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Abrasive Leaders Who Changed: Learning From Their Experience

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Abrasive Leaders Who Changed: Learning from Their Experience

Abstract

Purpose—The purpose of this paper is to understand the experience of three formerly abrasive leaders who improved their conduct and management strategies following a workplace intervention.

Design/methodology/approach—Narrative inquiry, a personal and collaborative research method, revealed the experience of three leaders in their shift from destructive behaviors. Concepts from adult development, specifically Kegan's constructive-development theory (CDT) and Mezirow's transformative learning theory (TL) provided a lens to better understand the leaders' personal development.

Findings— This study culminated with three co-composed narrative accounts and an analysis of narrative threads. The focus of this paper is the interpretive narrative thread analysis. The developmental experience of these three leaders included: disruption, awakening, and equipping.

Implications for theory and practice—This initial exploratory study contributes to CDT and TL by suggesting leader interpersonal development is an intensely emotional experience that transcends the mechanics of developmental stages. In practice, this study indicates abrasive leaders may improve their conduct and management strategies with organizational support, including supervisor intervention, and specialized professionals.

Research limitations/implications—This study included three leaders. The experience of these leaders may not be representative of other formerly abrasive leaders.

Originality/value—This paper offers insight for scholars and HR professionals on the emotionally intense experiential journey of leaders who improved their interpersonal conduct. This study introduces concepts from CDT and TL into the study of workplace psychological

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aggression (WPA) and it expands the limited knowledge of how HR can support positive perpetrator change.

Keywords—workplace bullying, perpetrator, abrasive behavior, adult development theory, workplace intervention, narrative inquiry

Paper type—Research paper

Personnel Review

1
2
3 “We were just trying to do too much.... We were sometimes almost victimized by our success....

4
5 We created a ton of challenging goals which we all felt compelled to make but it just wasn't

6
7 humane.... While I never intentionally threatened anybody, I think it was perceived.... My

8
9 behavior was definitely counter to the culture that I helped to create and would want.”

10
11 Vincent¹, President and CEO (~~Redacted~~) (Tucker, 2019)

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16
17 Organizations are faced with an unsettling reality: Workplace psychological aggression
18
19 (WPA) is endemic (Potter *et al.*, 2016) and current Human Resource Management (HRM)
20
21 practices are seemingly ineffective (Lockhart and Bhanugopan, 2019; Potter, *et al.*, 2016). WPA,
22
23 recognized as a global phenomenon, is studied across numerous disciplines using a variety of
24
25 conceptual terms (e.g., incivility, bullying, abusive supervision, psychopathic leader; Nielsen and
26
27 Einarsen, 2018) varying in degrees up to what Boddy (2018) calls the psychopathic bully. The
28
29 increasing interest in understanding this phenomenon (Martinko *et al.*, 2013) has resulted in
30
31 ample research on antecedents and outcomes of workplace bullying (e.g., Baillien *et al.*, 2011;
32
33 Balducci *et al.*, 2012; Hauge *et al.*, 2009; Nielsen and Einarsen, 2018). However, few studies
34
35 have focused on effective workplace interventions, fewer still on interventions with perpetrators
36
37 (Walsh, 2018) and none on the mechanisms of personal growth or recovery of the perpetrator.
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42 We wondered, excluding psychopathic leaders (Boddy, 2018; Boddy and Taplin, 2017),
43
44 can abrasive leaders change or are they just a lost cause? While literature on workplace bullying
45
46 on the whole ignores the perpetrator (Rai and Agarwal, 2015), the field of adult learning and
47
48 development (see for example, Kegan and Lahey, 2010, 2016; Mezirow, 1997) is based on the
49
50 notion that adults can and do change their conduct and attitudes. Understanding the mechanics of
51
52 the developmental experience of formerly abrasive leaders will inform adult development and
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3 learning theory by including a unique firsthand perspective not found in the literature: the
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5 organizational leader who had engaged in WPA and who has no (or few) current behavioral
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7 complaints.
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10 The purpose of this narrative study was to understand the developmental experience of
11
12 three formerly leaders who had improved their interpersonal conduct. The study had one research
13
14 question: How does a leader describe the movement away from his² use of abrasive behavior?
15
16 We used narrative inquiry to gain a nuanced understanding of how three leaders made sense of
17
18 their difficult journey of behavioral change. The leaders offered stories, reflections, and analysis
19
20 as each one inquired into his developmental experience. This study contributes evidence of the
21
22 role of emotions to Mezirow's (1997) transformative learning, and it suggests development is
23
24 more continuous than divided into distinct stages (Kegan and Lahey 2016) or phases (Mezirow
25
26 1997). The findings also provide practical insight into organizational interventions, HRM
27
28 policies, and leadership development practices that may be beneficial. Perhaps, in learning from
29
30 these leaders, scholars and practitioners will reconceptualize perpetrators of WPA and their
31
32 potential for positive change.
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37 Following a review of literature, we describe the research design explaining the inductive
38
39 narrative inquiry method. Next, we present the findings by introducing the leaders and the
40
41 narrative threads of disruption, awakening, and equipping. We then discuss organizational
42
43 factors in WPA, view the findings through the lens of constructive-development theory (CDT)
44
45 and transformative learning (TL), present contributions to CDT and TL, and offer practical
46
47 implications. Last, we ~~offer~~ limitations and future research.
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49

50 describe

51 **Literature review**
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3 To situate this article in the current literature and paint an adequate background, we first
4 introduce recent research on organizational antecedents to WPA as they relate to knowledge of
5 interventions for workplace perpetrators. Second, we describe frameworks and classifications of
6 workplace interventions. Third, we note the scant exploration of the perpetrator's firsthand
7 accounts; and fourth, we conclude with key CDT and TL concepts that informed the study.
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10 *Organizational antecedents to WPA*

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Hodgins and McNamara (2019) state, "we know very little about how to handle and prevent workplace bullying" (p. 4). While the knowledge is slight, there has been an examination of organizational support, advertent or not, of workplace practices that may lead to a culture of WPA. Balducci *et al.* (2012) found that workaholism is related to aggression even after controlling for role stressors, operationalized as role ambiguity and role conflict, and interpersonal conflict. Organizational support of workaholism, not to mention role stressors (role overload, ambiguity, and conflict) could be indicative of an organizational culture that values ever-increasing performance and productivity over employee well-being. Pheko *et al.* (2017) reviewed the bullying literature and concluded, "organizational culture may be one of the critical factors that may motivate, facilitate, perpetuate, enable, and/or precipitate workplace bullying" (p. 3). In their conceptual model, they suggest various organizational dimensions that contribute to a tolerance for bullying including large power distance, short-term orientation (i.e., meeting immediate goals), and valuing tasks over relationships (for more on job vs employee oriented cultures, see Blake and Mouton, 1964; Hofstede *et al.*, 1990; and Hofstede, 2011).

Some studies indicate several elements of an organization's infrastructure may discourage psychological aggression. Potter *et al.* (2016) suggest education and training, or policy and regulation implementations may be effective interventions to reduce workplace

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2
3 bullying and harassment. Einarsen *et al.* (2019) concluded the most effective ethical
4
5 infrastructures against workplace bullying is through “extensive training, the use of formal
6
7 performance appraisal, and regular employee attitude surveys” (p. 13). Feedback from team
8
9 members can help course-correct unproductive, including aggressive, behaviors (Kegan and
10
11 Lahey, 2016), yet giving feedback requires psychological safety (Edmondson and Lei, 2014).
12
13 With the trickle-down effect of supervisor incivility on psychological safety (Liu *et al.*, 2020),
14
15 honest feedback from below the uncivil supervisor is unlikely to be delivered.

Change to read: "...honest
feedback from those who
report to the uncivil
supervisor..."

16 17 18 19 *Perpetrator interventions*

20
21 Knowledge of effective interventions with workplace perpetrators is gravely missing
22
23 (Einarsen *et al.*, 2019). What has been proposed are frameworks on classifying interventions and
24
25 identifying critical success factors (CSFs) across all interventions. Nielsen and Einarsen (2018)
26
27 suggest “interventions should be tested and studied as primary (prevention), secondary (handling
28
29 of cases), and tertiary (rehabilitation) levels” (p. 79). Although they expressed the need to
30
31 understand the rehabilitation of perpetrators, the ensuing discussion exclusively focused on
32
33 victim rehabilitation while neglecting perpetrator rehabilitation. It stands to reason that
34
35 understanding the mechanisms of perpetrator rehabilitation could inform effective tertiary
36
37 interventions. Murray, et al. (2019), using a Delphi approach, sought to identify CSFs that
38
39 contribute to the success of workplace bullying interventions. They identified eleven
40
41 interventions including coaching and suggested there are three CSFs across all interventions:
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43 “organisational infrastructure, followed by commitment and engagement of management, and
44
45 competent and resourced professionals” (p. 328). Besides coaching, the only other intervention
46
47 method for perpetrator rehabilitation was employee assistance programs.
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3 As described, the term *intervention* is used to describe a range of workplace practices
4 (training, policy or program implementation, education, surveys, or coaching). With this wide
5 range of activities, there is a lack of clarity on the concept of workplace interventions, their
6 outcomes, and how to measure their success. Intervention adequacy is also an issue. A case in
7 point, Lockhart and Bhanugopan (2019) discovered victims of bullying believed employee
8 assistance programs were poorly supported token efforts rather than helpful in preventing and
9 mitigating bullying.

10 *Perpetrator firsthand accounts*

11 Recognizing the potential of perpetrator interventions, scholars have called for qualitative
12 studies to understand the perspective of the perpetrator (Branch *et al.*, 2013; Rai and Agarwal,
13 2015; Samnani and Singh, 2012). Yet as of March 2019, there were only ten such studies (Bloch,
14 2012; Castle, 2014; Crawshaw, 2005; DeSanti, 2014; Harrison, 2014; Jenkin *et al.*, 2011, 2012;
15 McGregor, 2015; Samenow *et al.*, 2013; Zabrodska *et al.*, 2014). Of these, only four focused on
16 organizational leaders who had been *perpetrators of abrasive behavior* (Crawshaw, 2005;
17 Harrison, 2014) or had been *accused of being a perpetrator of bullying* (Jenkins *et al.*, 2011,
18 2012). While these studies explored the perspective of a perpetrator or someone accused of being
19 a perpetrator, they did not illuminate a leader's experience moving towards acceptable
20 interpersonal behavior. We found no research on the developmental experience of an
21 organizational leader who was positively influenced with intervention, coaching, or training, and
22 whose behavioral complaints were reduced. New subsection heading. Move to next line. *Conceptual framework: CDT and TL*

23 In Day *et al.*'s (2014) review of 25 years of leadership development theory, they
24 suggested CDT (see Kegan, 1980, 1982, 1994, 2009; Kegan and Lahey, 2009, 2010, 2016)
25 offered "a fruitful avenue for future leadership development research" (p. 75). We draw from
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3 intersecting concepts of CDT and TL (see Mezirow, 1990, 1996, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2009a) to
4 extend those theories to abrasive leaders. Four shared concepts are relevant: impetus of change,
5 critical reflection upon assumptions, lack of awareness, and meaning making.
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10 Kegan and Lahey (2009, 2010) and Mezirow (1990) propose that individuals frequently
11 need an *impetus of change*. Kegan and Lahey (2009, 2010) suggest that individuals are prompted
12 to shift to a more complex way of seeing themselves in their environment when they are “in over
13 our heads,” that is, when their mental schema no longer helps them navigate and simply trying
14 harder does not solve their problems. Mezirow (1990) used the term *disorienting dilemmas* to
15 describe “anomalies and dilemmas of which old ways of knowing cannot make sense ... that
16 precipitate critical reflection and transformation” (p. 5). Disorienting dilemmas have been
17 described as either gradual or a point in time crisis that suddenly shakes the foundations of a
18 person’s identity (Mezirow, 2009a).
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31 Kegan and Lahey (2009, 2016) and Mezirow (2000) emphasized the importance of
32 *critical reflection* upon one’s assumptions in response to the disorienting dilemma. Kegan (1980,
33 1982, 1994) used what he called the subject-object relationship. Development, Kegan (1994,
34 2009) asserted, is the movement from subject (invisible to self) to object (visible to self). When
35 assumptions become visible and are scrutinized, growth can occur. Mezirow (2000, 2009a)
36 argued individuals develop habitual ways of thinking from childhood, broad, orienting
37 dispositions that include values, beliefs, and behaviors, and as adults these conscious or
38 unconscious habits of mind need to be critically evaluated. Through critical reflection, an adult
39 expands “problematic frames of reference ... to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open,
40 reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 92). Mezirow suggested the
41 enhanced frame of reference can also lead to a change in identity.
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3 Kegan and Mezirow suggest people are selective in what they are attentive to. This
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5 discrimination causes selective *lack of awareness*. Kegan (1994), in explaining how lack of
6
7 awareness can occur, asserted “Shaping, selecting, and patterning reality in some fashion also
8
9 means not designing it in some other fashion” (p. 204). Mezirow (1990) claimed, “When
10
11 experience is too strange or threatening to the way we think or learn, we tend to block it out or
12
13 resort to psychological defense mechanisms to provide a compatible interpretation” (p. 2). This
14
15 selectivity, while arguably protective in the short term, inhibits the developmental process in the
16
17 long term (Kegan and Lahey, 2009).
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20
21 Kegan (1982, 1994; Kegan and Lahey, 2009) and Mezirow (1990) recognized that how
22
23 people make meaning is central to their theories of how adults develop. Mezirow (1990)
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25 described adult development as primarily cognitive while Kegan came to recognize it as both
26
27 emotional and cognitive (Kegan and Lahey, 2009). However, Kegan and Mezirow both assert
28
29 development is not simply the acquisition of skills but is primarily cognitive, a transformation
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31 from a habitual pattern of thinking towards more deliberate and critical reflection (Kegan, 1982,
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33 1994, 2009; Mezirow, 2000, 2003). For Kegan (1982, 1994; Kegan and Lahey, 2009), adult
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35 development is movement toward a more complex way of knowing—a different way of *meaning*
36
37 *making*. Mezirow (2000) suggested that initially individuals make meaning from unconscious
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39 habits of mind, and a change in meaning making occurs when an individual, prompted by a
40
41 disorienting situation, critically examines and transforms those habits.
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46 47 **Research design**

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49 For this study we used Crawshaw’s (2005) description of the abrasive leader, one who
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51 uses “any behavior ... that creates emotional distress sufficient to disrupt organizational
52
53 functioning” (p.3). In managing their coworkers, Crawshaw (2013) contends abrasive leaders
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3 most commonly resort to overcontrol, threats, public humiliation, condescension, and
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5 overreaction. The problem we explored was the lack of knowledge of the developmental
6
7 experience of formerly abrasive leaders. Our aim was to understand their journey towards more
8
9 effective conduct at work. One research question drove this study: How does a leader describe
10
11 the movement away from his use of abrasive behavior?
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13

14 *Methodology*

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17 This study is based on a constructivist paradigm with the assumptions that knowledge is
18
19 subjective, context-dependent, and socially constructed. Narrative research focuses on the stories
20
21 individuals tell to make sense of experiences and find meaning (McMullen and Braithwaite,
22
23 2013). It has strong roots in psychology (Bruner 1986; Mishler 1992; Gergen 1992;
24
25 Polkinghorne, 1995), education (Connelly and Clandinin, 1999), communications (Bochner,
26
27 2002) and sociology (Denzin, 1997). In what Denzin and Lincoln (2003) call the narrative turn,
28
29 the goal is to understand the meanings and purposes of social actors. According to McMullen
30
31 and Braithwaite (2013), narrative “captures nuances of event, relationship, and purpose ... [that]
32
33 ... would be lost in the abstraction process central to the logico-scientific model ... with a focus
34
35 on propositions or rules that connect categories of behaviour to categories of actors and
36
37 situations” (p. 93). Seeking to retain the complexity and richness of nuanced development
38
39 trajectories, as called for by Day *et al.* (2014), we followed the narrative inquiry approach of
40
41 Clandinin and Connelly (2000).
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46
47 The epistemological commitment of narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) is
48
49 based on the philosophy of John Dewey (1938) who asserted “there is an intimate and necessary
50
51 relation between the process of actual experience and education” (p. 20). In essence, knowledge
52
53 comes from understanding experience. Building on Dewey’s philosophy, Clandinin (2013)
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3 stipulates narrative inquiry has three key ontological commitments: It (a) is relational and
4
5 respects the value of ordinary lived experience, (b) adheres to the concept of continuity where
6
7 experiences come from and grow into other experiences, and (c) recognizes social influences on
8
9 the inner-self and the larger environment. Narrative inquiry is subjective and relational, not
10
11 objective and distant (Clandinin, 2013). It is designed to be a constructed reality where rigor, at
12
13 least partly, is shown through the co-composed representative accounts and by remaining
14
15 diligent in the epistemological and ontological commitments (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).
16
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18
19 This exploratory study included three male organizational leaders in the USA who were
20
21 located through executive coaches and a professional development program. Three criteria
22
23 narrowed the participant selection: (a) the leader had been the subject of an *intervention* due to
24
25 abrasive behavior; (b) at least 2 years had passed since the intervention; and (c) a third party
26
27 confirmed the leader had no (or few) recent reports of abrasive behavior. For this study,
28
29 intervention refers to a brief and direct interaction between the abrasive leader and one or more
30
31 supervisors that includes specific feedback on unacceptable behavior. As a result of this
32
33 intervention, the leader understood continued abrasive behavior could bring serious
34
35 consequences, including termination. Throughout the remaining methodology section, the
36
37 primary researcher is referred to in the singular and a plural reference includes the researcher and
38
39 the leader(s).
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45 An initial goal in the inquiry process was to build relationship, recognizing some of the
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47 stories could be difficult to tell. I used a general interview guide with broad questions, and began
48
49 by stating, "Tell me about you and your journey away from the use of abrasive behaviors in the
50
51 workplace." Each leader proceeded to tell stories and then together we sought meaning and
52
53 significance through conversation. With permission, I recorded each session and promptly
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3 transcribed each one. Then, for member-checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), I provided the
4 leader a transcript of each session to make edits for clarification. The intent was to accurately
5 portray their stories and to further build trust. Each leader and I engaged in 3-6 inquiry sessions,
6 each lasting between 30 minutes and 2 hours. The sessions were conducted by phone or in-
7 person within a span of five months. Overall, we generated over 10 hours of recorded
8 conversation, 250 pages of transcriptions, 50 pages of fieldnotes, and 75 emails.
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Edit to read: "... each
lasting 30-120 mins."

17 *Analysis*

18
19 *Narrative accounts.* In some narrative research, the stories are treated as static data, but
20 Clandinin and Connelly (2003) suggest narrative accounts exist in a three-dimensional context of
21 time, space, and sociality. This approach recognizes people and stories in their multi-layered
22 contexts of the interviews at a point in time yet also representing them in narrative as they once
23 were and who they are becoming. With that in mind, a chronological presentation with
24 reflections and meaning making towards the end of each account could represent and honor each
25 leader and his experience. The creation of a narrative account was time intensive. The leaders
26 had disclosed their stories across multiple sessions as trust was developed. We also frequently
27 circled back to stories to deepen our understanding. After the final session with each leader, I
28 composed a master document, highlighting especially meaningful words, phrases, events, and
29 situations. After creating a tentative draft of our collaborative experience, each leader and I
30 edited until we agreed upon a narrative accounting (~~Redacted~~). (Tucker, 2019)
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47 *Narrative threads.* Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained that narrative threads (a)
48 shape the overall story, (b) help deepen the understanding of the experience, or (c) reveal the
49 participant. Fittingly, Rogers (2007) described the process as "listening for the melody of a song"
50 (p. 110). With the ontological commitments in mind, I honored these leaders by absorbing their
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3 stories and gaining an essence of their personal and collective developmental experience.

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5 Through an iterative process, I reread each leader's transcripts searching for storyline threads by
6
7 focusing on tensions, continuities, or gaps within their stories (Clandinin, 2013). I then grouped
8
9 and regrouped potential threads. This repeated process of reading, identifying possible storyline
10
11 threads, and grouping them helped me see interwoven threads in each account. I then examined
12
13 across accounts to identify the storyline threads that described the developmental experience.
14
15

16 17 **Findings**

18
19 To answer the research question—how does a leader describe the movement away from
20
21 his use of abrasive behavior—we present a synthesis of each participant's narrative followed by
22
23 a discussion of the narrative threads from within and across their stories: disruption, awakening,
24
25 and equipping. These threads offer a description of the difficult journey towards improved
26
27 workplace conduct.
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30 31 *The participants*

32
33 *Vincent.* Vincent is an Ivy League graduate who, wanting to be better prepared to lead an
34
35 organization, returned to school for an MBA. He has authored two books and was once named
36
37 citizen of the year in the state where he resides. Vincent described himself as an authentic
38
39 servant-leader, until "the 18 months" when he felt "compressed for time" while attempting to
40
41 attain ambitious organizational goals and fulfill numerous commitments external to the
42
43 organization. Vincent recounted he was "spiraling out of control." He felt like a "teapot that is
44
45 ready to blow." He revealed, "I was definitely being aggressive when people didn't meet
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47 deadlines, and if they made mistakes, they were publicly berated." His swearing increased as he
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49 was becoming "progressively angry and short" with his executive team. Vincent disclosed he
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3 was “regularly providing individual feedback and critiques during team meetings that were only
4
5 appropriate for private performance review sessions.”
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8 Vincent was approached by three board members about his “deleterious conduct” stating,
9
10 “we’ve got to address this.” Vincent acknowledged the accuracy of the report while
11
12 simultaneously being embarrassed by his conduct and fearful of losing his job. Vincent He
13
14 immediately agreed to the extensive plan outlined by the board members. At the time of this
15
16 intervention, Vincent had been the President and CEO for 18 years. Reflecting on the
17
18 intervention, he realized he needed the “final push” of the board members; He needed the
19
20 ultimatum of knowing his job was on the line.
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23
24 Vincent was required to engage with an executive coach. As part of the process, the
25
26 coach conducted multiple 360 assessments (360). Vincent recalled being surprised with the
27
28 feedback on how many coworkers could see his lack of emotional intelligence. The negative
29
30 effects, he discovered “rippled through the organization...even into the mailroom.” The initial
31
32 360, Vincent divulged, was “hard hitting” and the coach was “brutally honest” as she
33
34 “documented in living color all of the abrasive behaviors.” This feedback prompted him to “learn
35
36 a lot of techniques in terms of how to keep my cool when someone doesn’t perform. I still had to
37
38 point out performance issues, but I learned how to do that more effectively.”
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42
43 Contemplating the 18 months preceding the intervention, Vincent said he knew at the
44
45 time his behaviors were “wrong and unacceptable.” He explained, “I could see it creeping up....
46
47 I was seeing myself, almost in my own movie—losing my cool.... I could see it, but I didn’t do
48
49 enough, obviously, to make any corrective actions.” Vincent has kept the original 360 so “[I] can
50
51 see how bad the abrasive behavior was.... I never want to return to that.”
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3 *Brady*. Brady is the safety director at a gas and underground utility construction
4
5 company. He had led the department for about six years without any real challenges when the
6
7 organization doubled in size within 12 months. Without any additional hiring, Brady felt “alone.”
8
9 He revealed his job tasks “were already very stressful,” but then they became “a complete
10
11 nightmare.” He was “completely overwhelmed” saying, “I just snapped.”
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14
15 The HR manager called him after a complaint was filed about his conduct. She simply
16
17 informed him, “We have a problem.” Soon afterward Brady met with the HR manager and the
18
19 company owner. “I knew I had to do this [executive coaching] or they were going to fire away.
20
21 So, there was just no option.” He revealed it was difficult to understand how he could be “on thin
22
23 ice” after he had worked so hard for the company.
24

25
26 When asked what prompted his change, Brady quickly and emphatically responded, “the
27
28 threat” of the loss of his job. “I was forced” to change. Reflecting on his initial 360, he said, “I
29
30 didn’t agree with all of it. Some of the things that were said were so far off-base to me.” Brady
31
32 emphatically stated the most challenging part of his journey was “having to listen to what people
33
34 were saying about me—having to take that—and then trying to understand what I have to do to
35
36 make myself better.”
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39
40 With coaching, Brady learned to improve his awareness and strengthen his leading
41
42 abilities. He learned to be “situationally aware” admitting it was new to him. Before his
43
44 intervention Brady used language and behavior with leaders in the corporate office that he did
45
46 not realize was unacceptable. Neither did Brady know that former peers look at you
47
48 when you become their supervisor. And he admitted, prior to coaching, he had not valued or
49
50 sought to understand the perspective of the field workers. Brady also improved his interpersonal
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52 skills. He learned the importance of eye contact and “watching my tone of voice.” He stated, “I
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Please insert quote marks:
“look at you differently when
you become their supervisor.”

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3 am developing the ability to take a step back.... I try not to knee jerk anymore.” Reflecting on
4
5 his development, Brady said, “I have learned to just be a better person.... I’ve gotten to be quite
6
7 a good leader through all of this [coaching and] training.”
8
9

10 *Jimmy.* Jimmy is an orthopedic surgeon who received his medical training in the military,
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12 reached the rank of lieutenant colonel, became an assistant professor at the military medical
13
14 school, and received numerous commendations. Following his military service, Jimmy entered
15
16 into private group medical practice. At a monthly partners meeting, after several years of being
17
18 in private practice, the senior partner announced, “We need to talk with you.” Jimmy recalled the
19
20 room going quiet. Instantaneously he became defensive and anxious. The senior partner told him
21
22 two coworkers had reported unprofessional behavior. “Being called out by my peers ... elicited a
23
24 flood of emotion.” He felt attacked. “I couldn’t even hold my coffee cup. Literally, I couldn’t
25
26 even talk.... I had to cancel my clinic that day. I became so emotional.... How dare you call me
27
28 out for that!”
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32
33 Jimmy promptly contacted a physician development program. Reflecting on his
34
35 participation in the six-month intensive program, Jimmy disclosed he was “digging deep and
36
37 looking at myself.... It was very, very painful.” He agonized over, “What was in my life that led
38
39 to this?” Jimmy concluded he was under “relentless stress and [had] poor coping skills ... along
40
41 with negative thoughts.... It boiled over in that instant.”
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43

44 The results of the first 360 indicated to Jimmy that he saw himself “better than others
45
46 did.” He saw himself as someone who works hard and does good for others: “I do all kinds of
47
48 complex surgeries and I continue to take call and fix broken things.” But with coworker
49
50 feedback, Jimmy came to realize he “was not in tune to the pulse [of what was happening around
51
52 him].... I had no situational awareness.” Jimmy revealed, “I had been going around with blinders
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3 on most of the time.” Through the physician development program he examined himself closely,
4
5 discovered more about his personal journey, and learned improved interpersonal skills including
6
7 that the perceptions of others mattered.
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10 Jimmy credits the intervention as the catalyst for his change. He described the continuing
11
12 journey towards improved conduct as “arduous,” saying it “will always be a struggle because I
13
14 am struggling with myself—my own values and beliefs.”
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16

17 *Three narrative threads*

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19 The naming of narrative threads can oversimplify complex and continually unfolding
20
21 lives representing them as static rather than evolving (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). With this
22
23 caveat, we identified three narrative threads that capture key aspects of the experience ~~away from~~
24
25 ~~abrasiveness~~: disruption, awakening, and equipping. These threads provide significant insight for
26
27 HR in understanding the experience of three leaders as they moved away from abrasive behavior.
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30
31 *Disruption.* Disruption consists of high stress accompanied by strong, often negative,
32
33 emotions and detrimental social interactions. There is internal and external unrest. Prior to the
34
35 intervention the leaders had been stressed for a year or more by substantial workloads and their
36
37 personal expectation of performing well. They experienced intense emotions (e.g., anger,
38
39 contempt, embarrassment, fear, confusion) when it became clear during the intervention the
40
41 abrasive behavior was no longer acceptable. Vincent, Brady, and Jimmy also expressed varying
42
43 deep emotions when they obtained feedback from coworkers about their destructive conduct and
44
45 lack of emotional intelligence. Learning new ways of thinking and doing was arduous, the
46
47 was
48
49 disruption both intense and long-lasting.
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52 *Awakening.* The leaders spoke paradoxically of being both aware and unaware. They also
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54 described partial or growing awareness. Awakening, as a narrative thread in this study, means
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3 movement along a continuum towards greater awareness. Sometimes awakening was sudden and
4
5 other times gradual. Vincent, Brady, and Jimmy described how at the time of their coaching or
6
7 training they did not recognize (a) how coworkers were perceiving them, (b) how coworkers
8
9 were impacted by their behavior, and (c) how their own emotional self-control was lacking. They
10
11 were not aware of the strong emotions they were evoking in coworkers. However, a
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13 Please edit to read:
"However, all three
reflected ..."
14
15 ~~reflective~~ on their developing emotional intelligence and improved conduct. Their stories are
16
17 filled with growing awareness, increased observations, and deep reflections. As an example of
18
19 the multifaceted thread of awakening, Vincent described being somewhat aware of the
20
21 inappropriateness of his behavior, yet not aware of the depth of harm he caused. With feedback,
22
23 Vincent quickly became aware of how many people were affected, although it took significant
24
25 time to grasp the depth of pain he caused some members of his executive team.

26
27
28 *Equipping.* As a narrative thread, equipping entails continuing education and personal
29
30 development. Each leader dedicated himself to professional services external to the organization
31
32 (i.e. executive behavioral coaching, counseling, anger management, physician development
33
34 program) that lasted 6 to 12 months and involved multiple 360s. The leaders focused on
35
36 improving their interpersonal and management skills. Brady and Jimmy came to question some
37
38 of their natural tendencies, whereas Vincent believed his journey was a return to how he had
39
40 once been, describing his change as a “recovery from abrasive behavior.” Jimmy disclosed he is
41
42 “wired one way and I knew I had to focus some level of mental energy to keep things on track.
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45 Over time it got easier. As I continued to develop these skills and they become habits, they
46
47 become more automatic.” For these leaders, equipping was learning self-regulation, self-
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49 awareness, and effective communication behaviors. They were highly motivated by the desire to
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3 retain their positions at work and the need for coworkers to perceive them as emotionally
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5 competent.
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7 **Discussion**

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10 This section includes a discussion of the (a) organizational antecedents that may have
11
12 contributed to abrasive behavior, (b) findings in light of the four concepts from CDT and TL, (c)
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14 theoretical contributions to CDT and TL, and (d) practical implications for HR.
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16 *Organizational antecedents to abrasive behavior*

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19 De Ciere *et al.*'s (2019) study suggests that organizational characteristics are strong
20
21 predictors of bullying. We observed a few. Before the interventions, these leaders could be
22
23 described as workaholics (working compulsively and excessively, see Balducci *et al.*, 2012) and
24
25 they were allowed to persist in their abrasive behavior, at least in part, because they were
26
27 technically proficient, even outstanding. They were also immensely stressed. Each leader
28
29 recognized he had been struggling at work for a year or more prior to the intervention. None of
30
31 the leaders recalled receiving feedback about their workload, stress, or conduct prior to the
32
33 intervention. This is not to say the feedback was absent, just that it was such a weak signal they
34
35 did not notice it or understand its import. Jimmy, disappointingly expressed, "Nobody sat me
36
37 down and said, 'You know, Jimmy, I am concerned about you.'" It is clear from these leaders
38
39 that individual growth was needed, however, the organizations where they worked also played a
40
41 part in the dysfunction.
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46 *Concepts from CDT and TL*

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48
49 *Impetus of change.* Vincent, Brady, and Jimmy experienced significant disorienting
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51 dilemmas (TL). Their mental schemas were no longer effective: Exerting more effort would not
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53 resolve their problems (CDT). Each leader's description of the intervention reflected Mezirow's
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3 (2009b) first stage of transformation as an “acute personal or social crisis” (p. 19). Jimmy
4 described his intervention as “shock therapy ... which shocked the brain into doing something
5 different in recognizing the need to make a change.” Mezirow’s next stage is an emotional self-
6 examination. The initial 360 triggered strong emotions when the leaders came to understand their
7 ignorance and lack of awareness. The revelations shook their sense of self. In these leaders’
8 experiences, the self-evaluation was prompted by direct and incontrovertible feedback from
9 others. With the specific and “hard hitting” 360s, it became quickly evident there were
10 significant issues with their behavior and how others perceived them. Furthermore, they knew
11 from the initial intervention that change was not optional.
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24 *Questioning assumptions.* The leaders’ stories revealed glimpses of tightly held values,
25 self-descriptions, and assumptions that were questioned. All three leaders faced problematic
26 value assumptions about work and achievement which paradoxically contributed to both their
27 many successes and to their abrasiveness. In short, they held an intense work ethic, and they
28 valued being (and being perceived as) exceptional performers. The enactment of these values
29 contributed to difficult workplace relationships. With increased stress levels, the leaders focused
30 more intently on high task performance. Vincent, even while acting abrasively to coworkers,
31 considered himself an “authentic servant-leader” and Jimmy claimed he never considered
32 himself an abusive person saying, “That isn’t me.” Only after the intervention and the initial 360
33 was there any substantive concern about the perceptions of others, the reality of the impact of
34 their behavior, and a deep examination of self.
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49 *Lack of awareness.* Vincent, Brady, and Jimmy discussed being occasionally or partially
50 unaware of events and coworkers. Prior to intervention, the leaders were highly attentive to tasks
51 and responsibilities and not as attentive to their personal interactions with coworkers. Each
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3 leader explicitly stated he had been “situationally unaware.” Jimmy recognized, “My world was
4 focused on what was in front of me and I lost my peripheral vision.” Prior to the initial 360,
5 Vincent had been unaware of how coworkers outside the executive suite viewed him and his
6 inability to control his increasing anger. Consistent with CDT and TL, lack of awareness happens
7 as individuals selectively fashion reality (productive leader) while being inattentive to a less
8 desirable reality (abrasive leader; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow 1990).
9

10
11
12 *Meaning making.* Consistent with CDT and TL, the leaders told stories that demonstrated
13 their increasing rational capacity for understanding and appreciating complexity and how those
14 insights assisted them in their development. CDT’s phases of adult development move from
15 simple views of the social world to more complex. Vincent reflected on numerous ironies he
16 became aware of through his journey. Jimmy discussed his various strengths and how he learned
17 they can also become weaknesses. TL suggests a transformed mind “generates beliefs and
18 opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide actions” (Mezirow, 2000, p. 9). Brady
19 acknowledged how he came to view himself “as no better” than those he supervised, admitting
20 he had to “gain respect for the workers.... I had to realize the workers—maybe, you’d say, the
21 foreign workers—are just regular people, too.”
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39 *Contributions to CDT and TL*

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42 From this study, we learned the experience and meaning making of three formerly
43 abrasive leaders involved an arduous journey of disruption, awakening, and equipping. These
44 findings have theoretical implications for CDT and TL: the continuously intertwined nature of
45 adult development, and the primacy of emotions of individuals seeking to improve their conduct.
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51 CDT and TL propose, to some degree, a roadmap of adult learning and development.
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53 Kegan’s CDT presents clearly defined sequential stages of development. In contrast, Mezirow
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3 rejects stages of development believing each learner has unique habits of mind to transform.
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5 However, he suggests adult learners often follow some variation of ten phases where meaning
6
7 becomes clarified. This study found the developmental journey of three leaders included three
8
9 tightly woven, co-occurring, and non-sequential narrative threads of disruption, awakening, and
10
11 equipping. These threads were continually present as the leader improved his conduct whether he
12
13 possibly moved through stages (CDT) or entered phases (TL). This implies the growth of the
14
15 abrasive leader, juxtapose with the mechanics of a developmental stage or phase, has an intensive,
16
17 dynamic, and complex nature. These three threads were ever-present in the journey of personal
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19 growth.
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24 CDT and TL focus primarily on the cognitive processes, a transforming of the mind, and
25
26 not the acquisition of new skills. Meaning making for the leaders of this study was somewhat
27
28 different. These leaders experienced a holistic journey with intense emotions, physical reactions,
29
30 and a reworking of both identity and consciousness (Newman, 2012; Walker, 2013). These
31
32 dynamic interactions accompanied and drove their shifts in behavior and thinking. The strong
33
34 emotions and the practice of new behavioral, emotional, and management skills were integral to
35
36 their development. The leaders tried new interpersonal and emotional regulation behaviors in a
37
38 tentative or experimental way, to see not only if they were effective but how they fit into their
39
40 professional identities. Intense emotions were present throughout all narrative threads. These
41
42 findings imply adult learning can be enhanced when there is an understanding of the importance
43
44 of emotions in self and others and the significance in practicing of new skills.
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48 49 *Practical implications*

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51 The three narrative threads describe a journey that was intensely social: one or more
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53 superiors intervened; coworkers offered feedback with multiple 360s; and specialized
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3 professionals coached, trained, or counseled the abrasive leaders. The leaders did not go on this
4 journey alone. With this as a backdrop, we offer five practical implications of this initial
5 exploratory study. First, this inquiry suggests some abrasive leaders can develop emotional
6 competency and improved management strategies. Second, abrasive leaders need superiors who
7 will provide effective feedback, hold them accountable, and intervene when necessary. Third,
8 this inquiry implies abrasive leaders need social support including ongoing feedback and
9 encouragement from within a supportive network to include coworkers and specialists external to
10 the organization. Fourth, organizational leaders who intervene can reduce employee suffering,
11 not only for those on the receiving end of abrasive behavior but also for the valued yet abrasive
12 leader. Fifth, this study suggests that organizations that value and incentivize overwork over
13 well-being or who choose to not intervene with abrasive leaders and hold them accountable for
14 their behavior may be complicit.
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30 HR has an influential role in the personal growth of the abrasive leader. One
31 consideration for HR is enhancement of the organization's leadership development program to
32 (a) address the duty of management to measure both performance and conduct; (b) strengthen
33 feedback skills including how to hold leaders accountable for misconduct; (c) include training on
34 management intervention; and (d) provide guidance when to secure coaching or counseling
35 professionals. HR may also play a role in balancing the need to increase production with
36 employees' well-being.
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46 *Limitations and future research*

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49 This study has several limitations. First, with its small sample, it is not representative of a
50 larger population. While the three leaders were from a variety of backgrounds and professions,
51 they were all white males and worked in for-profit organizations in the U.S.A. While some of the
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3 findings will be transferable to other cases and contexts, the findings are not statistically
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5 generalizable. Second, the inquiry is an exploration of how these leaders made sense of their
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7 journey; it is not a collection of facts. Future research should explore formerly abrasive leaders
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9 who are women, individuals of other races, cultures, and countries.
10

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12 This study adds a distinct perspective to the literature of WPA: The experience of the
13
14 formerly abrasive leader who, following intervention and specialized help, had no (or few)
15
16 complaints of abrasion. Using the lens of CDT and TL, this narrative study provides insight into
17
18 three leaders' journeys and informs HR professionals' practice in developing organizational
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20 culture and interventions to reduce WPA.
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¹ Pseudonyms are used for names of participants.

² Abrasive leadership behaviors may be exhibited by any gender or either sex. For ease of reading, we exclusively use male pronouns.

Personnel Review