The Abrasive Personality

Not everyone who rises quickly in a company and has good analytical skills and a lot of energy is abrasive, nor are all abrasive people in high management levels, but when the two do coincide, top management has a real problem. The problem is simply how to keep the extraordinarily talented person in a position where he or she can be most effective, and at the same time not sacrifice the feelings and aspirations of the people who work with and for this person. According to this author, managers can cope with this dilemma by helping their abrasive subordinates to understand the negative consequences of their personalities. This method takes time and patience, but it is most likely the only way managers can save such people for the organization.

The corporate president stared out the window of his skyscraper office. His forehead was furrowed in anger and puzzlement. His fingers drummed the arm of his chair with a speed that signified intense frustration. The other executives in the room waited expectantly. Each had said his piece. Each had come to his and her own conclusion about the problem.

Darrel Sandstrom, vice president of one of the corporation's major divisions, was the problem. Sandstrom was one of those rare young men who had rocketed to the division vice presidency at an age when most of his peers were still in lower-middle management. "He is sharp," his peers said, "but watch out for his afterburn. You'll get singed as he goes by." And that, in a phrase, was the problem.

There was no question that Sandstrom was well on his way to the top. Others were already vying for a handhold on his coattails. He had
a reputation for being a self-starter. Give him a tough problem, like a failing division, and he would turn it around almost before anyone knew what had happened. He was an executive who could quickly take charge, unerringly get to the heart of a problem, lay out the steps for overcoming it, bulldoze his way through corporate red tape, and reorganize to get the job done. All that was well and good. Unfortunately, that was not all there was to it.

In staff discussions and meetings with his peers Sandstrom would ask pointed questions and make incisive comments. However, he would also brush his peers’ superfluous words aside with little tact, making them fearful to offer their thoughts in his presence. Often he would get his way in meetings because of the persuasiveness of his arguments and his commanding presentations, but just as often those who were responsible for following up the conclusions of a meeting would not do so.

In meetings with his superiors, his questions were appropriate, his conclusions correct, and his insights important assets in examining problems. But he would antagonize his superiors by showing little patience with points and questions that to him seemed irrelevant or elementary. Unwilling to compromise, Sandstrom was an intellectual bully with little regard for those of his colleagues who could not keep up with him.

There were complaints from subordinates too. Some resented his controlling manner. Fearing his wrath, they spoke up at meetings only when they knew it to be safe. They knew he would not accept mediocrity and so they strived to attain the perfection he demanded of them. When he said they had done a good job, they knew they had earned his compliments, though many felt he did not really mean what he said.

His meetings were not noted for their liveliness, in fact he did not have much of a sense of humor. On the golf course and tennis courts he was equally humorless and competitive. Playing as intensely as he worked, he did not know what a game was.

And now here he was. The division presidency was open and the corporate president was in a dilemma. To promote Sandstrom was to perpetuate in a more responsible position what seemed to many a combination of Moshe Dayan, General George Patton, and Admiral Hyman Rickover. Sandstrom would produce; no question about that. But at what cost? Could the corporation afford it? If Sandstrom did not get the job, the likelihood was that he would quit. The company could ill afford that either, for his division’s bottom line was a significant portion of its bottom line.

Around the table the opinion was divided. “Fire him now,” some said; “you’ll have to do it sooner or later.” “Be gentle with him,” others said; “if you hurt him, he’ll lose his momentum.” “He’ll mature with age,” said others. Still others commented, “When he gets to be president, he’ll relax.” And there were those who said, “What difference does it make? He’s bringing in the bucks.” The corporate president faced the dilemma: Sandstrom could not be promoted but neither could he be spared. None of the options presented gave him a way out; none of them could.

Darrel Sandstrom epitomizes people who puzzle, dismay, frustrate, and enrage others in organizations—those who have an abrasive personality. Men and women of high, sometimes brilliant, achievement who stubbornly insist on having their own way and are contemptuous of others, are the bane of bosses, subordinates, peers, and colleagues.

In the long run, they are a bane to themselves as well; when they fail, their failure is usually due to their abrasive personalities. Because of their value to their organizations, however, their superiors frequently go to great lengths to help them fit in the organization. In fact, top executives probably refer more managers with abrasive personalities to psychologists and psychiatrists, and human relations training programs in order to rescue them, than any other single classification of executives.

In this article I describe the abrasive personality, trace its origins, and suggest what managers might do to both help and cope with such people.

A Profile

Like the proverbial porcupine, an abrasive person seems to have a natural knack for jabbing others in an irritating and sometimes painful way. But that knack masks a desperation worse than that of those who receive the jabs, namely, a need to be perfect. (For a closer look at how a need to be perfect drives a person to the point where he alienates and causes significant stress to most people around him, see the sidebar at the end of this article.) The person who becomes a Darrel Sandstrom
however, is not just someone who needs perfection. He has other characteristics which, combined with that need, create the behavior others find so offensive.

Such a person is most usually extremely intelligent. With a passion for perfection, accuracy, and completeness, he pushes himself very hard and can be counted on to do a job well, often spectacularly. He tends to want to do the job himself, however, finding it difficult to lean on others who he feels will not do it to his standards, on time, or with the required finesse. He has, therefore, great difficulty delegating even $25 decisions. Such complete thoroughness, however, no matter how good for the company as a whole, tends to leave others figuratively breathless, making them feel that they cannot compete in the same league.

He is often keenly analytical, capable of cutting through to the nub of a problem, but with his need for constant achievement, he is impatient with those who cannot think as quickly or speak as forthrightly as he can. Thus his capacity for analysis tends not to be matched by equal skill as a leader to implement the answers he has deduced.

On a one-to-one basis he is often genial and helpful to people he is not supervising. But despite what he says, he is usually not a good developer of people for, frequently, they feel too inadequate when they have to compare themselves with him. Also, the abrasive person’s intense rivalry with others often leads him to undercut them, even though he himself may not be aware of doing so.

When his competitive instincts overwhelm his judgment, an abrasive person will sometimes crudely raise issues others are reluctant to speak about, leaving himself a scapegoat for his own forthrightness. In groups he tends to dominate others, treating all differences as challenges to be debated and vanquished. At the same time that he is domineering to his subordinates, he is fawning to his superiors. If he feels himself to be exceptionally competent, however, he may try to dominate his superiors also.

Though often in imaginative pursuit of bigger and broader achievements for which he frequently gets many accolades, he may well leave his bosses and those around him with no sense of having any input to the task or project. He moves so fast and ranges so widely that even when he has good ideas, his boss will tend to turn him down fearing that if he gives an inch, the subordinate will take a mile. The boss feels there will be no catching him, no containing him, and no protecting the stellar subordinate, himself, or higher management from any waves that may be created, the backwash from which might overwhelm them all.

Once reined in by his boss, the abrasive person feels that he has been let down, that his efforts have been in vain. Feeling unjustly treated, he becomes angry because he was asked to do something and it did not end well. Therefore, he reasons, he is being penalized because other people are jealous, rivalrous, or do not want to undertake anything new. Seeing his boss as somebody to be outflanked, rather than as somebody whose step-by-step involvement is necessary for a project’s success, he is politically insensitive and often righteously denies the need for such sensitivity.

Although others often perceive him as both grandiose and emotionally cold, the abrasive person has a strong and very intense emotional interest in himself. Needing to see himself as extraordinary, he acts sometimes as if he were a privileged person—indeed, as if he had a right to be different or even inconsiderate.

At times he sees others as mere devices for his self-aggrandizement, existing as extensions of himself, rather than as full-fledged, unique adults with their own wishes, desires, and aspirations. To inflate his always low sense of self-worth, he competes intensely for attention, affection, and applause. At the same time, he seems to expect others to accept his word, decision, or logic just because it is his. When disappointed in these expectations, he becomes enraged.

To such a person, self-control is very important, as is control of others, which he makes total if possible. Thus he overorganizes, and copes with imperfections in others by oversupervising them. To him, losing a little control is the same as losing total control. To prevent that, he is rigid, constricted, and unable to compromise. In fact, for him, making a compromise is the same as giving in to lower standards. He therefore has little capacity for the necessary give and take of organizational political systems. This inflexibility is especially apparent around issues of abstract values which, for him, become specifically concrete.

To others the same control makes him appear emphatically right, self-confident, and self-assured. In contrast, those who are not so sure of what they believe or of the clarity of an issue, feel inadequate and less virtuous.

The abrasive person, appearing to have encyclopedic knowledge, is often well read, and, with already a good academic background, strives
for more. While subordinates and even peers may strive as well to meet the high expectations of such a person, and some may reach extraordinary heights, many ultimately give up, especially if he beats them down. Thus the legendary Vince Lombardi drove the Green Bay Packers to great success, but all of its members, recognizing that he was the key to their success, felt that the better and more competent he was the less adequate they were. When such a person dies or leaves an organization, those left behind are demoralized because they have no self-confidence. Usually they will feel that they have not been able to measure up and indeed, frequently, they cannot.

If they are compelled to retire, abrasive people will have difficulty. If they are not compelled to retire, they tend to hold on to the very end, and with age, their judgment is usually impaired. In their view, they have less and less need to adapt to people and circumstances, or to change their way of doing things. Thus they become more and more tangential to the main thrust of the business. If they are entrepreneurs, they may frequently destroy organizations in an unconscious effort to keep somebody else from taking over their babies. J. Edgar Hoover, a case in point, ultimately corrupted and very nearly destroyed the reputation of the FBI out of his own self-righteousness.

**Solving the Dilemma**

Given that you, the reader, have a subordinate who fits the profile I have drawn, what can you do? Corrective effort occurs in stages, and takes time and patience on everybody's part.

**FIRST-STAGE TECHNIQUES**

The following steps can be used with any employee who is having a behavior problem, but they are particularly effective in introducing an abrasive person to the consequences of his or her behavior.

- Recognize the psychological axiom that each person is always doing the best he can. Understanding that abrasive, provocative behavior springs from an extremely vulnerable self-image, a hunger for affection, and an eagerness for contact, do not become angry. Instead, initiate frequent discussion with this person.

- In such discussions, uncritically report your observations of his abrasive behavior. Describe what you see, especially the more subtle behavior to which people react automatically. Ask how he thinks others feel when he says or does what you describe. How does he think they are likely to respond? Is that the result he wants? If not, what would you do differently to get the response he wants? How would he respond if someone else said or did what he does?

- Point out that you recognize his desire to achieve and that you want to help. But tell him that if he wants to advance in the company, he needs to take others into account, and that his progress along these lines has implications for his future. Ensure him also that everyone experiences defeats and disappointments along the way.

- When, as is likely to be the case, his provocative behavior ultimately irritates you, try to avoid both impulsively attacking back on the one hand and being critical of yourself for not responding in kind on the other. Explain to him that although you understand his need to do or be the best, that he made you angry and that others he works with must feel the same. Tell him you get irritated and annoyed, particularly with hostile, depreciating, or controlling tactics. After all, you can say, you are only human, too, even if he thinks he is not. Let him know how frequently such behavior occurs.

- If he challenges, philosophizes, defends, or tries to debate your observations, or accuses you of hostility to him, do not counterattack. Tell him you are not interested in arguing. Merely report your observations of what he is doing or misinterpreting at that moment. Keep his goal the point of your discussion; does he want to make it or not?

- If your relationship is strong enough, you might ask why he must defend or attack in situations that are not combat. Point out that to be part of a critical examination of a problem is one thing; to turn such a situation into a win-lose argument is another.

- Expect to have to repeat this process again and again, pointing out legitimate achievements about which he can be proud. Explain that goals are achieved step by step, that compromise is not necessarily second best, that the all-or-none principle usually results in futile disappointment, and that perfection is not attainable.

Much good talent can be saved if managers employ these steps with their abrasive subordinates. Of course, some people are less abrasive than others and may be able to modulate their behavior voluntarily and cope consciously with their abrasive tendencies. For those who cannot, however, more drastic measures may be needed.
Sometimes people with unconscious drives cannot see reality despite repeated attempts to show them. Perhaps they are too busy thinking up defensive arguments or are preoccupied with their own thoughts. Whatever, if they do not respond to the gentle counseling I have described, then they should be confronted with what their arrogant, hostile, and controlling behavior is costing them.

Such people must be told very early on how their behavior undermines them. All too often afraid to do this, their bosses quickly become resentful and withdraw, leaving their subordinates uncomfortable, but not knowing why. Feeling anxious, the abrasive subordinate then attempts to win back the regard and esteem of the boss in the only way he knows, by intensifying this behavior. That only makes things worse.

Abrasive persons can make significant contributions to an organization, but managers need to steer them again and again into taking those political steps that will enable them to experience success rather than rejection. Rather than corral such people, who tend to figuratively butt their heads against restrictions, managers do better to act like sheepdogs, gently nudging them back into position when they stray.

Highly conscientious people, who need to demonstrate their own competence by doing things themselves, are likely to have had to prove themselves against considerable odds in the past. Their demonstration of competence has had to be in terms of what they, themselves, could do as individuals. Thus they need political guidance and instruction in teamwork, as well as support from a superior who will tell them the consequences of their behavior in straightforward terms.

These people will often need frequent feedback on each successive step they take in improving their political relationships. As they move slowly in such a process, or at least more slowly than they are accustomed to, they will experience increasing anxiety. While not demonstrating their individual competence, such people may feel that they are not doing well, and get so anxious that they may indeed fail. When they have such feelings, they then tend to revert to their old unilateral way of doing things.

However, if despite the boss’s best efforts the subordinate does not respond, the manager must tell him in no uncertain terms that his behavior is abrasive and therefore unsatisfactory. Managers should not assume that their subordinates know this, but should tell them and tell them repeatedly, and in written form. Being told once or twice during a performance appraisal should be enough. My experience is, however, that most superiors are very reluctant to tell people, particularly abrasive ones, the effects of their behavior during performance appraisals.

In one instance, when I was asked to see such a manager, he did not know why he had been referred to me. When I told him, he was dismayed. Showing me his performance appraisal, he complained that his boss had not told him. Rather his boss had commented favorably on all his qualities and assets, and in one sentence he had written that his behavior with people was improving. In reality, the boss was so enraged with his subordinate’s behavior that he was not promoting him as fast as he would have wished.

When the steps I have outlined have been followed to no avail, when the subordinate clearly knows, and he or she is unable to respond by changing his or her behavior, when repeated words to the person and even failures to be promoted have produced no significant improvement, there are two likely consequences. First, the abrasive person will feel unfairly treated, unrecognized for his or her skills and competence, and unappreciated for what he or she could bring to the organization. Second, the superior is usually desperate, angry, and at his wit’s end.

If by this point the abrasive person has not already been referred to a competent psychologist or psychiatrist for therapy, he should be. Nothing else will have a significant effect, and even therapy may not. Whether it does will depend on the severity of the problem and the skill of the therapist. This is not a problem that will be solved in a T-group, or a weekend encounter, or some other form of confrontation.

The manager should make sure the subordinate understands that when a person is referred to a psychologist, there are two implications. The first is that the person is so competent, skilled, or capable in some dimension of his role that his superiors would not only hate to lose him, but also have reason to expect that the person could flower into a mature executive who can assume greater responsibility. The second is that despite his talent, the subordinate is so unable to get along with other people that he cannot be promoted beyond his present role. Both points should be made emphatically.

These same principles apply equally in dealing with any ineffective or dysfunctional behavior on the job. Some people cannot seem to get their work done. Others have a habit of getting in their own way as well as that of others. Still others manage to stumble their way to work...
late each morning or produce incomplete or inadequate work. Whatever the case, steps in treating them are essentially the same.

Other Problem Situations

What do you do if the abrasive person is your boss, your peer, someone you are interviewing, or, hardest to face of all, yourself? What recourse do you have then?

THE BOSS

Let us assume that you are relatively new or inexperienced in a particular area and need a certain amount of time to achieve your own competence. Chances are that because of his knowledge and competence, your abrasive boss will have much to teach. Since his high standards will ensure that the model he provides will be a good one, there will be sufficient reason for you to tolerate his abrasiveness.

But after two years, or whenever you establish your own competence, you will begin to chafe under the rigid control. As you push for your own freedom, your boss is likely to become threatened with loss of control and feel that you are becoming rivalrous. He is then likely to turn on you, now no longer a disciple, and, in sometimes devious ways, get back at you. Your memos will lie on his desk, unanswered. Information being sent through channels will be delayed. Complaints, suggestions, requests will either be rejected outright or merely tabled. Sometimes he will reorganize the unit around you, which will fence you in and force you to deal with decoys—nominal bosses who have no real power.

If you are in a safe position, you might tell the boss how he appears to you, and his effect on subordinates. If he is at a high level, it will usually do little good to go above his head. Your memos will lie on his desk, unanswered. Information being sent through channels will be delayed. Complaints, suggestions, requests will either be rejected outright or merely tabled. Sometimes he will reorganize the unit around you, which will fence you in and force you to deal with decoys—nominal bosses who have no real power.

THE PEER

If you are the peer of an abrasive person, do not hesitate to tell him if his behavior intimidates you. Speaking of your irritation and anger and that of others, you might tell him you do not think he wants to deliberately estrange people or be self-defeating. He might become angry, but if approached in a kindly manner, he is more likely to be contrite and may even ask for more feedback on specific occasions.

THE CANDIDATE

What should you look for during an interview to avoid hiring someone who will turn out to be abrasive?

Pay attention to the charming personality. Not all charming persons are self-centered, but many are. Some preen themselves, dress to perfection, and in other ways indicate that they give an inordinate amount of attention to themselves. The more exhibitionistic the person, the more a person needs approval, the less he or she can be thoughtful of others. Also pay special attention to precision in speech or manner. Clarity is a virtue, but a need for exactness indicates a need to control.

Find out how the person gets things done by having him or her describe past projects and activities. How much does he report starting and finishing tasks all by himself, even to the surprise of his superiors? To do so is not necessarily bad; in fact, it may be good for a person to be a self-starter. But repeated singular achievement might indicate a problem in working as part of a team. How often does he use “I”? How closely did he have to check the work of subordinates? How important was it for him to have control of what was happening? How did he talk to people about their mistakes? How did he go about coaching them?

YOU, YOURSELF

Finally, what if you are abrasive? If you ask yourself the questions in the sidebar at the end of this article, “Do You Have an Abrasive
Do You Have an Abrasive Personality?

You might ask yourself these questions. Then ask them of your spouse, your peers, your friends—and even your subordinates:

1. Are you condescendingly critical? When you talk of others in the organization, do you speak of “straightening them out” or “whipping them into shape”?
2. Do you need to be in full control? Does almost everything need to be cleared with you?
3. In meetings, do your comments take a disproportionate amount of time?
4. Are you quick to rise to the attack, to challenge?
5. Do you have a need to debate? Do discussions quickly become arguments?
6. Are people reluctant to discuss things with you? Does no one speak up?
   When someone does, are his or her statements inane?
7. Are you preoccupied with acquiring symbols of status and power?
8. Do you weasel out of responsibilities?
9. Are you reluctant to let others have the same privileges or perquisites as yourself?
10. When you talk about your activities, do you use the word “I” disproportionately?
11. Do your subordinates admire you because you are so strong and capable or because, in your organization, they feel so strong and capable—and supported?
12. To your amazement, do people speak of you as cold and distant when you really want them to like you?
13. Do you regard yourself as more competent than your peers, than your boss? Does your behavior let them know that?

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