bosses, colleagues, staff or outside stakeholders. They regard the perceived 'incompetence' of team members as undermining their own professional competence. Their anxiety leads typically to flight or fight responses. The flight response can manifest itself by withdrawal (e.g., lack of engagement in management meetings). The fight response is exhibited through aggressive behaviour - e.g., demeaning other people's capabilities, public humiliation and intimidation. The fight behaviour can range from minor to severe. Sarah's behaviour was at the severe end.

My coaching of clients like Sarah is predicated on the following premise: Attempts at convincing such leaders to change their behaviour will typically fail. Why? Because they lack self-awareness and strongly deny the impact of their behaviours on others. Instead, I have found the following multi-phased approach to be very useful in addressing abusive behaviour.

In the first phase, I conduct a 360 assessment to collect valuable information that will help gauge the impact of the leaders' negative behaviours on employees, colleagues and relevant stakeholders. This is supplemented by shadow coaching and by my own observations from working with them. When I present these findings to the leaders, they are often unpleasantly surprised to learn that their aggressive behaviours, rather than their competencies and objectives are the main focus of other people. They now see clearly that the negative perceptions of their behaviours are overshadowing their technical competence, and threatening their professional survival. Their anxiety skyrockets.

In the second phase, I find that these leaders are now more open and willing to partner with me to:

- Identify what behaviours generate people's negative perceptions of them
- Determine what can remove these negative perceptions, and prevent their return
- Identify and stimulate more productive relationships

The last phase of the process requires them to adopt and integrate their new interpersonal patterns of behaviour.

Abusive leaders' behaviours are a scourge to the wellbeing and productivity of organizations. The emotional distress they cause co-workers and the disruption they bring upon organizations can be truly devastating. Unfortunately, all too often, they are identified and acted upon only when much of the harm has already been done.

Generating effective, lasting change to abusive leaders' behaviours is not easy, fast, nor assured. I have been quite successful in coaching a number of abusive leaders using the approach described above, but not all.