Dealing with Difficult Supervisors

Neil Dodgson
Dean, Faculty of Graduate Research

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF
WELLINGTON
TE HERENGA WAKA

The material in this talk is taken from a range of online sources but draws most heavily from Dr Laura Cranshaw's "Taming the Abrasive Manager: How to End Unnecessary Roughness in the Workplace" [2007]. This was recommended to me by Jon Everest, an experienced mediator who runs the Employee Advisory and Resolution Service (EARS Te Rauawa) at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW).

Cranshaw, in collaboration with David Wright, has written a short (20-page), readable summary of her book, available on her website at:
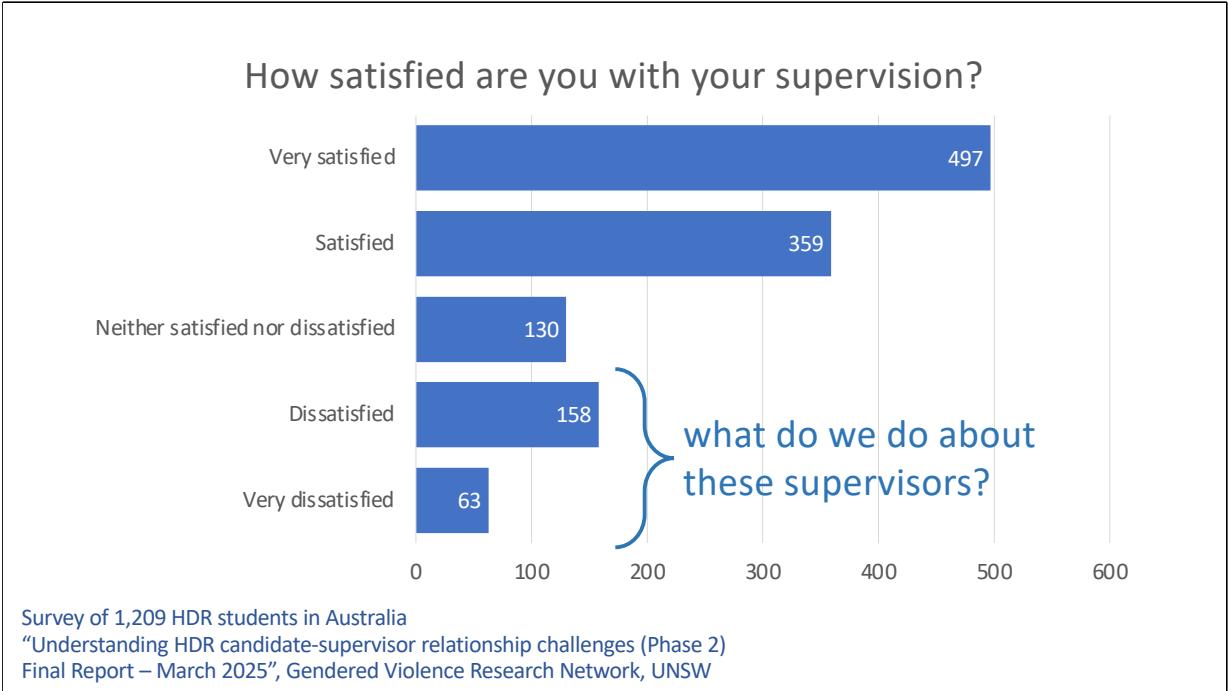https://www.bosswhispering.com/Winners-Who-Become_Losers-Chapter.pdf
This amplifies a lot of the material in this talk and should take about 15 minutes to read.

Cranshaw's book is available as an e-book from O'Reilly (and should be free through your University's institutional subscription): https://learning.oreilly.com/library/view/taming-the-abrasive/9780787988371/

Cranshaw's consulting website is at: https://www.bosswhispering.com/

VUW's EARS Te Rauawa website is at:
https://www.wgtn.ac.nz/restorative-justice/ears

How satisfied are you with your supervision?

Very satisfied	497
Satisfied	359
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	130
Dissatisfied	158
Very dissatisfied	63

what do we do about these supervisors?

Survey of 1,209 HDR students in Australia
"Understanding HDR candidate-supervisor relationship challenges (Phase 2)
Final Report – March 2025", Gendered Violence Research Network, UNSW

This is from the March 2025 survey of 1200 HDR students in Australia. 18% of them are dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their supervision. While there are many reasons why someone might be unhappy, it does reveal that there must be a good number of supervisors who are not doing what we expect. What do we do about those supervisors?

The case of Alan Cooper

Alan Cooper [born 1966] is an evolutionary molecular biologist and an ancient DNA researcher. Cooper was a very influential, well published, and widely-cited academic. He is a significant figure in the field of ancient DNA, involved in many of the early discoveries in the field. He was the inaugural director of both the Henry Wellcome Ancient Biomolecules Centre at the University of Oxford (2001–2005) and the Australian Centre for Ancient DNA at the University of Adelaide (2005–2019). Cooper had an *h*-index of 86 and over 29,000 citations [Google Scholar, 1/12/2020].

In December 2019 he was dismissed from the University of Adelaide for serious misconduct

The case of Alan Cooper

- **The University of Adelaide has fired Alan Cooper**, the high-profile leader of its Australian Centre for Ancient DNA, for "serious misconduct". His dismissal follows **allegations that Cooper bullied staff and students**, and an investigation into the 'culture' of the centre.

- Cooper told *Nature* that **he rejects the allegation that he was a bully.** "I work at the highest international levels, and want my students and staff to do the same. **I've occasionally been too blunt in my language and actions, and regret this — but it was never bullying,**"

Nature, 20 December 2019

The quotes on this slide indicate the problem: the University dismissed Cooper partly on evidence of bullying, while Cooper says that it was not bullying and, essentially, that he had done nothing significantly wrong. This is one of the challenges that we face: what looks like bullying to one person is seen by the perpetrator as appropriate behaviour that gets results. In Cooper's case, he clearly got academic results, with all of that excellent research, but he appears to have left a trail of very unhappy PhD students.

[a former student reports] Cooper would yell at him alone or in front of colleagues during lab meetings and criticize his work. "It was pretty much an everyday occurrence"

Cooper often targeted the most vulnerable people in the lab, … "He was selective over who he'd pick on. They wouldn't bite back too much" [a senior researcher]

[a researcher recalls] … on several occasions hearing Cooper's shouting from behind his closed office door, and was himself yelled at a number of times while seated in front of Cooper's desk. "He'd kind of stalk and walk a bit, warming up and then the door would close and he'd be behind you and it was actually quite intimidating, and then the shouting and yelling would start," he says.

Cooper's criticisms of students' work was unconstructive and tinged with personal insults…
…being shamed in meetings was so frequent that [students] were surprised when they came out of one unscathed. "I was frequently paralysed by anxiety and feelings of inadequacy."

Bullying…

…is **inappropriate behaviour** that affects mental state
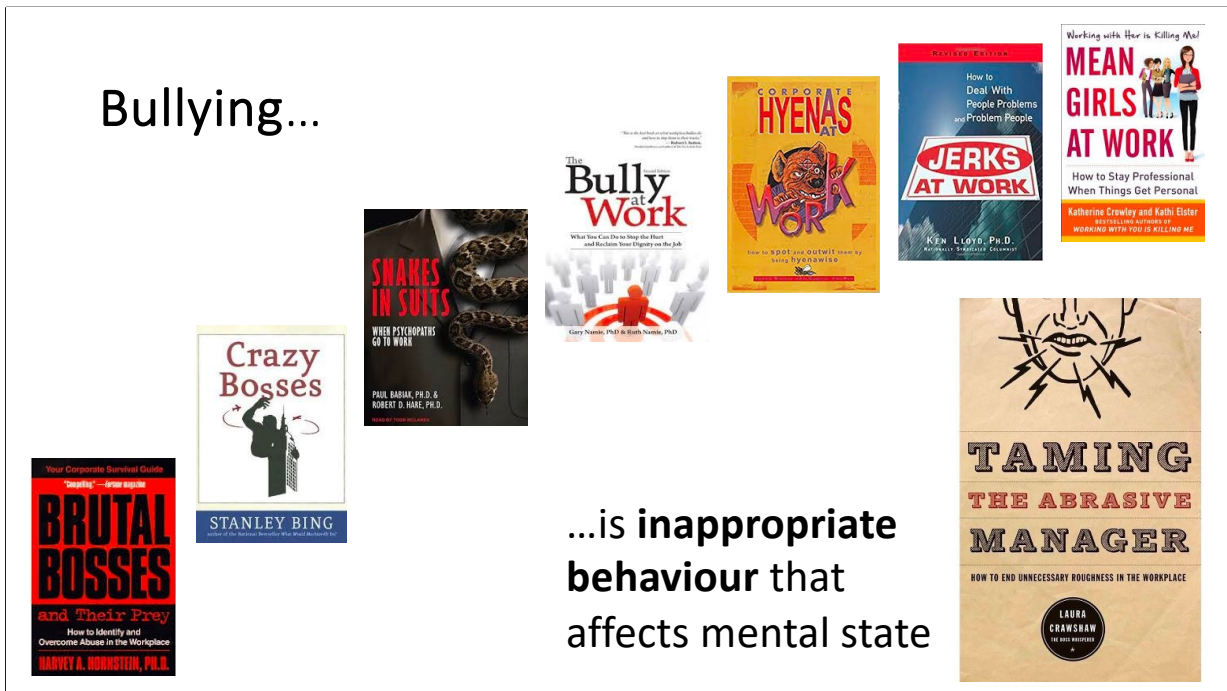
So let's look at the literature.

There are many books on how to handle the *impact* of bullying managers [including the catchy titles: *Jerks at Work* (Lloyd, 1999), *The Bully at Work* (Namie & Namie, 2003), *Corporate Hyenas at Work* (Marais & Herman, 1997), *Crazy Bosses* (Bing, 1992), *Snakes in Suits* (Babiak & Hare, 2006), and *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey* (Hornstein, 1996)]. The titles of the books on this slide shows a trend that we tend to demonise those who inflict pain on others. [Cranshaw argues that this is irresponsible and unhelpful. We would not have a book on child abuse called "Brutal Parents and their Prey". Why do we not take employee-abuse as seriously as child abuse or partner abuse?]

Bullying is inappropriate behaviour that affects mental state. We do not want students to be in a position where they are negatively affected by poor behaviour. Unfortunately, these books tend to explain how to work around bullying rather than how to tackle it. As Deans we need to think about how we can manage the bully.

I found Cranshaw's "Taming the Abrasive Manager" to be insightful as to what we can actually do.

First, we will dispense with the word "bullying". We all know what bullying is, but it is almost impossible to get someone to *admit* to being a bully. Much more helpful to speak of "inappropriate behaviour". Most people are OK about owning up to inappropriate behaviour but none of us want to be called a bully. Cranshaw uses the word "abrasive" as being descriptive without being disrespectful, so we are talking about **abrasive supervisors**.

Categorising supervisor's behaviour
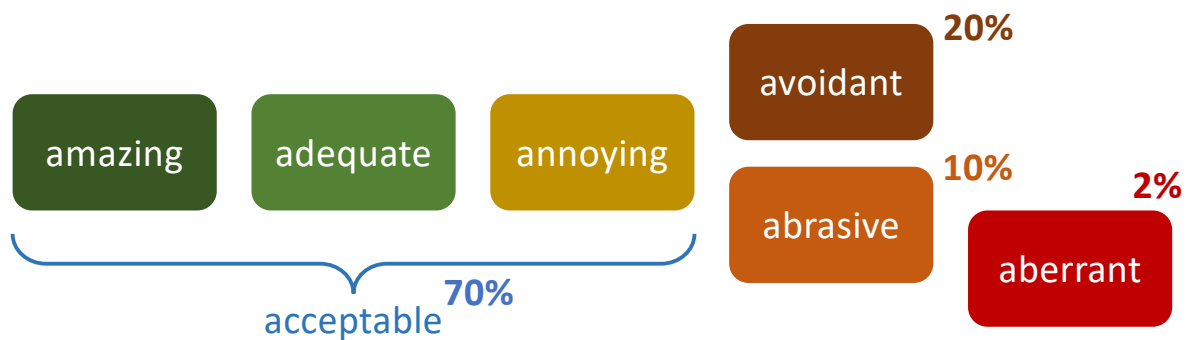
amazing · adequate · annoying — acceptable 70%

avoidant 20%
abrasive 10%
aberrant 2%

"Taming the Abrasive Manager: How to End Unnecessary Roughness in the Workplace",
Laura Cranshaw, Jossey-Bass (Wiley), 2007

We can group supervisors into various categories from the amazing to the aberrant

amazing
> we wish all supervisors were like this but they are only a small minority

adequate
> insightful enough to behave consistently in ways that students and colleagues perceive as respectful

annoying
> cause mild, temporary irritation in their students and colleagues but not sufficient to damage work relationships or organisational functioning – irritating but harmless

avoidant
> isolate themselves physically and emotionally, distant, unresponsive, uninterested, avoid any difficult interactions – student distress comes from neglect

abrasive
> rub people up the wrong way, can be aggressive (ranging from mild offence to open attack), damage work relationships to the point of disrupting organisation functioning – harmful, can produce intense emotional distress

aberrant
> psychologically abnormal, may exhibit symptoms of paranoia, narcissism and sociopathy, extreme and socially deviant behaviour – wreak havoc

I am going to tell you that the amazing, adequate and annoying supervisors are all exhibiting acceptable behaviour. It is the three categories on the right that we need to concentrate on.

The percentages on the chart are estimates from the survey of 1,209 HDR students in Australia, except for the 2% aberrant which is from Cranshaw's work.

The annoying supervisor

- Is not a problem

- Does not affect student's long-term mental state

- But when does annoying shade into abrasive or avoidant?

- It's in the eye of the beholder…

Why is the annoying supervisor not a problem? Because, while annoying, the student can still work effectively and the behaviour does not affect the student's long-term mental state. Everyone is annoying at some point.

But the boundary between annoying and abrasive is different for different people. What I find annoying you may find abrasive. What I shrug off as irrelevant may have a lasting impact on your mental state and your ability to work.

You cannot judge "abrasive behaviour" by your own standards. Saying to someone "you need to develop a thicker skin" can help if the behaviour only just shades into abrasive, as it allows your listener to work on moving their internal annoying/abrasive boundary a little, But saying this would be counter-productive if you are advising someone who is seriously affected by the behaviour, because they are too far from the annoying/abrasive boundary to make that mental adjustment.

The avoidant supervisor

- Neglects their students

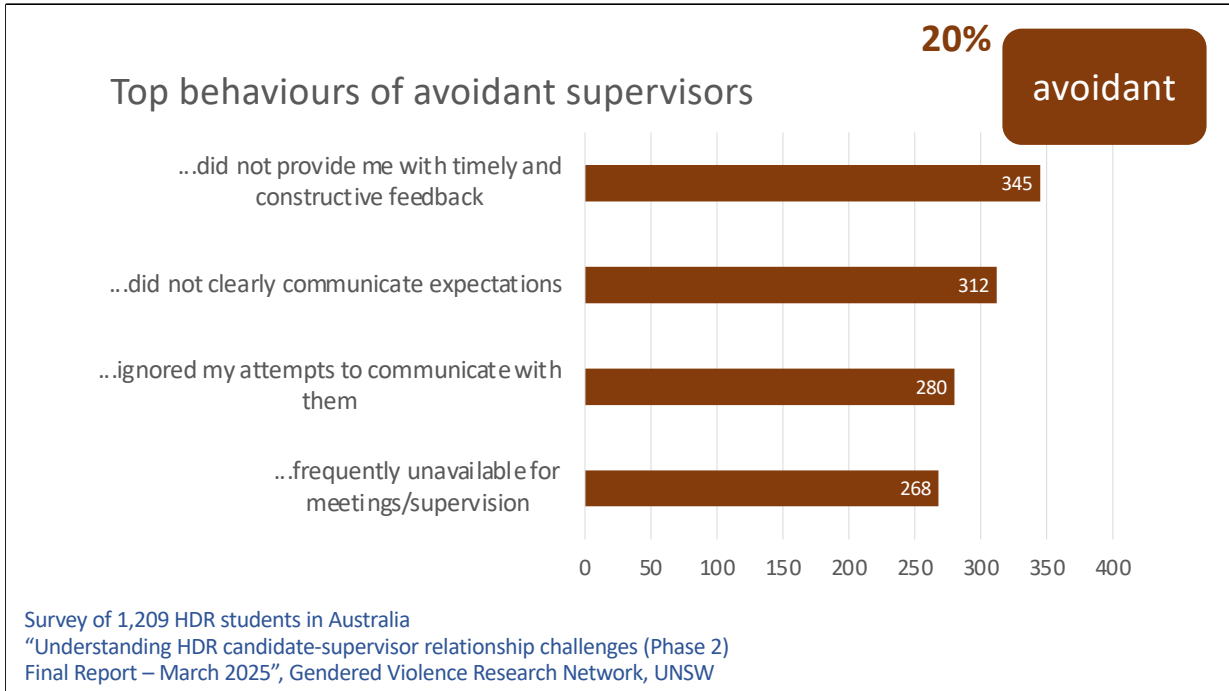- Unresponsive, uninterested, avoids difficult interactions, distant

Avoidant supervisors are as problematic as abrasive ones.

We have all come across the student who cannot get in touch with their supervisor, whose supervisor never responds.

We can excuse avoidant supervisors by saying "they are very busy". We need to avoid making excuses: we are all busy. Most supervisors are able to schedule time to do the things that their students need, are interested in their students, and are able to handle difficult conversations.

Avoidant supervisors are one type of problem, and the evidence is that they are more common than abrasive supervisors so, when considering how we tackle inappropriate behaviour, we'd get considerable mileage out of tackling this. A University can provide training to help those who are avoidant supervisors. If the avoidant supervisor is aware of their behaviour but does not know how to change, then it can be helpful for them to attend group training in, for example, how to have "courageous conversations". If the avoidant supervisor is unaware then one-on-one coaching is likely to be needed.

20%

avoidant

Top behaviours of avoidant supervisors

Behaviour	Value
...did not provide me with timely and constructive feedback	345
...did not clearly communicate expectations	312
...ignored my attempts to communicate with them	280
...frequently unavailable for meetings/supervision	268

(x-axis: 0, 50, 100, 150, 200, 250, 300, 350, 400)

Survey of 1,209 HDR students in Australia
"Understanding HDR candidate-supervisor relationship challenges (Phase 2)
Final Report – March 2025", Gendered Violence Research Network, UNSW

In that survey of 1200 HDR students, over a quarter said that their supervisor does not provide timely and constructive feedback. More worrying is the bottom two bars: a quarter of students had supervisors that ignored their attempts to communicate or were frequently unavailable.

That's inappropriate and, if it is a regular behaviour, it is passive bullying that needs to be called out.

Top behaviours of abrasive supervisors

10% abrasive
2% aberrant

- ...made me feel belittled or humiliated — 192
- ...was aggressive or intimidating in their comments or conduct — 123
- ...convened with others in a way that made me feel intimidated — 77
- ...used abusive, insulting or offensive language — 65

(x-axis: 0, 50, 100, 150, 200, 250)

Survey of 1,209 HDR students in Australia
"Understanding HDR candidate-supervisor relationship challenges (Phase 2)
Final Report – March 2025", Gendered Violence Research Network, UNSW

The information here is worrying, even if we acknowledge that some of the complaints may be about "annoying" supervisors rather than "abrasive" or "aberrant".

15% of our supervisors have belittled or humiliated their students
10% of our students have had supervisors who are aggressive, intimidating, abusive or insulting.

How can we handle this?

It depends on whether you are dealing with an abrasive personality or an aberrant personality. An abrasive personality is one that can change. An aberrant one is one who suffers from a mental health condition that makes them unable to change.

The aberrant supervisor

- Exhibits symptoms of psychological disorder
  - narcissism, sociopathy, paranoia
- Extremely challenging to deal with
  - their mental model of the world does not match reality
- Need to be managed out or contained
  - we *should* be able to deal with inappropriate behaviour through the normal human practice of discussing challenges and having "courageous conversations"
  - *but* aberrant personalities will not budge

Aberrant supervisors are the minority that will not respond to any attempt to change them. Cranshaw says [Ch. 6] that, in one study, 80% of perpetrators indicated that they had no intention of hurting others' feelings, implying that no more than 20% of perpetrators fall into the aberrant category: the 80% *can* be helped.

That means that about 2% of your academic staff are likely to be aberrant and you will find it very difficult to get any traction with dealing with them. But the 8–10% who are merely abrasive can be helped.

Narcissists are arrogant, have a grandiose sense of their own status, lack empathy, exploit others, and display a strong sense of entitlement. "Narcissists gravitate to organisations that are highly hierarchical and where they can rise to the top and have power over others. The top vocations that are attractive to narcissists are: **academia**, corporate management, entertainment, medicine, politics and sport." — Sam Vaknin

Behaviours: "A narcissist's weapon of choice is often verbal: slander, lies, playing the victim in flipped tales of who was the victim and who was the abuser, gossip, rage, verbal abuse, and intentional infliction of emotional pain." — Gail Meyers

Sociopaths do not feel empathy towards others, show no genuine remorse and do not feel shame or guilt. They are often charming and charismatic using these traits to gain the trust of those around them and convince people they are 'normal'.

Paranoia is mistrust and suspicion so intense that it interferes with thought patterns, behaviour, and daily functioning.
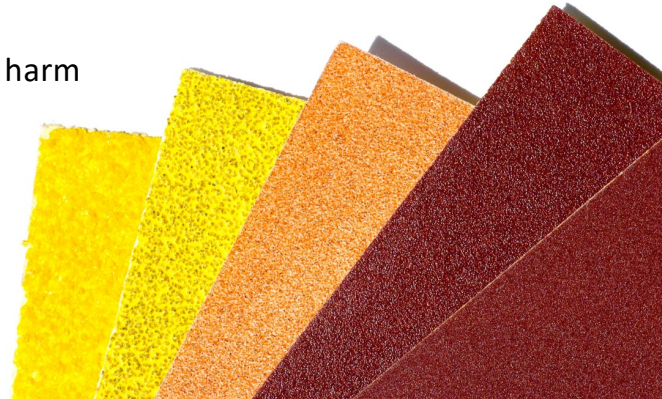
Abrasive behaviour

- The perpetrator is generally oblivious to the impact of their behaviour

- The perpetrator does not intend to cause harm

- The behaviour is treatable

"Taming the Abrasive Manager: How to End Unnecessary Roughness in the Workplace", Laura Cranshaw, Jossey-Bass (Wiley), 2007

Let us assume that we are dealing with an *abrasive*, rather than *aberrant*, supervisor. That is: we are dealing with someone who would be willing to change if only they were aware of the problem.

People are quick to make assumptions about other people's behaviour.
The assumptions that are listed on this slide would be true of an *aberrant* supervisor: an aberrant supervisors knows exactly what they are doing and they are not generally open to change.

But Cranshaw's experience is that an abrasive supervisor is unaware of their impact on others. You *can't* care about something *you don't see* and *don't understand*.

Can they be treated? Can they change? Absolutely. We know alcoholics can stop drinking. We know that parents can stop abusing their children. We also know that it is a challenging road to change these behaviours. The same is true for inappropriate behaviour at work.

Research about abrasive behaviour

- Driven by fear of being seen as incompetent
- Blind to their impact on others

How to address abrasive behaviour

- Make them see what they do
- Make them care enough to change
- Offer help

Where the *aberrant* supervisor is driven by an over-inflated version of their own self-worth, the *abrasive* supervisor is driven by a fear that they are not worthy. It is a fight-or-flight response: the abrasive supervisor is frightened and they fight the fright by being abrasive to those under their control.

Where an *adequate* supervisor would understand the impact of their behaviour on others (and adjust accordingly), an *abrasive* supervisor is blind to their impact on others.

Cranshaw reports that most abrasive managers, when confronted with solid evidence of the impact of their behaviour, are willing to change their behaviour.

See Cranshaw Ch.9–10 for practical approaches and the challenges that a manager will face in addressing abrasive behaviour.

As with alcoholics, fixing the problem is not done through a one-off meeting or through group training sessions. Cranshaw says that she usually uses a series of ten meetings when she is coaching abrasive managers, but can generally see improvements after the third session.
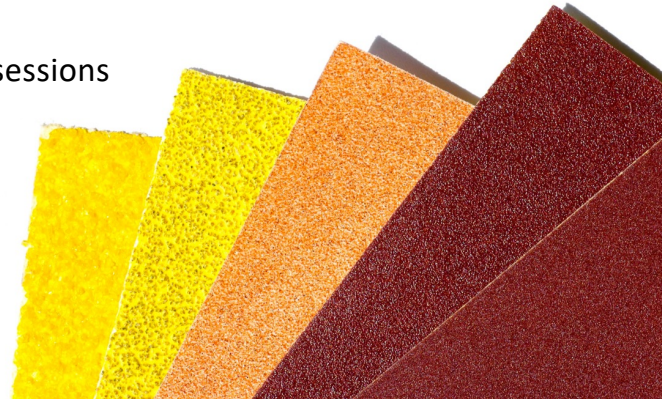
The problem with tackling this

- Sending someone on a group training course will not work

- Needs one-to-one training over multiple sessions

"Taming the Abrasive Manager: How to End Unnecessary Roughness in the Workplace", Laura Cranshaw, Jossey-Bass (Wiley), 2007

Training will go *some* way to preventing the problem but are not the way to address permanently the challenge of the truly abrasive supervisor, that person who sits at the back of the training and complains that they are "forced to waste time with all of this touchy-feely bull****." The only way to tackle this attitude long-term is through one-on-one coaching.

Management's response

- Never ignore complaints

  but only half of students complain*

  and less than 10% complain formally*

- Never ignore or tolerate problem behaviour
  - Intervene early
  - Set limits and consequences
  - Use educative and restorative practices
  - Offer help through one-on-one coaching

*Survey of 1,209 HDR students in Australia
"Understanding HDR candidate-supervisor relationship challenges (Phase 2)
Final Report – March 2025", Gendered Violence Research Network, UNSW
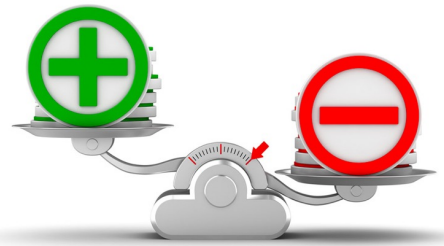
If you saw bullying in the playground, you would address it immediately, not wait until the parents wrote a formal letter of complaint.

You do not tackle bullying by bullying back.

As an employer you have three choices:
1. Do nothing and pay the price of lost productivity and human suffering
2. Do damage control by isolating or terminating the abrasive leader
3. Intervene by setting limits and consequences and offering help through coaching

An appropriate management response means that
- student suffering ends because they and their supervisor have been given tools for how to deal with the problem
- students respond favourably to their "new" supervisor
- students regard the University favourably for having intervened
- supervisor is grateful to the University for a "second chance"
- University reduces potential for litigation, attrition and anti-University sentiment
- University retains supervisor's expertise

No-one should pretend that this is easy.

How does management really respond?

- denial

    "I cannot believe Prof. X would do that" [1]

    "we haven't had a formal complaint" [2]

- displacement

    "the student doesn't want us to take action" [3]

- delay

    "the supervisor is under a lot of stress right now" [4]

    "let's wait and see if it happens again" [5]

- referral

    "the Head of Department doesn't want to rock the boat" [6]

    "the Dean should really be the one to deal with this" [7]

Managers will flee the task of handling abrasive bosses because they're afraid of doing harm *to* or being harmed *by* these aggressive individuals. [Cranshaw, Ch.7]

With regard to the specific excuses:
1. Even if you cannot believe it, you need to investigate it.
2. You do not need to have a formal complaint before you take action against an employee. Many students would never dare put in a formal complaint. There are several things you can do that do not require a full formal complaints process.
3. If the student doesn't want action, then it needs to be made clear to the student that nothing can change. Even if the student does not want action to be taken, it may be necessary to take action (cf. policies on sexual harassment, see next slide).
4. Being under a lot of stress can, perhaps, excuse *annoying* behaviour, but it should never be put up as an excuse for *repeated* abrasive behaviour.
5. A single instance is not bullying. Multiple instances are. You should not use the "wait and see" approach if you have evidence of multiple instances. If it is serious, a single instance should lead to immediate action.
6. The Head of Department's job is to manage and they should do so. This can be challenging because of personnel dynamics. HR should be able to provide support and it is vital that the Head's manager supports them in taking action.
7. Inappropriate behaviour should be dealt with by the line management structure. A Head can refer the problem up the chain (provided their manager *will* deal with it) but should not pass it off to someone who has no management responsibility for the staff member.

How do we improve our response?

- Create a values culture

- Train supervisors

- Intervene with one-on-one coaching

Implement a culture where appropriate behaviour is encouraged. Make it clear that inappropriate behaviour is not tolerated and *do not tolerate it*. Demonstrate how a values culture leads to improved outcomes, i.e., have a business case that explains to those who are not touchy-feely how and why a values culture works in their favour.

Train supervisors in behavioural expectations and in how to deal with conflict to avoid the problems in the first place. Train Heads of Department and managers in how to deal with inappropriate behaviour. Cranshaw Ch.9–10 has details on how managers should handle this.

All our universities already have mechanisms for handling formal complaints. We need to re-visit our mechanisms for handling informal complaints and see how well we are doing.

> For example, my university has a sexual harassment policy where students can make informal complaints and, if sufficient of these are made against the same person, an investigation can be made even if no action was requested on each single complaint. This could possibly be adapted for handling bullying.

Having a values culture and training will go *some* way to preventing the problem but are not the way to address permanently the challenge of the truly abrasive supervisor, that person will need intensive one-on-one coaching.

Questions for discussion

1. How many **formal** complaints of bullying of doctoral students have you had in the past five years?

2. How many **informal** complaints of bullying do you estimate come to the attention of the HDR Office, in one way or another, each year?

3. What processes does your university have in place for handling **informal** complaints? Do they work?

4. Have you a case study of bullying where your university has tried to address the issue? What happened?