

Are You Abusive, Cynical, or Exciting?

By David H. Maister

My website has an “Ask David” section where visitors can post questions anonymously. I respond online if the issue is of general interest. Here’s a question from April 2005 (slightly edited) followed by my much-expanded response:

It seems as if confrontational and abrasive leadership styles are more prevalent in professional firms today than in the past. It’s clear that people suffer in these tense environments. Why do you think this is happening?

Many, if not most, professional firms have indeed become less pleasant places to work in than they used to be. It is not uncommon for me to be told by partners (or “partner-level” people) that even though their firm has achieved impressive financial results, they have been accomplished by management consciously creating an environment of “fear and insecurity.”

The simplest explanation for the prevalence of this “abusive” management behavior is the simple fact that, in the right situation, it *works!*

It gets results without the delays and frustrations of having to worry about people’s emotional state, not to mention the difficulty of developing the requisite skills to “manage people.”

You can and do get higher performance out of individuals and organizations by being excessively demanding, terrifying in manner, and (apparently) completely lacking in human sensitivity. There is, in fact, a time and place for this approach.

Think of a military unit under fire. Social graces are not exactly a critical element in motivating the forces to action and achieving team cohesion. Quite the opposite! In fact, it has even been observed that bad language is sometimes used in such circumstances.

Using this approach does *not* mean you are being insensitive to people’s emotions. Sergeant majors know exactly what they are doing when they yell at raw recruits. Rather than ignoring human emotions, they are demonstrating a highly developed sense of what human beings will respond to. It’s just that a different decision is being made as to *which* emotions to work on!

The same perspective can be gained by considering how you would interact with a child under your supervision who was about to put himself or herself in harm’s way.

Would you be a calm nurturer, entering into a Socratic dialogue (in baby talk, of course) that leads the child to a deep understanding that certain things in life should be avoided?

No, you'd almost certainly scream at the top of your lungs, "Don't TOUCH that!" and grab the child (roughly if necessary) to pull it to safety.

The child will cry bitter tears (as complaining employees and even partners also have a tendency to do) but you will take great pride in the fact that you did the *right* thing. Appropriately, you will reassure yourself that more was accomplished by focusing on the outcome and not caring *at all* about the manner in which it was accomplished.

It's not a matter of being unfeeling, but of matching the appropriate temperament and style to the task.

Do we need results *now*? Do we have to show immediate results to please Wall Street? Are our heavy-hitting rainmaker partners threatening to leave us if we don't get firm profits up by raising the demands on everyone else?

Well, these situations are exactly like the baby putting its hand in the fire. This is no time for niceties.

At least that's how the "yellers" justify their behavior. In reality, it may just be that they are "Do it my way or take the highway" people. But they can make a good case that their way is mandated by the situation.

We truly will get the best and, more important, the *quickest* results, they will argue, by inaugurating a reign of terror, instituting iron discipline, and putting in positions of influence people who know how to intimidate, scare, and cow otherwise intelligent people.

This is the best, most effective way to make it happen — once.

The "Exciting" Alternative

The problem with this approach is that if it is used too frequently or, as in many professional firms, continuously, it begins to feel as if one is living in a world of continuous, nonstop, extended battles and wars, otherwise known as business as usual. Over time, different effects begin to result.

As every parent knows, yelling and screaming, repeated too often, lose a little of their effectiveness and are increasingly resented. Nonstop battle ("We just had our greatest year ever, so we are raising next year's targets by 15 percent!") leads to fatigue and shellshock.

With lessened effectiveness comes the temptation (rarely resisted) to escalate the yelling and screaming in order to achieve the same results. Resentment builds even further.

People become worn out, suffer burnout, and leave, and the troops' efforts, rather than rising to the rallying cry one more time, slump back into compliance (to avoid abuse), not the pursuit of excellence. The culture of the organization becomes miserable, if not poisonous. But take heart. None of this matters if you don't care about tomorrow.

There is another way. I began my book *Practice What You Preach* (Free Press, 2001) with the simple proposition: If you (first) energize and excite your people about the work they do (and the clients they do it for), they will serve your clients better, and, in turn, the clients will then (and perhaps only then) give you superior financial rewards.

I was delighted when my statistical data reaffirmed that firms following this

sequence made (on average) the most money and grew the fastest. I could truly show that the key to superior profits was to “turn the staff on.”

Note that the test is not, “Are your people happy?” That’s nice, but not necessarily a profit determinant. What my data show is that the vital ingredient is the energy that comes from a sense of meaning or purpose and a common cause, direction, or mission.

The test is not whether your company *has* an official mission. The test is whether or not the individuals within your organization *act zealously* about that mission.

These results are consistent with, if not identical to, the approaches advocated by many modern business authors such as Tom Peters, Jim Collins, and James Heskett, in his book, *The Service Profit Chain*.

The conclusions always sound fine and dandy. Many people would be willing to accept that “turning people on” is a great approach and, in time, would lead to greater accomplishments than the “get it done at all costs” approach.

But you’d only take this approach if you (a) truly wanted to get somewhere in the future, (b) were willing to incur costs today to invest to get there, (c) had patience and got your need for instant gratification under control, and (d) were more interested in building something new (a career, a firm, a skill, an achievement) than exploiting what was immediately available.

Those are a lot of conditions to meet! And most of them are about time and time orientation. To succeed by means of exciting your people, you must have

some rare qualities: the patience and faith to stay the course.

Meet the Cynics

In the years since my book’s publication, I have run countless seminars exploring the conclusion that an excited, energized organization is demonstrably the key to superior financial returns.

These discussions have not always gone well. Apparently, there’s something scary about the idea. The discomfort with, and resistance to, the conclusions take many shapes.

Among the questions I hear are the following:

a) If we excel at turning our people on, don’t we run the risk of creating unfulfillable expectations? They might expect to get promoted fast, and then, since we might not have the space for them, they will leave.

b) Anyway, what’s wrong with people not being turned on? Don’t you need a certain number of people who are cruising (and *not* trying to go somewhere) in order to take care of the repetitive work that always needs to be done? Can’t we just pay them less?

c) The people writing books say we will make more money if we require everyone to learn and grow. But *can* everyone learn and grow, or even become excited? Do we *want* them all to be ambitious, dynamic? Don’t we make money off employees (and partners) who will just do their job and not expect too much of the rest of us?

d) We can make a lot of money by just getting people to work harder. Why can’t we just set higher financial targets and enforce them, instead of worrying about things like inspiration and motivation?

e) Time spent managing people could be spent getting out, winning clients, and billing hours. Isn't this a more certain path to success than spending valuable time trying to motivate people?

f) In books like *Good to Great*, business authors say that successful firms have an ideology and live up to high standards, even if it costs them something in the short run. In today's world, is this really possible to do? Can we actually afford to incur short-term costs to enforce a principle of high standards? Can't good enough be good enough?

g) In the recent past, in down times, people hoarded work they should not have held on to in order to look busy, because management penalized people who were underutilized. How can management now credibly convince them that the path to success is to delegate familiar work in order to start "growing their skills"? Won't people think this leaves them exposed? Would they ever trust the management of our firm to support them through a transition or an investment period?

People who ask questions like these are not abusive, abrasive, or confrontational. But they *are* cynics and skeptics. They just think there's a (low) limit to what can practically be done in the "real" world. They say that they believe in principle in certain things (and may even include them in their own internal speeches and presentations) but think that, on any given day, other forces actually determine what can realistically be done.

The questions posed above are all valid, and there are answers to each of them given in the books I have cited. (I won't repeat them here.)

The problem the cynics create by focusing on the questions much more profound. The problem is that, by being so evidently "pragmatic," they elicit precisely the same reaction from those they manage. If management doesn't really care about excitement, excellence, and our mission, why then should we?

Consider the message, the hidden assumptions, being communicated by these statements:

"We don't want you (employees or junior partners) to expect us to make any promises about your career progress. If you want to act as if you have a job, not a career, that's OK with us, we'll just respond with appropriate pay decisions. We think we've hired some people who are incapable of learning and growing. We just want you to keep your heads down and hit higher work volumes. And we're too busy with other activities to spend any time managing you."

Even if they are never actually said out loud, these thought processes are immediately obvious in managers who think this way. Managers who have these "yes, but" attitudes send off very clear signals to those they manage.

And if your people think that you have attitudes reflected in the above statements, how do you think they are going to respond? Will you truly be able to achieve the excellence goals you say you want to aim for?

Cynics and skeptics in managerial positions are more dangerous even than the abusers.

Through their cynicism they are the people who allow the abusers to be tolerated! ("Can we really afford to tackle the big hitter who refuses to show up for meetings?") Because of their

tolerance, the abusers are never confronted and things never improve.

Cynics and skeptics may not be as explicitly offensive as the abusers, but alas, they are more common.

Creating Excitement

The majority of professional firms, like most businesses in all industries, have become principle-free zones. There's hardly a thing (as long as it's legal, strictly speaking) most firms would not do for current cash.

As noted previously, one can prove that having a firm where people treat each other with respect will in the long run make you more money. Indeed, respect is one of the main profit drivers. But there's that escape clause—"in the long run."

In the short run, I know only a few (terrific) firms that would discipline a major rainmaker if he or she didn't treat people with respect. Short-term cash trumps any strategy that you have to work at for a future benefit!

As may be seen in the "Ask David" section of my website, I keep getting people contacting me who say things like "I like what you wrote in *True Professionalism* and *Practice What You Preach*, but do any real-world firms actually operate that way?"

It seems we are all seeking something that may exist out there but which appears to be incredibly scarce: a firm that actually has principles and standards and doesn't compromise them for short-term expediency.

Why are such firms scarce? Why is all the bad behavior becoming more common? Because our culture in general

and business at large, not excepting the professions, is becoming more and more short-term oriented.

For all of the grandiose talk of strategy and vision and plans, what you see in professional firms is a philosophy that says, "Let me worry about this day, this week, this month, *maybe* this year. I'm under too much pressure to worry about next year."

Let's be honest. It's not just "those guys" at the top thinking and acting this way. It's everybody. All of us. You and I included. Of course, it's always easier to identify it in the other person.

For example, in almost every firm I work for, in every profession, in every country around the world, someone complains that the new generation of recruits is different from the way we were at that age. They tell me that the new generation wants instant gratification and they are not prepared to put in their time; they have no loyalty.

In other words, these senior people seem to be complaining, those awful kids are thinking short-term and not responding to our visions of the future rewards that would come from sacrificing their personal lives for (at least) the time it takes to become partner.

And clients can be even worse. Instead of looking for trusting relationships, they keep asking, "What have you done for me lately?" Long-term thinking is not what clients are showing. Instead of looking to build relationships, clients are putting consultants and auditors in place to design purchasing processes and competitive bid situations to extract the maximum juice from their vendors at minimum cost.

So, don't just blame the leaders, managers, and bosses. We're *all* short-term thinkers now.

How Did We Get Here?

Why have we become this way, as a society? That I don't know. Maybe we should blame MTV and the advertising community for training us to shorten our attention spans. Maybe we should blame me and my management consulting colleagues for convincing the professions that they needed to become more "businesslike" (without actually understanding what that means), leading to obscene caricatures of sometimes disgusting leadership behaviors being excused in the name of expediency.

I don't (yet) know how to get short-term thinkers to become long-term thinkers. I've tried to be convincing that the way you get the most success is to focus on getting better, not on getting more. But people don't buy it.

Getting better takes effort and work and consistency and patience. They can see all around them the screamers succeeding at getting more by intimidating people (including clients, in some cases) into giving them what they want.

I've tried logic. It hasn't worked well on non-believers. I've tried presenting conclusive data. It hasn't worked well on non-believers. I've tried appealing to matters of principle, standards, values, and meaning. It hasn't worked well on non-believers.

I no longer believe people can be "converted" on this topic – preferred styles seemed to be well entrenched in people's personalities long before the age at which I meet them. The best

anyone can do, probably, is to help the believers develop the courage to implement what they already believe.

It's probably not going to change much except among the determined, principled few who, fortunately, are out there!

To find out what you are and your firm is, conduct a quick poll at your next group (or firm) meeting. Show them these three categories, describing a firm or group:

- (a) This place is abusive, confrontational, abrasive, fear-inducing.
- (b) We talk a good game of togetherness, idealism, and high standards, but the truth is we're pragmatists. Cash wins!
- (c) This is an energizing, motivating, inspiring place to work. We do what's best for the long term and act in accordance with our declared principles.

Ask everyone how they would describe your environment, allocating 100 points. They can put all their points in one group if that's what they firmly believe you are all the time, or they can spread them around if they think you are a mixture. The results may surprise you.



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