Do you manage or work with someone who displays abrasive behavior? You are not alone. Research shows that at some point in our careers, most of us will work with an abrasive person who may be blind to the impact of his or her style in creating a work environment.

Abrasive people’s treatment of others can create interpersonal tension and anxiety that can adversely impact motivation, communication, and productivity. In more intense contexts, abrasive behavior can inflict deep psychological wounds and severe emotional suffering. Abrasive behavior can include rudeness, demeaning comments, ridicule, swearing, intimidation, over-control, insults, name-calling, deception, and abusive language (Bassman & London, 1993). Should we view these people as evil, incapable of developing any emotional intelligence, or should we try to understand their abusive actions as symptoms of deeper distress that can possibly be remedied?

You may be in the difficult position of setting limits and defining consequences to the abrasive person’s disruptive behavior. You may be treading lightly for fear of the possible costs of disciplining or terminating a technically proficient individual.

**Why People Are Abrasive**

Researcher, Dr. Laura Crawshaw (2007), posits that abrasive people may be lacking in psychological insight and therefore, clueless to the harm they are causing others. They may not see their behavior as abnormal because most of them learned it and lived with it in their early social systems. Their abrasive behavior is simply a defense to combat the anxiety that incompetence or failure may bring.

Darwin’s (1859) survival of the fittest concept can be extrapolated to the present world context. Those who can defend against the threats to their survival will endure and therefore increase their possibility of success. This is the subconscious thinking process of the abrasive person, rational to the person, but painful to others.
When a person perceives a threat, the perception generates fear (anxiety), which mobilizes him or her to defend against the threat through fight or flight. It looks like this:

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\text{Threat} \rightarrow \text{Anxiety} \rightarrow \text{Defense (fight/flight)}
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This dynamic of Threat, Anxiety, Defense is referred to as the TAD dynamic (Crawshaw, 2007). For example:

Threat…..Person’s competence, or goal achievement is threatened by another’s opinion or perceived incompetence.

Anxiety….The threat causes anxiety.

Defense…The person defends against the fear of incompetence or inability to reach his or her goals with interpersonal aggression (fight syndrome).

Considering this explanation, the manager is not evil, but simply afraid.

**What To Do**

As a result of being called on their abrasive behavior, the abrasive may deny the impact or blame the incompetence of another. They may defend their behavior with comments about the other: “They are lazy. They don’t know what they are talking about. I have no other recourse.”

Simply talking to abrasives may not work because they are in denial or truly do not see the impact of the behaviors. The paradigm must be shifted from *eliminating the abrasive’s behavior, to eliminating negative perceptions* (Crawshaw, 2010). Focusing on eliminating the perceptions places energy on the perception not on the person’s bad behavior, therefore buffering defensive reactions. The goal is to provide the abrasive with information on how his or her behavior is impacting others.

Our responsibility to help abrasives is to:

- Make them see the impact of their behavior.
- Make them care enough to want to change. (What is the consequence if they don’t?)
- Offer help.
Make Them See

The process of uncovering the impact of the abrasive behavior is called action research, which is a series of fact-finding steps resulting in insight development. It is stronger than giving advice or conducting lengthy conversations culminating in threats. Action research is a hard science where feedback is presented as data and not as complaints or whining. With the action research approach, the abrasive is an active participant in analyzing the negative perceptions and crafting a collaborative approach to eliminate them. You can’t make them change if they don’t want to, but you can give feedback to make them see.

Make Them Care

What is the consequence for continued abrasiveness? Will the abrasives lose their position, will they be demoted, or will their upward mobility be hampered? This is a critically important step. If the abrasive sees no reason to change, then there is no motivation and the intervention may fail.

Offer Help

Once the abrasive is presented with data regarding their behaviors, you can offer support in collaboratively planning alternate behaviors. You partner with the abrasive and endeavor to understand the perceived threat, the related anxiety, and the “fight” behavior that ensues. You can stress that people are focused on the abrasive’s behaviors, not their objectives and you’d like to help change that perception. Or, you can offer support through an outside coach who can provide training in developing insight and the emotional intelligence necessary to attain the client’s objectives.

By engaging abrasives in the process, they are not demonized, shamed, or disciplined. They are part of the solution, not the target.

References


