How to deal with an abrasive boss -
sometimes known as a “bully”

Pam Rechel
www.braveheartconsulting.com
pam@braveheartconsulting
MY BOSS IS A BULLY!
What is abrasive behavior?

• Over control – It’s always “just do it” with no discussion or input”
• Threats – “heads are going to roll” “If you don’t get this done, you’ll be unemployed.”
• If you disagree-you’re doomed
• Public humiliation – yelling and belittling in front of everyone
• Condescension - talks down to us. Rolling eyeballs or snorting in contempt. A know-it-all.
• Overreaction – Impatient, then comes unglued
• Short fuse- any little thing sets her off
• Quick to convict
• Aggressive language – “shut up”; lots of profanity; nasty emails.
• Hostile humor – jokes about paychecks being lost

• Favoritism – has an ‘in-crowd’; “nice to his superiors but treats us like chopped liver”
• If you’re in the doghouse, you stay there forever.
Impact of abrasiveness

Their behaviors, characterized by aggression, damage work relationships to the point of disrupting organizational functioning.*

- Coworkers and employees feel mistreated
- There is often intense emotional distress.

- And, it’s not fun to work in an environment of abrasiveness. There is a lot of suffering....

*Taming the Abrasive Manager, Laura Crawshaw
What have you experienced?

How have you coped with the abrasive behavior?
Typical responses

• **Fight** – tell the abrasive boss to stop the behavior. We’ll talk more about this....

• **Flight** – quit or transfer. This can be an effective strategy in many cases.

• **Freeze** – stay frozen in fear and do nothing.
If you choose to fight

There are no guarantees....

This is risky business because the abrasive manager relies on aggression and domination to survive professionally and psychologically.

If they see you as threatening their competence, they are likely to fight back.
5 Strategies

1. The Soothe Strategy
   - Direct to abrasive boss

2. Reverse Threat Display

3. Abrasion Alert
   - To organization’s management or Human Resources

4. Abrasion Alarm

5. Mass Mutiny
The Soothe Strategy

• Reduce the possibility that the abrasive manager will see you as a threat.
• Reassure your commitment to competence, his/hers and yours.

Example:
You: “Could I talk with you for a moment?”

Abrasive Boss George: “Yes, but I don’t have long”

You: “Thanks, I wanted to go back to what happened this morning. When you asked me for the numbers on the project estimate, I told you that I didn’t have them yet. You got pretty worked up and cut me off before I could finish. [state behaviors] I can see how my response set you off – I’d be bothered if that’s all I got from one of my guys. [Exercise of empathy.] But I’d be able to finish my sentence, you would have heard that even though I didn’t have them then, I’d gotten a commitment from Accounting to have them on my desk by noon – here they are.” [demonstration of competence]
Soothe Strategy Continued

You: “George, you need to know that I care as much about this project as you do. I’m here to make it happen and make us look good in the process. [I’m caring]. I’ve been all over it, and I’m going to stay all over it. [I’m competent] You don’t have to work about my support. [I’m committed] Here’s the thing – if you sense that things are going out of control, it would work a lot better if you’d hang in there to talk about it instead of cutting me off. [teaching moment]. That’s all I wanted to say – thanks.” [short, not a big discussion]

• Describe the situation in neutral terms
• Acknowledge how they could see your actions as incompetent
• Reassure your boss of his/her competence and yours
• Tell/teach them what would work better
Reverse Threat Display

• Stand your ground and respond with a threat of your own to intimidate him/her into doing what you want him/her to do: *back off*.

• Veiled Reverse Threat Display: “*I told him that I wouldn’t tolerate it any more.*”

• Defined Reverse Threat Display: “*I told her that if she kept it up, I’d be forced to take it to HR or further up the chain.*”

“Talk low, talk slow, and don’t talk too much.” John Wayne
The Abrasion Alert: Make Management See

• **Suicide Strategy:** *Dump* your info to Human Resources or senior management in a *highly emotional manner, without specific descriptions of the behaviors and indicate that they should fire him/her.*

• Why does this backfire? Because *you* are seen as irrational and abrasive because of your highly emotional and disrespectful descriptions of your boss.

• *You* may be suspected of “having it in for the boss” and your complaint could be invalidated and not seen as worthy of management’s attention. *You* may come across as demanding and abrasive toward HR or management.

Don’t do this....
Abrasion Alert Success

You: “HR Mary, I don’t want to take up a lot of your time, but there’s a situation that I think you should be aware of. I debated about coming to you, but decided that you’d want to know. [empathy]

You: “You know that Morton was brought in from the plant to run our department. He’s got a lot going for him – very intelligent, sizes up situations quickly, has made some good decisions. The problem is that he’s alienating a lot of people, including me. I can’t speak for others, but I’ve found him very difficult to work with because .... For example, ....this morning... last week...

HR Mary: “What do you want me to do about it”

You: “I don’t know – that’s why I brought it to you. [not demanding]. I just wanted you to be aware of what’s going on.
Abrasion Alert

- No anger
- No demands
- No overt threats
- Demeanor of concern and composure
- Include recognizing the abrasive boss’ strengths
- Present specific abrasive behaviors [“he yelled at us during a meeting” vs. “he’s a jerk”]
- Hint that you’re not going to tolerate the behavior

- Keep the focus on the abrasive boss – not on you and how you present the info
Other Defense-Reducing Options

• Empathize with the pressures facing your boss and your company
• Emphasize your commitment to the organization “You know, I’ve worked here 12 years and I really believe in this company. That’s why I came to you—I can’t believe it’s good for the company to have Simon treating people that way”.
• Describe what you’ve done to try to solve the problem.
• Empathize with management’s dilemma. “I don’t know if someone can get through to him. It’s really a shame, because he is so incredibly intelligent and motivated.”
The Abrasion Alarm

Invoke one of these phrases in a very quiet (and seemingly nonthreatening) way to HR or senior management:

• “This is starting to feel like a *hostile environment*”

• *Is this what they call harassment?*

• “*Isn’t picking on a person of another sex [or race, ethnicity or protected class] a form of discrimination?*”

• “*I can see why people would bring legal action if they were being treated this way.*”
Mass Mutiny

1. Get a group
2. Go to Human Resources
3. Voice your concerns together - calmly
4. Respectfully declare some version of

“We’re sick of being treated this way and we can’t and won’t take it anymore.”
For all options - have a plan

- Know what you’ll do first
- Have a back up plan if Plan A doesn’t work
- Keep yourself calm and strong – this is key
There is hope

- These strategies, although not easy, can be effective.
- And, you can know that you’ve done all that you can to make the situation better for you and everyone else.
- There is help for the abrasive manager – coaching can be very effective. That’s up to HR and senior management to arrange.
- Your job is to make choices about how you’ll conduct yourself in ways that you’re proud of and that work for you.

Never Give Up
Presentation based on

*Taming the Abrasive Manager* by Laura Crawshaw, 2007

The book is a terrific resource for Human Resources and anyone who works with, for or manages an abrasive boss.
Coaching abrasive managers
Accountability program for busy teams

Pam Rechel    Portland, OR    503.780.3965
pam@braveheartconsulting.com
pam@CountOnMeAccountability.com