

# The EI. Coach

## Coaching Skills for Emotionally Intelligent Leaders Creating an Emotionally Intelligent Workplace

This issue is for organizational leaders looking for solutions to the problem of managers who seem to create dissension, distrust, and undue stress in the workplace. Often technically competent, the question arises: “Are we dealing with a Bully Boss or someone in need of training or coaching in people skills?” This article presents a rationale for answering that question.

### **Bully Boss or Potential Leader?**

How to determine if a technically competent manager who is deficient in people skills can be transformed into an effective leader.

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### **Workplace Stress and Work Trauma**

Our work adds meaning to our lives. It can be a creative expression of who we are and deeply fulfilling. It can be a cornerstone of our identities. It can be the primary way of meeting our social needs, our need for belonging. Often we spend more time at work than with our families. When our work is threatened we characteristically react as though our basic sense of self has been attacked. When our work is lost it can be as though we have lost part of ourselves. When abused on the job, we feel a sense of betrayal and outrage, and deeply wounded.

Much of our clinical work with anxiety and depression has to do with conflicts and difficulties arising on the job. We often see people who no longer take satisfaction in their work, instead dreading each and every day and wondering how long they can keep it up. We hear a lot about a workplace environment that doesn't feel safe, about tension and hostility, and about unpleasant work conditions that carry over into personal life, seriously impacting mental and physical health. Sometimes, a job has been lost in a way that seems terribly unfair. In other cases, someone stays in an abusive situation that goes on and on until there is been deep psychological and emotional wounding. Recovery can take years. Sometimes, people don't recover.

As a society, we're starting to pay more attention to the serious damage that frequently affects people in the workplace. Work Trauma, a relatively new phrase in workplace vocabulary, is similar in effect to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in that individuals have a sense of lost control over their world, feel intensely threatened, and have a deep sense of feeling unsafe and insecure. Common symptoms are hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, and avoidance of thoughts and feelings associated with the traumatic situation. Damage to self occurs. What finally brings workers to our clinical office is a mixture of anxiety and depression at a level that can no longer be ignored.

*Susan was typical. When she called for an appointment it was because as she stated "My life is out of control and I think I'm going crazy." Susan went on to state that her life had radically and abruptly changed., In stark contrast to her previous calm, outgoing and cheerful self, Susan now found herself always on edge, apprehensive, and easily threatened. She was having trouble sleeping, taking hours to fall asleep, awakening frequently, and then having trouble getting back to sleep. Occasionally she would have nightmares, usually involving work. She was now chronically tired. Often during the day she felt numb and detached, with difficulty focusing or remembering important details. She feared the loss of her job and the seemingly catastrophic effect such a loss would have on family finances. Home life offered no relief. She was "crabby" with her husband and children and often wanted just to be left alone.*

*Life was no longer fun. There didn't seem to be anything to look forward to. "I feel like I'm out of gas. It's all I can do just to get going in the morning and I really don't want to." At the same time, Susan was unable to relax. She seemed unable to let things go and restore her energy and enthusiasm. It's what we call an "agitated depression," a sense of being depleted and void of any zest for living, yet unable to rest and recover. Susan was in a bad place, and it seemed to be getting worse.*

Like so many others, Susan's distress stemmed primarily from her work. Work life is often such an important and vital part of how we define ourselves, that it's easy to lose our emotional balance if work life is not going well. If the stress is intense and unrelenting, as in Susan's case, workplace trauma may be the result.

Stress in the workplace can be the result of any number of situations. Some examples include:

1. Factors unique to the job such as workload, pace, and physical environment.
2. Role in the organization such as role conflicts, role ambiguity, or level of responsibility.
3. Career development such as job security fears or lack of career development opportunity.
4. **Relationships with supervisors, coworkers, or subordinates.**
5. Organizational structure/climate including participation in decision-making, management style, or communication patterns.

### **Stress From Relationship With Supervisor**

The fourth category gets a lot of our attention. In particular, difficulties with a supervisor or manager constitute the largest percentage of the workplace stress cases we see in our clinical practice. Additionally, many of the requests we have from CEOs and other corporate officers,

city managers, human resource managers, risk managers, and various government leaders to work with problem managers have to do with individuals who seem to generate an inordinate amount of workplace stress along with complaints of abusive treatment. The following is typical:

*Paul, the Human Resource Director for a large public agency called to request our assistance in resolving a situation that threatened to generate the loss of valuable employees, Workers Comp claims, and even the possibility of lawsuits against the organization. Members were alleging abusive treatment, lack of protection from management, serious impact on their health and well-being, and a generally unsafe and hostile work environment. The situation had existed for some time and Paul had hoped it would somehow resolve itself. Lately however, the atmosphere in one department had been getting increasingly contentious and unstable. Everything seemed to point to Anne, a veteran manager with unquestionable technical competence, prodigious work output, and highly respected by managers higher in the organization for her special knowledge and abilities.*

*Paul was in a quandary. Anne, on the surface, appeared to be a strong manager. She definitely knew the business of the organization. She was a superb writer and had excellent skills in strategic planning. Why then was her department in chaos? One of her direct reports was out on stress leave, claiming emotional abuse from her boss. Another worker was threatening to quit outright rather than have to continue dealing with Anne. Most workers seemed unhappy and anxious. Upon entering the department's work space, it immediately seemed to an outsider that workers took no joy in their work and could hardly wait to leave at quitting time. Workers willing to talk complained that Anne micromanaged them, talked down to them, even demeaned them in front of others. She apparently managed the department through threats and intimidation, leading to an atmosphere of fear and distrust. Workers felt unsafe, dreaded coming to work, and often had work-related stress symptoms such as anxiety, depression, boredom, apathy, emotional fatigue, sleep disturbance, headaches, and irritability. The situation seemed to be getting worse.*

### **The Crucial Question: Asset or Liability?**

Paul's request was not unusual. We had gotten over a dozen similar requests in the past six months. Paul had a dilemma, with essentially three choices. He could choose to do nothing and let the situation grow worse, he could make sure that Anne was strongly counseled and disciplined., or he could undertake to transform the situation in such a way that would boost morale and cohesiveness within the department and retain valuable employees.

The first course of action was clearly unacceptable. This had been the way of handling the situation all along and obviously didn't work. Now things were at a point where people were being damaged, productivity and morale were down, and major damage to the organization was looming on the horizon. So much for the "let's wait and see" approach.

The second course of action was problematic. Anne unquestionably had value to the organization through her knowledge, experience, and technical know-how. Taking a purely disciplinary or punitive approach to the problem might negatively impact on Anne's performance

without improving morale or cohesiveness within the department. She might get angry and seek employment elsewhere, or quit outright. Moreover, if her performance didn't improve and termination had to be considered, the impact on the organization might be severe.

The third course of action seemed most inviting, and at the same time most difficult to implement. Could Anne's behavior be transformed? Could morale and cohesiveness in the department be improved with Anne still at the helm? Would her workers learn to trust her and respect her as a leader? Had the situation already progressed too far for recovery?

Paul was troubled by the possibility that Anne's managerial style was fatally flawed and beyond correction. Was she a bully boss? Did she have a deep-seated need to abuse people? Could she be transformed or were her problems characterological and not amenable to organizational intervention? Would organizational interventions simply cause her to hide abusive behavior without changing her style of management? Was she really the valuable employee she seemed to be or a liability that might carry a huge financial price tag for the organization? Would the organization be better off letting her go? Would it be more damaging and expensive to keep her? Was she a bully boss or a potential leader needing to be transformed? Was she coachable?

So many questions and so few answers. Paul was confused as to how to proceed. His boss was looking to him for direction and concrete advice on what was best for all concerned and for the organization. Unfortunately, as is the case for most important decisions, whatever was going to be decided would probably be decided with incomplete information and with significant opportunity to be wrong. The consequences to the organization were large and more information was needed. Thus the phone call.

One question was uppermost in Paul's mind; Was Anne coachable? With effective people skills added to her obvious technical expertise, she would be awesome. Without such skills, she was damaging the organization. Could the needed skills be learned and would she respond to the challenge in a positive way? Was there still time before things could no longer be fixed?

As mentioned previously, this is not an unusual question. Organizations are frequently confronted with this very real dilemma. Fortunately there are answers.

To begin with, consider the following "Behavior and Attitude" matrix, a handy decision-making tool. There are two dimensions, **Behavior** and **Attitudes** and four sets of conditions resulting from the mix.

Under "**Behavior**" a decision needs to be made as to the general presence or absence of effective people skills. In the case of managers, needed behaviors are much the same as behaviors

**BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDE**

		<b>Behavior</b>	
		No People Skills	People Skills
Attitude	Uncaring About People	<b>I.</b> Abusive "NotCoachable"	<b>II.</b> Manipulator "NotCoachable"
	Caring About People	<b>III.</b> Socially Unaware and ineffective "clueless" Coachable	<b>IV.</b> Socially Aware and Effective. Highly Coachable

demonstrated by the most effective leaders. Do managers inspire a high level of commitment and performance? Are they trusted? Is there a perception that the manager operates in the best interests of the employee as well as those of the organization? Do they effectively build self-esteem in others? Do they grow and develop people? Do employees feel not only safe but relaxed and comfortable around the manager? Can employees turn to the manager for help?

If people skills are lacking, employees often lack trust in their manager. They may not believe that their manager is there to look out for them, understand their needs and feelings, and help them grow. They may fear their manager, or simply withhold respect from someone who doesn't seem to care about them. They may feel unsafe and dread contact with the manager.

Some managers think that the only way to manage is to crack the whip until employees perform as desired. Some managers are demeaning and overly critical. Some yell at their employees and generally talk down to them. Some totally ignore their employees until they spot a mistake, then descend upon the unfortunate employee as though they have committed a capital offense. Some managers assume that employees basically don't want to work and must be watched carefully to make sure they don't get away with anything. Upon catching one of those lazy employees, you've just "got to show them who's boss."

Some managers define their role as thoroughly controlling their employees, and proceed to micromanage their employees until they have succeeded in destroying all motivation and initiative. Some managers rely upon threats, coercion, and intimidation to get the job done, backing up these controlling tactics with punishment for wrongdoers. They may see so-called "soft skills" as permissive coddling, an abdication of their managerial responsibility and behavior that allows employees to perform badly. It may be that they themselves have been socialized in their work-life by having harsh managers early on, and that has led them to quite naturally think that total control and a punitive attitude is the only one way to manage.

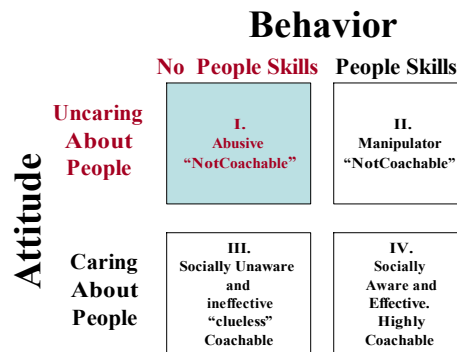
Then there are the managers who have people skills. These may be managers who clearly realize that success is dependent upon workers who are prepared, informed, motivated, inspired, equipped with all the necessary tools, and who feel appreciated. Managers who realize these things and fully take responsibility for being a "Servant Leader," rather than a "boss," are usually also managers who demonstrate people skills that have more to do with leading and influencing than power and control.

However, there's another dimension. Having people skills does not guarantee that those skills will be used for the benefit of people. The second dimension is **Attitude** and has to do with whether there is basic caring about people or a lack of such caring.

Putting both dimensions together in a matrix creates a most useful decision-making tool. It's the basic tool for the recommendations we make to managers like Paul. When asked if a manager like Anne is coachable or not, we look to the matrix.

Occasionally we find managers in quadrant one. You might think that their general lack of people skills would bar them from managerial positions, but they seem to turn up regularly. Their lack of caring about people would put them in a category we consider "not coachable."

## BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDE



Although this kind of boss is not as common as the other types, this is not to say that we rarely encounter supervisors in Quadrant I. As we were putting the finishing touches on this article, a woman came in who had been thoroughly beaten up by the worst kind of bully boss.

*Sally had worked for a large insurance company for a number of years. She worked in a branch where she was left often alone with her supervisor. The abuse was extreme. Sally stated "I just don't feel like I'm myself anymore. I feel as though I've lost myself." On a short test of anxiety and depression, she scored in the extreme range. She had Irritable Bowel Syndrome, daily headaches, and panic attacks. She had become generally fearful, had trouble sleeping, and counted every minute until the weekend, getting even more distressed and apprehensive every Sunday night and Monday morning.*

*Her supervisor would follow around, often standing for long periods of time behind her as she was working. He seemed to delight in telling her how "stupid and incompetent." She was. He would follow her to her car and continue to harangue her. He seemed to enjoy getting her to the point of tears, whereupon he would continue to ridicule her and tell her how weak and insignificant she was. Incredibly, Sally stayed because she had three small children at home and had believed until recently that she needed this job enough to put up with unrelenting abuse. Her occasional complaints to corporate had been met with a promise to "look into it," but nothing ever happened. Her supervisor it turned out was the corporation's "golden boy" who produced a lot of revenue and was therefore regarded as untouchable. Finally, Sally arrived at the point where she didn't believe she could physically or emotionally handle any more. In desperation Sally got a referral from her insurance company and called our office.*

The second quadrant is more problematic as people skills may be in evidence particularly in relating to people higher up in the organization. In fact, upper management, from their vantage point may see only what the Quadrant II manager wants them to see. It's often most

disconcerting when these people seem to be the darlings of upper management, often receiving special recognition and promotion. The view from below is quite different.



Quadrant II managers may talk a good game, but there's no real concern for workers as people. They may be totally task oriented, willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done, regardless of cost to people's self-esteem or well-being. They may initially seem concerned, and may even say things people want to hear, and make promises – but they don't deliver unless it satisfies some self-serving motive. Over time it becomes clear that they are in this for themselves and value others only for their utility in goal achievement.

Our advice to senior management in regard to quadrant one and two managers? It's simple and logical – for the good of the organization and all who work for them and with them, get rid of them. They're simply too expensive. They have a negatively dramatic effect on the bottom line and continuously cost the organization in terms of lowered morale, lack of cohesiveness, retention problems, absenteeism, lack of productivity, and even litigation. They can never make up through their personal expertise, experience or productivity for the creation of hidden damage and wasted potential.

Finally, there are Quadrants III and IV. Here there is caring about people, but a difference in people skills. Quadrant IV managers are probably already perceived as leaders. If they want coaching, it's probably because they simply want to continue developing to an even higher level of skill. They tend to be highly coachable if that is their desire.

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Quadrant III managers account for most of the requests for us to work as executive coaches. Quadrant III managers tend to be technically competent and good workers. Their hearts are in the right place. They care about people but they lack skill in leading and influencing others. They may be using a management style that they were exposed to earlier in their career. They may be simply playing out their concept of a "boss." They may be clueless as to how to most effectively motivate, inspire, and influence – in short they may not know what leadership is all about. They may be misunderstood. Their motives may be suspect. They may even be perceived as a "bully boss."

If they are open to coaching, and commit themselves to learning a better way, the results may be surprising. Often there's a strong motivation to accomplish the work to the best of their ability. If they can be shown that there is a more effective way of getting the work done, they can be quite enthusiastic. Since there is already a caring about people, the notion of more effectively managing people, having happier workers, and workers who are inspired to put forth their best effort, is quite appealing. If they are open to the concept that leadership is influencing, not bossing, then they are definitely ready for change. If they can be helped to see that being a "boss" can only take you so far, and may fall far short of the results expected, they are on their way. You can boss people to do just enough to keep their jobs. If you want them to be extraordinary, you have to inspire them, motivate them, equip them, and help them feel appreciated – in short, you have to be a leader.

Our experience is that leadership skills can be taught to a motivated manager willing to take an honest look at himself or herself, given one crucial ingredient—a basic caring for people. This caring is demonstrated through a deep desire to help people grow and a sincere desire to help them in their work and their lives.

### A Solution

Paul's dilemma had a happy resolution. The story of Anne continues:

*Anne was distressed to find that her workers were so unhappy with her. She'd always prided herself on being unwilling to settle for mediocrity in her own work or in work contributed by any member of her team. She saw herself as a "no-nonsense" boss who got the job done. She expected a lot from her workers and clearly saw it as her job to use any and all means available to her to make sure that they delivered. She wasn't interested in excuses. People knew what was expected of them in and had to produce or face consequences. This has been the case early in her career so why should it be any different now? Coddling of workers who weren't performing at 100% was akin to dereliction of duty.*

*But now her workers seemed to be up in arms. Complaints about her treatment of them were plentiful. Feedback from Paul indicated that they didn't feel safe bringing their concerns to Anne, felt she talked down to them, and that there was no pleasing her. They described her as incessantly critical, unforgiving of mistakes, and never appreciative of their effort. Furthermore, she never seemed aware of a sick husband, a child graduating from college, a new baby in the family, or personal difficulties with anxiety or depression. They described her as "cold and unfeeling."*

*Anne felt deeply hurt by those last comments. Didn't they know how much she cared about them? It was just that the boss is supposed to be aloof. Doesn't everyone believe that? A boss wasn't supposed to get personal. She'd been taught that if a boss is too friendly, workers won't respect her. You had to maintain some distance, particularly when it became necessary to hand out criticism and punishment. At least these are the things she had believed. She wanted them to feel good about her and about their work. But now the opposite was true, and she hadn't seen it coming. Where had she gone wrong?*

*Anne proved very coachable. She bought into the definition of leadership as "the Art of influence." She wanted very much to be a manager who influenced people to produce extraordinary results, rather than someone who commanded and micromanaged, leaving workers resentful and demotivated. Very importantly, Anne was open to feedback.*

We began with a 360° feedback instrument, allowing direct reports, colleagues, and supervisors to give her specific feedback on several leadership dimensions. Their observations were then compared with her self-assessment. In some areas she saw herself very much the way other people saw her. In other areas she was quite surprised. We all have our blind spots. The best we can do is to be open to feedback. It's essential for personal growth.

Anne was up to it. She used the feedback to make needed changes and was very pleased with the results. Three months later, another round of feedback showed perceptions changing. She was being viewed as a leader, seen as more approachable, more human. Most importantly, her office became more productive, and workers began expressing much greater satisfaction in their work and work environment. Anne was able to change some mental models of how managers should behave. New beliefs seemed awkward that first, but with obvious successes, follow-through

became easier and more natural. At the end of six months Anne had become one of the most respected managers in the organization and seemed sure to move up.

Crucial to the success was pinpointing Anne as a Quadrant III manager. The crucial factor making all the difference was a somewhat suppressed basic caring for people. That being the case, all that was needed was a willingness to be coached and success was assured. If she had been a true “Bully Boss” coming from Quadrant I or II, the outcome would have been for different and our recommendation would have been termination. As it turned out however, it was a clear win for Anne, her workers, and the organization.