

Risky Business

Taming the Boss You Work for or with

This chapter is written for those who work for or with an abrasive boss—you who work on the same rung as the boss or labor lower on the corporate ladder. I've grouped you together because, even though you may be at different levels, you share one thing in common—*neither of you has any authority over the abrasive boss who is making your life a misery*. Like the abrasive boss's superiors, if you want to see any hope of change, you're going to have to do some boss taming—you're going to have to do your best to make your abrasive boss see and care about the suffering you've experienced from his or her harsh words and actions. You're going to have to take the blinders off and put the limits on without the benefit of authority. This chapter will show you how, based on the paces that I've seen insightful coworkers put their emotionally blind bosses *and* companies through. Trust me—any doubters can look this gift horse in the mouth because I didn't think these up. You're not looking at a consultant's confabulations. These strategies came straight from the mouths and actions of employees who successfully tamed their abrasive bosses—employees who bravely blazed trails that put a stop to their suffering.

Perhaps this isn't the first book you've read on this topic—you may already have surveyed the "survival guides" that describe elaborate strategies to outlast, outwit, or outplay your abrasive boss. In accordance with the survival dynamic, these strategies fall into the defense categories of fight or flight. The primary flight strategy (*duck and cover*) advises you to bear the unbearable

by letting the stress caused by your abrasive boss roll off you like—you guessed it—water off a duck’s back. No kidding—one author urges you to make like a duck who “shakes itself off from time to time and goes about its business,” not allowing the boss to “dampen” your spirit. *Gack* (or should I say *quack*). Sitting ducks are also encouraged to exercise, visualize calmer ponds, and breathe deeply to manage their stress. Supposedly, by taking flight into whatever refuge you decide on, you will *outlast* the malaise of the moment to live another day in misery. And if you paddle through your pain long enough, you could metamorphose from lame duck to lucky duck, outlasting your abrasive boss, who has moved on to bigger and better ponds.

If flight strategies don’t suit your fancy, there’s always the defense option—you can fight. *Outwit* strategies call for deceptive ducks to trick their abrasive bosses with endless psychological gambits designed to keep bosses at bay. Such tactics can be risky, exhausting, and worst of all, ineffective. I’ve encountered more than one crispy duck who was roasted in the retaliatory fire of an abrasive boss who detected the employee’s deceit. Then there’s the *outplay* strategy, in which you are encouraged to flex your mighty duck muscles and engage in direct combat against further abrasion by reporting your boss to higher authorities. Let me tell you—there’s no faster route to ending up a dead duck than this one. Higher authorities, namely, management and human resource types, don’t like to deal with messy personnel problems, otherwise known as *duck poop*. If you embark on the outplay strategy without knowing how to navigate these waters, chances are very good that you, dear duck, will get *shot right out of the water—purged from the pond*.

This boss whisperer is a straight shooter, so here goes: frankly, I don’t give a damn for these strategies. I’ve rarely seen them have any positive effect, much less restore a wounded workplace to health. I believe that people should have the right to go to work without being subjected to aggression, but if you want to spend your working life mired in misery, engaged in wearisome

battles of wit or just waiting for your boss (or you) to croak, that's your choice. If you listen to these authors, they'll tell you that your choices are limited: futile fighting, duck and cover freezing, or fleeing the scene entirely. I'm feeling my abrasive oats as I disrespectfully disagree with these authors, because I've come across a few odd ducks who flew different routes—who blazed effective strategies to tame the abrasive bosses they worked for or with. I'm going to share those strategies with you, but before I do that, I'd like to set the stage with another tale of wilderness survival.

Arctic Anxiety

On those occasions when I'm challenged on my ability to stand my ground with an abrasive boss, I can't restrain the impulse to boast: "After standing down a grizzly bear, standing my ground with an abrasive boss is a piece of cake." You can't accuse me of being abrasive—just obnoxious. Intrigued? Here's the Hollywood version, in case anyone is considering the film rights to this book:

Striding through the spruce forest beside a salmon-stuffed river on Alaska's Katmai Peninsula, I came face to face with a grizzly bear. We stopped cold in our tracks—each taken off guard. The bear rose on up on his hind legs to his full height, glared at me, and then slammed his front paws to the ground in a threat display. I stood my ground and stared him down: seeing my steely resolve, he turned and fled.

Here's the real-world version—what *really* happened:

Shuffling through the spruce forest beside a salmon-stuffed river on Alaska's Katmai Peninsula, I came face to face with a grizzly bear. We stopped cold in our tracks—actually, *cold* doesn't quite describe it—I was *frozen*, frozen in fear. The survival dynamic had kicked in—perceiving a threat, I felt fear, but instead of opting for the standard fight or flight options, I instantaneously added another selection to the defense menu: *freeze*. Fight, flee, or freeze. My body was frozen, as was my gaze into the bear's eyes. Here's the important part: *the bear froze too*.

A veritable preteen, still unwise to the ways of his world, he clearly had never encountered the likes of me. And like me, he perceived a threat, felt fear, and froze. Our eyes were locked, each paralyzed by the presence of the other. Finally, after I don't know how long, he rose up on his hind legs and then slammed his paws to the ground in a threat display. This did nothing to defrost me: I remained petrified. He turned and fled.

Even in that moment I knew why he made the threat display: *he wanted me to know who was boss*. I also knew why he hotfooted it out of there right after making his display: *he was too afraid to prove he was boss*—he was too afraid to actually use aggression to dominate me. I offer this experience as a lesson in handling abrasive bosses. As I noted in an earlier chapter, bears just want to go about the business of survival—they won't hurt you unless you get in their way. I got in this bear's way, but instead of promptly attacking me, he misinterpreted my glaciated gaze as a threat display—a strategy designed to intimidate him into backing off. To him, *I was the threat*. Without being aware of it, I had succeeded in threatening him, (*gulp*), and because he was insecure about his ability to defend against this unknown threat, *he backed off*.

Defense Disclaimer

If you're working for or with a severely abrasive boss, chances are that you, too, are frozen—frozen in fear. You haven't yet opted to flee to another department or company, nor have you decided to fight for your right to come to work without suffering attack. I have observed employees defrost from their frozen states to take the blinders off their abrasive bosses and make them care about the fact that they attack. But before I describe the various ways to threaten your abrasive boss into adequate behavior, I want to make a very important point: *standing your ground with bears or abrasive bosses is risky business*. With bears you are putting your physical life at great risk; with abrasive bosses you are putting your

professional life at great risk. And here's a second critical point: *there are no guarantees*—defending yourself doesn't guarantee that you'll survive to tell the tale.

Before you decide to fight back, I strongly encourage you to consider the alternative defense option: flight. Many members of the animal kingdom would tell you (if they could) that flight is a very effective strategy for avoiding injury. Think about it carefully—do your own cost-benefit analysis of the flight option. How do the costs of sticking around weigh out against the benefits of escaping the threat of further harm through transfer or termination? To answer this question accurately, I recommend that you research other work habitats—lift your nose from the grindstone and look around for other employment opportunities that won't drain the lifeblood from you. Now is the time to get your ducks in a row: buff up your résumé, brush up your networking skills, beef up your savings, and scout new territories. If you decide to take flight, these advance tactics will increase your chances of future survival. And the same holds true if you decide to fight and (unfortunately) *lose*—you'll have a jump start on surviving long enough to locate happier hunting grounds.

Let's say you've completed your cost-benefit analysis of your job, and you've decided it's worth standing your ground for. Fine—keep reading. And for those of you who have decided to flee through transfer or termination, fine—but *keep reading*. Why? Because you are basing your flight plan on one mammoth assumption—that if you fight against abrasion, you're doomed to lose. Assumptions are sheer speculations, otherwise known to scientists as *hypotheses*. We mere mortals call them *guesses*—unfounded estimates of fact. Consider the cost of finding out whether your assumption is founded in fact: what, exactly, have you got to lose if you linger long enough to launch one of the following fight strategies? What price would you pay for testing your hypothesis? I'm not denying that there could be costs attached to the fight option: withheld words or letters

of recommendation, blanching benefits, or bad feelings—who knows? But consider the benefit of standing your ground: *you won't spend the rest of your life wondering if there was something you could have done to handle the situation.* You'll have peace of mind, knowing that you did everything in your admittedly limited power to turn the abrasive boss around and make him or her care enough to want to change.

Five Strategies for Subordinates and Peers

In the course of my ramblings I encountered five strategies that halted the harm done by abrasive bosses: the *Soothe Strategy*, the *Reverse Threat Display*, the *Abrasion Alert*, the *Abrasion Alarm*, and the *Mass Mutiny*. However, only the first two strategies (the *Soothe Strategy* and the *Reverse Threat Display*) are applied directly to the abrasive boss—the remaining three are applied to your organization's management—those with the authority to manage the unmanageable. Like horse whisperers, you're going to attempt to rein in a highly anxious individual—in your case, your abrasive boss. And if you don't succeed, you're going to climb up the chain of command and do your best to spur management into taming him or her.

Most of the following five strategies are variations on the survival dynamic theme: threat → fear → defense. With the exception of the *Soothe Strategy*, you're going to trigger this survival dynamic with your abrasive boss or, if necessary, on avoidant management. In short, you're going to do your best to make *them* see and care by taking their blinders off and putting limits on. Once you've opened their eyes, you're going to present *your* threat against continued abrasion—you're going to stand your ground and respectfully intimidate them into treating you with respect. I have to warn you, though: these strategies are doomed to failure if you show fear or anger. I'm alive today because I stared the bear down and stayed silent. I absolutely believe that any displays of fear (wild eyes) or aggression (growls) on my part would have sealed my fate—between the bear's

jaws. Before you enter the corporate corral to tame an abrasive boss, heed these whispered words: *never, ever let them see the whites of your eyes or hear the fear in your heart.*

You're going to present your threat, but you need to do it calmly and quietly, much like the concerned physician who advises his patients of looming medical threats. Because I'm whispering, you may have missed that: *calmly* and *quietly*. There's no room for raised voices or aggressive gestures. They will only provoke your boss into aggression. No, you want to gently whisper the costs of continued aggression, *without being aggressive*. Your objective: to quietly escalate your boss's anxiety to the point where he or she abandons (flees) aggressive behavior in favor of a kinder, gentler management style.

Looking calm and speaking quietly may require you to brush up on your acting skills. I don't expect you to *feel* cool, calm, and collected, but you'd better *act* that way—this is one moment when brute honesty will only result in your being brutalized. I'm serious about the whites of your eyes part—recent research reveals that the sight of fear-widened eyes triggers chemical reactions in the amygdala, the primitive brain center responsible for fight or flight reactions (Whalen et al., 2004). You don't want your boss to see your fear or hear your anger, thereby agitating the boss's amygdala, so you may have to *act* what you don't *feel*. Actors rehearse their parts before taking the stage, and I encourage you to rehearse your role repeatedly before you stand your ground. Role-play with people who've observed abrasive bosses and ask them to run through worst-case conversational scenarios with you. Do not, I repeat, *do not* think of standing your ground until you've reached the point where you can, like the very best horse (or patient or kid) whisperers, convey your threat in a concerned, composed manner.

The Soothe Strategy

Many say *music soothes the savage beast*, and I say *reassurance can* (sometimes) *soothe the anxious boss*. This is the only strategy

where you won't be presenting a threat: instead of escalating your abrasive boss's anxiety over incompetence, in the Soothe Strategy you'll be working to reduce or eliminate the possibility that he or she will perceive you as a threat. I hope this book has removed blinders from your eyes: you now see that abrasive bosses resort to aggression to eliminate any perceived obstacles to their quest for supercompetence. If you have the misfortune to be perceived as one of those obstacles, you're going to feel the pain. Let's analyze a typical scenario: strolling down the hallway to a meeting, you turn a corner and come face to face with *Bossus abrasivus*.

Abrasive Boss: Where are we on those numbers? I can't move ahead until we know how much this whole project is going to cost.

You: I don't have them yet—I—

Abrasive Boss (cutting in): What do you mean you "don't have them yet"?! Don't you realize that this is going to delay the whole project? Don't you understand how important this is!? [Inference of stupidity.] How could you let this happen—why didn't you get on this sooner? [Inference of sloth.] What do I have to do to get you to wake up and care enough to do the job?! [Accusation of apathy.] I can see that I'm going to have to do something about this. [Threat display.]

You freeze in your tracks.

Abrasive Boss storms off, contemplating your imminent extinction.

In the blind eyes of your boss, you've committed the capital crime of incompetence. In that moment he perceives you as a threat to his professional supercompetence. Provoked into a state of high anxiety (you may see the whites of *his* eyes at this point), he defends against the terrifying psychological threat of incompetence by projecting the whole mess onto you: *plop*.

Your boss has leapt to the assumption that you don't care as much about competence as he does because you're lazy, stupid, or uncaring, or all three. *You want to stop this thinking in its tracks.* You need to kill off this misperception before it lives to torment you another day, and *you're going to kill it with kindness.* You're going to dispel this destructive distortion by whispering reassurances of your commitment to competence, his *and* yours. Here's an example from an individual who, having defrosted from his frozen state of fear, returned to soothe his anxious boss and calmly combat these pernicious misperceptions:

Employee: Could I talk with you for a moment?

Abrasive Boss: Yes, but I don't have long.

Employee: Thanks—I wanted to go back to what happened in the hallway 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. 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 if I'd been 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.

Abrasive Boss: Oh—OK.

Employee: Nate, 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 worry 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.

Abrasive Boss: Yeah—OK.

The next time you're subjected to your abrasive boss's aggression, consider these steps of the Soothe Strategy:

1. Describe the attack in neutral terms. (*Blinders off.*)
2. Acknowledge your boss's anxiety over incompetence. (*Empathy on.*)
3. Reassure your boss of *his* or *her* competence. (*Soothe.*)
4. Reassure your boss of *your* competence. (*Soothe.*)
5. Teach your boss new ways to manage his or her anxiety without attacking. (*Low-pitched limits on.*)

Remember, you're about to come face to face with an anxious individual, and you'll want to do everything in your power to keep the fur from flying. Wait until you've calmed yourself down to the point where you can *act* with deference and respect toward the boss, even if you don't *feel* it. Here's another example of calmly offering reassurances to soothe the anxious boss:

Employee: Do you have a minute?

Abrasive Boss: Yeah, I guess. What do you want?

Employee: I wanted to clear up something that happened in today's meeting. When I asked you why we're holding off on starting up the new division, you reacted pretty strongly. [Neutral description of attack.] In retrospect, I wonder if you thought I was digging my heels in on the whole thing. [Exercise of empathy.] That's not the case at all—I'm fine with whatever date you set, [Reassurance of boss's dominance.] but it will help me to deal with the press if I know what drove the decision. [Reassurance of employee's competence.]

Abrasive Boss: You're right—I thought you were challenging me. [Confession of perception of threat.]

Employee: Look, Hal, you know what you're doing—I know that. [Reassurance of boss's competence.] And I also want

you to know that I'm not here to get in your way—I'm here to get everyone to get *out* of the way so we can move ahead. [Reassurance of employee's motivation.] From now on, if you have any questions about why I'm doing what I'm doing, don't hesitate to ask me directly—I don't want you to waste time worrying about where I'm coming from. [Teaching moment.]

That's the Soothe Strategy—short, relatively sweet, and not always entirely sincere. These employees empathically removed their bosses' blinders and used low tones to set limits on boss aggression by offering alternatives to attack. They took a calm, collegial approach to handling their boss's anxiety, whispering reassurances designed to soothe the anxious boss. As I noted earlier, I can't guarantee that this strategy will work the first time—or at all. Don't expect miracles: repeat application of the soothing treatment as needed, and you may see improvement. However, if your reassurances fail to reduce your boss's anxiety, consider the only other treatment formulated for direct application to abrasive bosses: a dose of their own medicine—*threat*.

The Reverse Threat Display

This defense strategy takes you one step higher on the scale of risk. You're going to do unto your boss as he or she has done unto you—you're going to quietly threaten your boss into abandoning his or her abrasive behavior. I have seen this work, but it takes a lot of courage and the ability to act confidently even if you're shaking in your shoes. Here's how it works: *Bossus abrasivus* has just made an aggressive display intended to intimidate you into competence. He's done this in the belief that his threat display will mobilize you into doing what he wants you to do. You, to his surprise, will stand your ground and respond with a threat of your own to intimidate him into doing what *you* want *him* to do: *back off*.

I first learned about this strategy from coworkers of the courageous employees who successfully blocked their bosses' attacks:

"He treats everybody like that . . . except for Linda—he doesn't pull that crap with her. He did at first, but then one day she just stood up to him. She just told him she wasn't going to put up with that kind of treatment. For some reason he backed off—he didn't go after her after she did that."

"I don't know why, but she never does her thing with Daniel. She'll rip into everyone but him. I don't get it. They're not exactly buddies—he can't stand her."

I didn't pay much attention to reports of this strategy until I sat with the individuals who'd actually used the Reverse Threat Display:

"I told him that he didn't need to talk to me that way, and that I wouldn't tolerate it."

"I told her that I don't appreciate being treated badly and that when people do that to me, it has the reverse effect. She never did it again."

"I told him my father used to yell at me as a kid and that I refuse to put up with it as an adult. He still yells, but not at me."

It was clear that all of these threat-slingers were determined to set limits on their bosses' abrasive behavior, reminiscent of the gunslinger played by John Wayne in *The Shootist*: "*I won't be wronged, I won't be insulted, and I won't be laid a hand on. I don't do these things to other people and I require the same from them.*" It was also clear that these employees presented their threats in cool, collected tones, in accordance with the Duke's advice to actors: "*Talk low, talk slow, and don't talk too much.*"

The employees I spoke with applied two variations of the Reverse Threat Display: *veiled* and *defined*. In the Veiled Reverse Threat Display no reference was made to how the employee intended to make good on the threat. In the Defined Reverse Threat Display employees specified the next step they'd take if the boss didn't back off and behave appropriately. I present the condensed versions:

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."

The veiled display is likely to provoke less defensiveness, because even though on the one hand you're presenting a threat, on the other hand you're giving your boss the opportunity to harness his or her aggressive impulses. Don't use this strategy without acquainting yourself with the defensive maneuvers discussed in Chapters Nine and Ten. Avoid crippling fact battles by presenting your feelings as fact: "You may think that what you said in the meeting wasn't humiliating but *I felt* deeply offended." Disarm your boss's defenses with the same strategies I recommended for managers of abrasive bosses, as in the following variations on the defense-disarming Veiled Reverse Threat Display.

The "That's Not What Happened" Denial

Abrasive Boss: That's not what happened—you're blowing it all out of proportion. You're making a big deal out of nothing.

Employee: I don't want to debate what happened. What I do know is the way you treated me today was way out of line, and I want it to stop. You don't need to act like that to get me to do what you want.

The “It’s Your Fault” Projection

Abrasive Boss: When you pushed back, it really pushed my buttons.

Employee: I wasn’t trying to challenge you—I was just asking for clarification. I had no idea you’d see my question as a challenge. I just want to figure out how to pull all of this off without setting *you* off. I’m not into public floggings—next time, just ask.

The “It’s Necessary” Rationalization

Abrasive Boss: Sometimes I have to get on your case to get things moving.

Employee: You may see it that way, but I don’t. I work very hard to move things along, and if I’m delayed because other departments haven’t responded, I don’t appreciate your taking it out on me. If yelling at me is the only way you think you can get things moving, you’re wrong—it doesn’t help. If you have concerns, bring them to me without yelling. I won’t tolerate being treated that way anymore.

Remember to look and sound calm and collected, even if a storm of anger rages within. This is *absolutely essential*—you want your boss to see your logic, not your rage. Displays of intense emotion will distract attention from your case and give the boss a welcome excuse to escalate into lethal aggression to avoid dealing with your feedback. You don’t want to provoke a bloody dominance struggle. You’re more than willing to submit to the top dog’s authority, but only if he stops chewing on you.

Here’s the prescription for the Soothe and Reverse Threat Display strategies:

1. In cases of boss abrasion, apply the Soothe Strategy directly to the boss. If improvement is noted, continue application of soothing reassurance until abrasive behavior disappears.

2. If no improvement is noted after a minimum of three applications of the Soothe Strategy, apply the Veiled Reverse Threat Display, injecting a direct threat only if the veiled threat fails to yield results. Either display may be rendered more palatable when prefaced with the Soothe Strategy (remember—a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down). Caution: administering either of these threats, veiled or direct, may jeopardize your career health. Displays of strong emotion are contraindicated.

There you have it: the two strategies that I've seen work when applied directly to the boss. If they haven't yielded results, you've now reached the end of your boss-taming rope, because, realistically, you don't have the authority to set stronger limits on your boss. You can *ask* bosses to back off, but you can't demand it, which leads us to your only remaining alternative: threatening those who have the authority to set limits on the abrasive boss into doing exactly that. You're going to change horses midstream by shifting the threat of the abrasive boss from *you* to *your company*—you're going to make management feel the threat of failing to intervene with the abrasive boss.

The Abrasion Alert: Making Management See

The Abrasion Alert consists of calmly and respectfully informing organizational authorities of the potential threat they face if they don't address the abrasive boss's behavior. In this approach you make *your* problem with your boss's behavior *their* problem. You'll do this by presenting them with your version of the survival dynamic: *threat* of noxious employee reaction to abrasion → *fear* of work disruption → *defensive* intervention with abrasive boss. Because your attempts to leash top dog have failed, you're going to pass the anxiety to someone with a leash.

Management (and I include human resource staff in this group) may or may not be aware of the presence of abrasion. In either case your first task is to take *their* blinders off—to ensure

they see what's going on. I start with an example of a bungled approach to the Abrasion Alert strategy, an approach used by too many distressed employees that should be avoided at all costs:

Manager (HR or otherwise): What's up?

Employee (in loud, agitated tones): I want to talk to you about something that happened today—I'm so angry I can barely talk. We were in a production meeting and Chris started going after me. I can't stand that guy—he is such a jerk.

Manager: What do you mean?

Employee: I was telling him that we need to run more trials on the new platform before we release it. Next thing I know he's drilling me with all of these questions:

"Haven't you taken care of that already? Why am I hearing about this now?!" He just ripped into me, right in front of everyone. He even called me "stupid"—I know he's had it in for me for a long time.

Manager: What do you mean, "ripped into you"?

Employee: You know—his usual temper tantrum. He can be such a big baby—you guys should fire him. So what exactly are you going to do about this?

We might better term this particular intervention the *suicide strategy*, for without being aware of it, you will succeed only in cutting your own throat with this approach. I've seen this strategy played out innumerable times, all with the same negative results:

- You will be perceived as irrational and abrasive because of your highly emotional and disrespectful descriptions of your boss.
- You may be suspected of "having it in for your boss," thereby eradicating any hope that your complaint will be considered valid and worthy of management's attention.

- You will come across as demanding and abrasive toward the manager or HR staff person, motivating him or her to terminate the conversation as soon as politically possible.
- The manager will mention your meeting to your abrasive boss, describing it along these lines: “Arnold showed up in my office today with some complaint about how you got on his case—what’s going on between you two?” Your abrasive boss will speedily convince the manager that you are a difficult case, mentioning your complaint about your last raise for extra effect. The manager will be thoroughly convinced that you’re a difficult duck, having already personally experienced a difficult meeting with “difficult” you. (*Final Score: Abrasive Boss, 1; Manager, 1; Duck, dead.*)

Get my drift? So when you finally screw up the courage to bite the bullet and make your case, don’t screw it up with any unpleasant, alienating, and yes, *abrasive* behavior from your end. You want to be perceived as rational, reasonable, concerned, and most of all, *helpful*. It won’t hurt to exercise a little empathy for management in this situation: how would you feel if you were a member of management listening to someone quack on and on about how a boss ruffled his or her feathers, followed by a demand that you do something—*right now*? You want to motivate your company into action with carrots, not sticks, because *abrasion provokes defense*. Earlier in this book I described how abrasive bosses are eventually plagued with negative perceptions of their behavior, surrounded by harmful perceptual horseflies that follow them everywhere. You don’t want any horseflies hovering over you as you alert your organization to the presence of an abrasive boss. You don’t want them buzzing that you’re lazy, stupid, or vindictive. Such perceptions, however inaccurate, will weaken your case and kill off any hope of being heard. To make your case you’ll have to avoid any chance of being misperceived as a troublemaker, whiner, or difficult type. Remember, you can’t help but be perceived as a threat the moment you bring your concern

to management. Your objective is to change that perception from *threat* to *rescue*—to make management see that you’re there not to harm the company but to help rescue it from a terrible fate. Here’s the strategy in action with a human resource manager:

You: Is this still a good time to meet?

HR Manager: Absolutely—come on in. What’s up?

You: Leo, I don’t want to take 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 I decided that you’d want to know.

HR Manager: What’s going on?

You: Leo, you know that Max was brought in from the Eastern Division to run our department. He’s got a lot going for him—he’s very intelligent, sizes things up quickly, and from what I can see, he’s made some very good decisions. The problem is that he’s alienating a lot of people, including me. I can’t speak for the others, but I’ve found him very difficult to work with because he gets very aggressive for no reason. For instance, if someone asks him a question, he immediately perceives it as a challenge and cuts them off. This morning I asked him when we’d start up the next phase, and he barked, “Get off my back—don’t you think I know what I’m doing?!” Last week when he got frustrated he called a female employee an “idiot”—he hasn’t tried that yet with me. I’ve heard of two people who are actively searching for new jobs, and I know that even though he’s well-intentioned, people aren’t going to put up with this forever [*veiled threat*].

HR Manager: What do you want me to do about it?

You: I don’t know—that’s why I brought it to you. I just wanted you to be aware of what’s going on.

That’s it—the Abrasion Alert strategy in action. No anger, no demands, no overt threats. But wait—*are you calling me a*

softy? Do these grains of wisdom seem a bit mealymouthed? Are you attacking my logic? If so, it's time for me to get defensive, otherwise known as presenting my superior reasoning:

- Your demeanor is one of concern and composure—no spooked sclera here. Your soothing presence invites attention. Leo *wants* to hear what you have to say. (*Defenses decrease.*)
- You open by recognizing the abrasive boss's considerable strengths, which attests to your good judgment and positive regard for the company's decision to bring him in (*reassurance of your competence*). Leo's feeling better and better about you—you're a company man (or woman). (*Defenses drop even further.*)
- You present the specific abrasive behaviors inflicted on you and others. You make Leo see. (*Blinders come off.*)
- You allude to the possibility of sexual harassment toward a female employee. (*First threat is presented.*)
- You refer to employees preparing to jump ship. (*Second threat is presented.*)
- You hint that you aren't going to tolerate the abrasion. (*Third threat is presented.*)

Notice that you've kept the focus on the abrasive boss—not on you. You've got Leo thinking about Max—not about you. You've presented threats and escalated the company's anxiety about Max—*not about you*. By the way, if you're harboring hopes of simply strolling in and laying your cards on the table only to have your abrasive boss face a firing squad, forget it. The company has a major investment in your boss and a further investment in maintaining the status quo. From the company's perspective, he or she may be doing a lot that's right. Your abrasive boss may be hitting high numbers, cutting costs, or keeping production on an even keel.

Let's get real—here's what you should reasonably expect. First, you want the company to be aware of the situation and then set limits on it. Second, you want your company to hold your boss accountable for interpersonal competence and require him or her to relinquish aggressive management tactics. These are not unreasonable demands. You're not asking for any special favors or calling for your boss's head—two actions that companies are reluctant to take. You are simply asking to be treated in a nonhostile (also known as *respectful*) manner. You're not dictating demands—you're respectfully asking to be freed from harassment so that you can do your job unencumbered by emotional distress. Issuing demands puts management on the defensive, shifting the perception of threat back to you. Instead, limit yourself to a calm, clear presentation of your concerns and let management worry about how they're going to deal with your boss. Here are some defense-reducing elaborations of the Abrasion Alert strategy:

- *Empathize with the pressures facing your boss and your company:* “I know Max is facing major deadlines and that we're under the gun.”
- *Emphasize your commitment to the organization:* “You know, I've worked here for eighteen 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 Max treating people that way.”
- *Describe what you've done to try to solve the problem:* “I've talked with him twice to try and make him see how he's alienating the people he needs most, but he just doesn't see it.”
- *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.”

There's one more thing to remember when you consider the Abrasion Alert strategy: refrain from any temptation to specify

how your company should intervene with the abrasive boss. In the last example the HR representative asked, “What do you want me to do about it?” Don’t fall into the trap of telling management what to do. Realistically, *that’s none of your business*—it’s their business, and don’t get in the way of it. There’s no law, however, against hypnotic management whispering: “Gee, I don’t know what would help. Maybe you guys talking to him or some coaching—I don’t really know.” But don’t fall into the trap of taking an authoritative stance where you have no authority.

There—you’ve done it—you’ve taken your best shot at making management see. You’ve done everything in your very limited power to open management’s eyes by respectfully presenting the threat of abrasion. Even better, you did it with emotional intelligence, intentionally escalating management anxiety without allowing that anxiety to ricochet back on you. *Good shot.* But don’t expect miracles after the first alert—further alerts may be needed to build your case. Patience can pay. Also, don’t forget that there’s strength in numbers, so consider the advantages of the *Serial Abrasion Alert*. In this variation, other wounded coworkers follow your example and calmly sound *their* alerts to management, using the tactics just described.

The Abrasion Alarm: Making Management Care

If the Abrasion Alert strategy fails to yield results, you can take the next step up the risk scale. Let me warn you: this is a major step in which you not only take the corporate bull by the horns—you’re going to wave the red flag of threat right in its eyes. In the course of my work I’ve had many opportunities to observe human resource staff going about their business. From my conversations with employees who stood up to abrasion, I learned of four corporate jungle calls that—*without fail*—make HR types sit up and take notice: *hostile environment*, *harassment*, *discrimination*, and *legal action*. But unlike chest-pummeling apes who charge about in wild threats of aggression, these employees

took a more subtle approach: they simply invoked one of these four phrases in a very quiet (and seemingly nonthreatening) way:

“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 era] a form of *discrimination*?”

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

The effects of these oblique threats can be immediate—the alarm bells start ringing, and so does my telephone: “We’ve got a potentially serious situation we need help with—are you available?” Time and time again I’m called in after management has gotten wind of potential legal action. Threats of legal action, however indirect, send chills spiraling down the spines of spineless managers—bosses who’ve fled the challenge of handling an abrasive boss. Such legal actions can be messy and expose a company to major threats of annihilation (through monetary loss) and abandonment (through loss of reputation). If you want to fly the most threatening flag, this is the one.

Don’t get me wrong: *I am not*—repeat *not*—*encouraging you to sue your employer*. Under most circumstances I’d advise against this, the *All-Out Attack* strategy, for many reasons. Some of the greatest words of wisdom were written on my *tabula rasa* by a lawyer friend who advised me to avoid legal recourse if at all possible, “because the minute you turn your matter over to a court, you lose control. The *court* will control your fate—*not you*.” Think about it. Do you really want to ruin more years of your life—financially and otherwise—tied up in legal action that could very possibly fizzle into failure? (Corporations, like kangaroos, have very deep pockets.) If the situation has become intolerable, do you want to subject yourself to further distress by pursuing litigation? And there’s something else you should be

aware of before you rush to court: in the United States, *there's no law against abrasion*. It's not illegal to be abrasive unless a boss specifically targets employees because of their sex, race, religion, national origin, age, or disability. If an abrasive boss attacks older employees to get them to resign, you're looking at age discrimination. But if an abrasive boss indiscriminately attacks *anyone*, old or young, for the same reason, you're looking at lawlessness in the wilds of work.

How risky is the Abrasion Alarm strategy? This is open to debate, but there's no question that executing this strategy transforms you into a force to be dealt with. You've made a potent threat display, and from this point on you will be perceived as a serious threat to the survival of your boss and your company. Paradoxically, applying the Abrasion Alarm strategy may reduce the possibility of retaliation, in that legislation does exist to protect whistle-blowers. But don't let your guard down, because organizations have means other than termination to extinguish threats. If your company takes an adversarial stance against you (instead of advocating for your right to be treated in a civil manner), it can find all sorts of ways to exile you (unwelcome transfer to the Timbuktu division) or starve you out (demotion or excruciatingly dull work assignments).

If you elect to execute the Abrasion Alarm strategy, do so only after you've calculated the risks of execution: *risk only what you can afford to lose*. Do not apply any of these strategies until you've gotten your financial and professional ducks in a row as earlier advised. I also strongly recommend that you consult with an employment attorney to get a realistic calculation of your odds of success and the potential for problems. This is neither the time nor the place to naively act on fantasies of revenge.

Mass Mutiny

There's one final strategy, and it offers two advantages—high yield on investment and little or no individual risk: the Mass

Mutiny. This strategy involves the following steps:

1. Marshal the tormented troops.
2. March to Human Resources.
3. Voice your distress in concert (abrasive tones should be avoided).
4. Respectfully declare, in chorus, some version of “We’re sick from being treated this way, and we can’t and won’t take it anymore.”

This may be the most effective strategy for motivating a foot-dragging company to take the abrasive boss by the horns. It consists of multiple employees presenting their concerns en masse to management, with statements to the tune of “This can’t go on—we can’t go on.” It’s a bold move, but as many species have discovered, there can be safety in numbers: *united we stand, divided we crawl*. Before you decamp from your department to mutiny, be sure that all participants undergo basic training in calm conduct, communicating concern for the company, and specific substantiation of their charges of abrasion. As with the other strategies there’s no guarantee that the Mass Mutiny strategy will produce results. Remember to handle management with care—never engage in direct attack, because, as humorist Kin Hubbard tells us: “*Nobody ever forgets where he buried the hatchet.*”