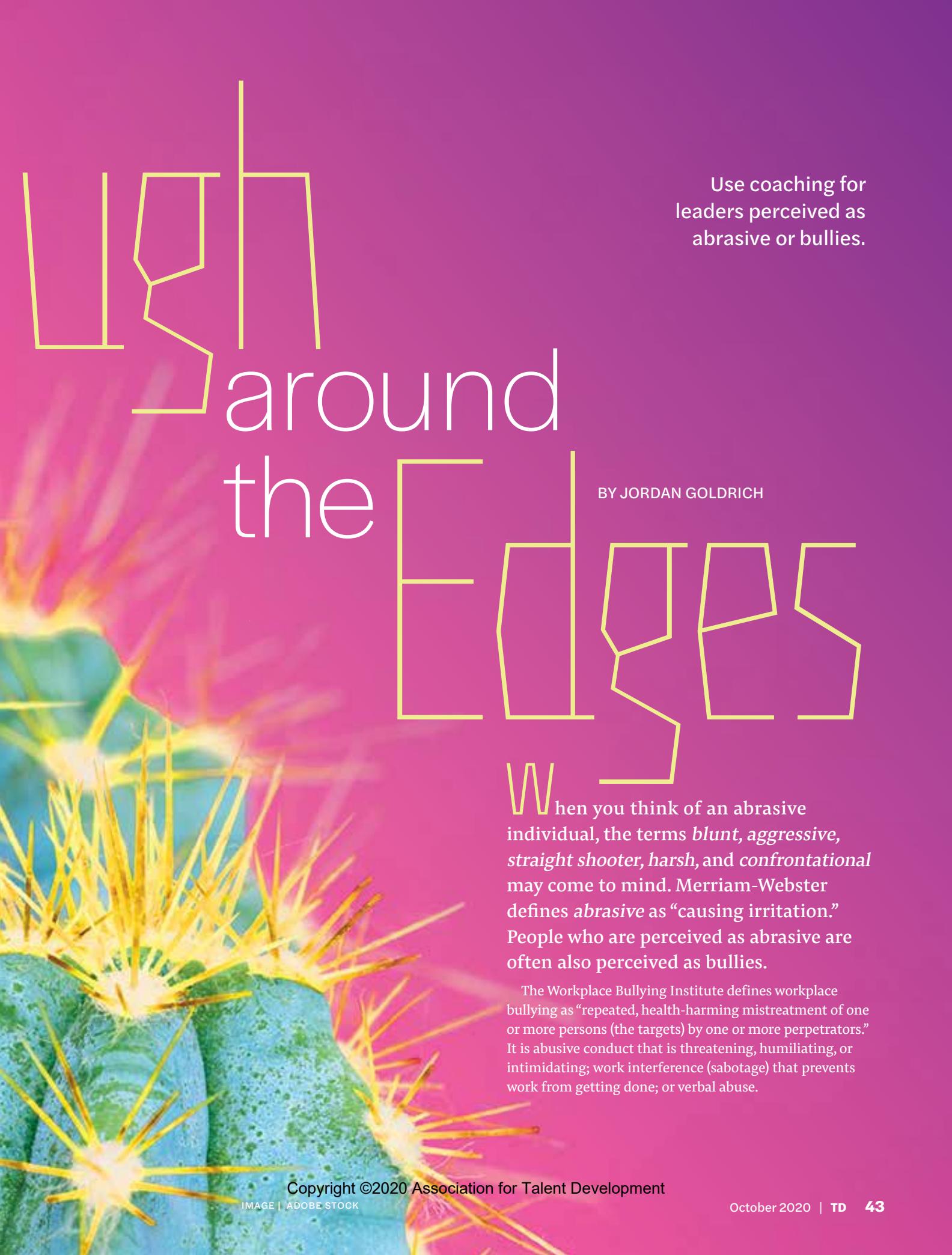


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Use coaching for
leaders perceived as
abrasive or bullies.

Get around the E

BY JORDAN GOLDRICH

When you think of an abrasive individual, the terms *blunt, aggressive, straight shooter, harsh, and confrontational* may come to mind. Merriam-Webster defines *abrasive* as “causing irritation.” People who are perceived as abrasive are often also perceived as bullies.

The Workplace Bullying Institute defines workplace bullying as “repeated, health-harming mistreatment of one or more persons (the targets) by one or more perpetrators.” It is abusive conduct that is threatening, humiliating, or intimidating; work interference (sabotage) that prevents work from getting done; or verbal abuse.



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Workplace bullying affects turnover, absenteeism, litigation, workers' compensation claims, quality, productivity, and company reputation, resulting in difficulty for employers recruiting top talent. The cost of turnover alone is conservatively estimated at 150 percent of a worker's salary. If because of bullying a company loses five employees with an average salary of \$50,000 each, the cost is \$375,000—but that figure doesn't factor in lawsuits, workers' compensation, and other expenses.

Given those losses, why would companies want to do anything but get rid of executives who are perceived as bullies?

In my experience as a certified executive coach, despite the perception, most executives who are thought of as bullies do not intend to hurt people. Rather, they have an uncommon desire for success, take charge, lead their teammates, accomplish the mission, and are never out of the fight. Those are all necessary characteristics to be successful in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment. However, those executives may need to adjust their leadership and communication styles.

Factors that drive abrasive behavior

Culture is a key factor in determining whether an executive's communication is considered abrasive, and there are significant differences in national, regional, and ethnic communication styles. Other than behavior that rises to the level of illegal or against company policy, the perception of disrespectful or demeaning communication depends on organizational culture and the individual receiving the communication.

The executive's core values are another factor of the perceived negative behavior. Most executives who are labeled abrasive are committed to some combination of these core values:

- Winning—holding the highest rank, making the most money, or being recognized as the best
- Achieving great things—solving big problems or big puzzles
- Serving others—adding value to others

People may believe an executive's commitment to high performance is unreasonable and therefore disrespectful. Conversely, the leader may believe that anyone who does not demonstrate the same commitment to results does not deserve respect.

Finally, most abrasive behavior is a defensive response. Many of these executives' self-esteem is attached to results, so less-than-excellent outcomes trigger a fight-freeze-flight response that others may often interpret as intentionally hurtful behavior rather than as a defensive response.

Leaders who exhibit such negative behaviors can fall under one of four labels: warrior, scientist, abrasive executive, and bully—each with its own characteristics and coaching needs.

Warrior

Warriors are master leaders, more committed to the mission than to themselves. Most people who work with them feel challenged rather than disrespected. I use the ethos of US Navy SEALs to define warriors' commitments:

- Have an uncommon desire to succeed
- Take charge, lead teammates, and accomplish the mission
- Demand discipline and are never out of the fight

Most executives who get labeled as a bully are perceived as demonstrating those commitments. Warriors embody additional commitments that the other three types do not, such as:

- Have uncompromising integrity
- Expect to lead and be led
- Humbly serve
- Have the ability to control their emotions and actions, regardless of circumstance
- Place others' welfare and security before their own

Warriors rarely receive complaints regarding harassment or bullying. However, they occasionally express frustration and use profanity. Because their direct reports and stakeholders feel safe and respected enough, they usually tolerate the leaders' lapses.

If warriors do receive a harassment or hostile workplace environment complaint, it often comes from people who resent being held accountable. Investigators typically find that the warriors acted in legal and appropriate ways.

During coaching, warriors' primary need is a safe, confidential environment to analyze what is going on and to think through their options. The coach should act as a sounding board, challenge their assumptions and perspectives, and offer options. Warriors typically need a coach with a deep background in business, leadership, organization development, or other areas relevant to the warriors' challenges.

Scientist

Scientists are highly analytical with a low need or desire for relationships. Their core purpose is some combination of achieving great things and serving others. They are especially motivated by solving large complex problems and puzzles. Like warriors, scientists sometimes express frustration and communicate in disrespectful ways, causing complaints.

Most scientists are introverts who process internally and don't share their thinking. People not as familiar with the science or technology, who process more slowly, or who have strong needs for interpersonal connection may feel disrespected when this type of leader quickly tells them the answer to a question.

Coaching success is higher
when the executive knows
the impact of their behavior.

When coaching scientists, their issues are typically a combination of three areas. First, they may be introverted and need to learn how to work with people who have a higher need for personal or emotional connection than they do. Because introverts process information internally, the coach should work with them around verbalizing their thinking process so other people get it.

Second, they may be more tactical than strategic. The coach should help scientists by encouraging them to find out what the more strategic executives are thinking and talking about. They need to at least get into the conversation. Another part is explaining the elements of strategy.

Finally, they need to understand that, as a leader, their job is more than providing great solutions to complex problems and puzzles. Part of their job is also to develop the people within their function so that employees are motivated to stay, eligible for promotion, and able to function with increasing autonomy. Scientists must understand that there is a value chain within the greater organization and that they are both a provider and customer within that value chain. A key part of leadership is aligning their function's work with their internal customers

and providers so that overall quality, productivity, and profitability enhances.

Abrasive executive

Abrasive executives are likely to receive complaints about bullying. Their core purpose is similar to the warriors or scientists. Their self-esteem is connected to getting results, they feel personally attacked by what they perceive as less-than-excellent performance, and they react defensively and are perceived as intentionally causing harm.

Some abrasive executives are more focused on exercising power and achieving status. In such cases, their behavior is in a gray area between the occasional expression of frustration and impatience on one side and the more consistent and damaging behavior of the bully (discussed below) on the other. The primary differentiator between abrasive executives and bullies is the frequency and intensity of that behavior.

When coaching abrasive executives, it is important to understand that most are unaware of their impact on others. Therefore, coaches should survey the leader's key stakeholders and share the feedback anonymously. Many abrasive executives are shocked and dismayed when they learn the impact they are having.

The coach must understand that these executives cannot and do not need to become a new person to change their behavior's impact. Rather, they need to acknowledge the effect their style has and engage in what Marshall Goldsmith refers to as a "feedforward" conversation with stakeholders. Feedforward involves an individual telling people he has received their feedback and that he wants to build respectful relationships. The individual then asks others what behavior they want to see in the future to rate him improved. In a sense, he is negotiating changes on an individual basis.

When leaders engage in feedforward, others usually perceive them as demonstrating humility, integrity, and courage. Whether or not leaders change their behavior, this process significantly changes the impact their behavior has on others. In my experience, abrasive executives need to make a 15–20 percent change in their communication and leadership behavior to restore a positive work environment.

Bully

Bullies take pleasure in or do not care about hurting others. That makes them exceedingly hard to coach. My informal survey of executive coaches indicates that somewhere between 10 percent and 20 percent of senior executives are bullies. That is a significant number. Yet, most executives who are labeled as abrasive or bullies are coachable.

True bullies will not change. Therefore, I tell executives whom I coach that we will fail if they do not have any intrinsic motivation to change. I let them know that if they do not have even a small amount of intrinsic motivation, I will withdraw from coaching them.

Guidance for coaches

The following guidelines apply to internal and external coaches, who should be flexible with their sequence and use.

Challenge your reactions and judgments so you see the executive as a valuable but imperfect human being like yourself. Address your own conflict avoidance; you must be able to be direct.

Interview their boss or HR to determine what others have said to the executive. Coaching success is higher when the executive knows the impact of their behavior and the consequences for failing to improve it. In my experience, for the most part, no one has clearly explained those details to the leader because the executive team is not aligned on the consequences or is conflict avoidant.

If possible, hold a meeting during which the executive's manager or HR communicates in front of you the impact of the individual's behavior and the consequences for not changing. That enables you to have a completely honest and supportive conversation going forward.

Everyone must understand that you provide insights and options but cannot guarantee that the executive will take any specific actions. You should let everyone know that you will withdraw from the coaching relationship if you believe that the executive is not, in your professional opinion, motivated.

The manager and HR must agree—and the executive understand—that in the event you withdraw from the coaching relationship, that will not affect the company's evaluation of the executive. In such situations, the company should evaluate the leader based on whether they change their impact on others, not whether the coaching continues.

Let the executive know that you will hold what they tell you confidential with certain exceptions, such as threats to life and breaches of company policy. Typically, what you should share with the manager and HR is whether the executive attends meetings and whether you believe the engagements are producing value for the company.

Acknowledge to the extent you agree that we do live in a culture that is politically correct and over-protective. That will help you build credibility and trust with an executive who believes the pressure to change their style is motivated by the company's desire to be politically correct. Often the leader is re-

acting justifiably but inappropriately to other executives who are not performing and not being held accountable.

Allow the executive between six and 10 hours total to vent while you mine for intrinsic motivation, which is determined by core values. Identify the executive's motivation via the assessment process, by listening for and reflecting on what you hear as the individual's underlying core values and emotional reactions that drive both their abrasive and positive reactions to others.

Help the executive connect their core values to changing the impact that their leadership and communication style has on others to broaden the executive's

understanding that they can be completely authentic while making necessary changes. These steps are applicable to all executive coaching:

- Interview stakeholders and provide anonymous feedback. (Use 360-degree assessments for more developmental coaching.)
- Review personality and behavior style assessments to identify their triggers and communication and leadership styles.
- Make a mutual go or no-go decision: Is there intrinsic motivation?
- Identify goals and a development plan.
- Gain alignment with their manager or HR on the goals.
- Have them conduct feedforward conversations.
- Implement the plan.
- Evaluate progress based on stakeholder ratings.

Achieving success

Results-driven leaders are necessary for success in a volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous environment. Coaches working with executives who are considered abrasive or bullies must first view the individuals with respect and compassion. Coaches will be much more credible and successful if they recognize the executives' strengths and the value they bring.

Much of the coaching process is the same for any other executive. However, one of the differences lies in understanding the key factors defining or driving the executive's abrasive or bullying behavior.

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