
Bigwigs Behaving Badly

Understanding and Coping with
Notable Misbehavior

Kendall L. Stewart, MD, DLFAPA
July 31, 2002

Introduction

It's a problem and it may be getting worse. Because of their power or position, certain people regularly get away with disruptive behavior that would not be tolerated in others. Their skills, their relative independence or their power over others inclines everyone around these unruly bigwigs to cut them extra slack. Temper tantrums are overlooked. Intimidation is accepted, even reinforced. Verbal abuse of underlings is tolerated. Even destruction of property and physical assault in the workplace are more common than we would like to admit.

No one has cornered the market on boorish behavior. Company executives rant at lieutenants and are profiled as "demanding." Arrogant physicians insist that emotional abuse is the price ordinary people should be willing to pay for the opportunity to work in the presence of greatness. Cocky pilots refer to others as "support puke." Certain athletes and show business personalities are notorious for their outbursts. Outrageous behavior is all the rage in contemporary society. Provocation is encouraged and applauded on political talk shows, professional-wrestling spectacles and televised freak shows.

But tolerating disruptive behavior extracts a price. Emotional excess tends to expand until it is contained. Those who have gone over the top during a temper fit will go even further the next time they are aroused, and they will get there more quickly. Demoralized and distracted, colleagues subjected to behavioral storms take cover when they should be taking risks.

This notion that we tend to do what we can get away with is a critical concept that will help you understand why people behave inappropriately and how you should respond when they do. The sensible principles that follow will help you develop strategies to minimize the disruptions fostered by those emotional outbursts. On the other hand, if you are one of those bigwigs who sometimes behaves badly, these observations should become the prod that goads you to shape up.

Don't overreact to the background noise.

People with clout are often unaware of the impact they have on others. Their stature transforms offhand comments into significant quotations, absentmindedness into arrogance and mild criticism into stinging rebuke. The powerful executive who questions subordinates sharply and insists on accountability is often puzzled to learn that others are afraid of her. A physician enduring a trying day may swear at no one in particular and profess astonishment when a nearby clerk takes the outburst personally and complains. Holding bigwigs accountable for their behavior begins with the realization that they have bad days too. Deciding when the leader has crossed the line between being annoying and being abusive sometimes challenges the most experienced managers.

Your reputation for tolerance will ensure that you are credible when you need to take a firm stand.

All relationships are best judged over a period of time, not at the moment. If the VIP in question is usually gracious and considerate, a momentary lapse should be forgiven if not entirely excused. When the moment is right, call the incident to the leader's attention with the observation that innocent bystanders reacted unfavorably. Leaders with good hearts will appreciate your calling this to their attention, make amends where possible, thank you for your understanding and make a point to be more careful in the future. Your indulgence of harmless idiosyncrasies will smother the embers of intolerance that start so many workplace fires. Your reputation for tolerance will ensure that you are credible when you need to take a firm stand.

Recognize warning signs and intervene early.

Those who feel entitled to vent their spleens in public rarely take pains to hide their frustrations from colleagues of lesser rank. Incensed travelers

lambaste hapless ticket agents. Doctors rail at clerks who had nothing to do with the policies they find so infuriating. Bosses chastise underlings for minor infractions and pout or explode when they are inconvenienced or embarrassed. That these disruptive bigwigs regularly show themselves with subordinates is no mystery. They know that lower ranking colleagues are less likely to hold them accountable. Because of the louts' clout, lower ranking associates usually conclude that they have no choice but to accept what the abusers are dishing out. You will notice a significant change in the bigwigs' demeanor if their boss suddenly appears.

But tales of clandestine emotional excess flourish on every organizational grapevine. Stories of bigwigs behaving badly will help you to identify those with poor emotional control and give you an opportunity to intervene early.

Invite the bigwig who reports to you to your office and inquire about the problem. Take this opportunity to point out how the outburst was perceived and offer your assistance in resolving future problems in more appropriate ways. Gently but firmly point out that you will not permit associates to be abused. The perpetrator will insist that his or her behavior was not nearly so outrageous as you were led to believe, but a significant consequence will have now been attached to the misbehavior. All but the seriously impaired will get the message and straighten up.

Limit the damage.

A surgeon, indignant that her case was bumped to permit a more serious case to proceed, lashed out at the nurses, insisting that a surgeon of lesser importance should have been inconvenienced instead. Already burdened with anticipatory anxiety, patients waiting for surgery became understandably upset when subjected to this self-absorbed harangue.

The charge nurse acted quickly to limit the damage. He invited the physician to finish venting in a nearby room out of patients' earshot. The nurse acknowledged the surgeon's frustration

but pointed out that just before surgery was the wrong time and that a public corridor was the wrong place. The surgeon agreed and apologized.

There are a number of things you can do to minimize the destruction that bigwig misbehavior spawns. Get the bad actor off stage as quickly as possible. Invite emotional exhibitionists to your office to discuss the situation privately. By your own calm demeanor, reassure your colleagues that this is really no big deal. Listen carefully. There is usually a legitimate grievance in the outburst somewhere. Acknowledge the reasonableness of the bigwig's frustration, but point out that the response may have been an overreaction. When a resolvable problem exists, see that it gets fixed, but be careful not to reward outrageous behavior. At the very least, ask the bigwig to come to you directly if she has a similar problem in the future instead of showing herself in public. Depending on the severity of the outburst, you may need to document the incident and go over the bigwig's head to achieve early containment and to attach a painful consequence to this emotional display.

Volunteer to be the lightning rod.

A corporate vice-president is embarrassed in a meeting because he is not sufficiently informed. He launches into an angry diatribe about the failure of "his people" to keep him informed. His colleagues find themselves musing sympathetically about the dog he is likely to kick when he gets home. In his tortured mind, the vice-president believes he has deflected the group's attention from his lack of preparation. In reality, his colleagues now understand that he is both unprepared and callow.

Taking full responsibility for a problem gives you the best opportunity to deliver a solution. When you blame others, you take yourself out of play.

The surest sign of emotional immaturity is the tendency to blame others. When rampaging

bigwigs are looking for someone to blame, invite them to blame you. Take full responsibility for the problem—no matter what it is. This helpful technique does not come naturally to most leaders. When you think about it, taking the blame is the perfect parry. Once you take responsibility, you are in charge of the situation. If it is your fault, you have just knocked the wind out of this windbag. If you are even remotely involved, you are now positioned to take charge. If the situation is obviously not your fault, the bigwig looks and feels stupid. This important point bears repeating. Taking full responsibility for a problem gives you the best opportunity to deliver a solution. When you blame others, you take yourself out of play.

Welcome harmless venting.

A quiet and conscientious physician CEO was approached by several of his colleagues who demanded that he make a scene on their behalf. A director had made a mistake and they wanted her crucified publicly. They expected the CEO to ambush her in a public meeting and to humiliate her to their satisfaction. Naturally, they wanted to remain in the background, washing their hands of any responsibility for the carnage. The physician CEO understood that this was silly and counterproductive, but his colleagues made it clear that respecting their wishes was a test of his leadership. This leader was not about to behave badly to placate rabble-rousers, but he understood that some of the instigators would hold this against him forever. Did he need to vent about his frustration even though he knew he had done the right thing? You bet he did.

Everyone—even a bigwig—gets fed up and needs to blow off steam now and then. Mopping up emotional vomit is one of the things leaders are paid to do. Make yourself available for this duty. You will need someone to mop up after you someday too. Listen carefully and accept the bigwig's feelings. Don't offer unsolicited advice. Don't pass judgment about how the bigwig feels. Be sure to keep your mouth shut about these toxic spills. Your job is to protect the environment by containing the gall that might otherwise poison relationships forever.

Let the emotional dust settle.

An important customer stormed into the president's office to complain about an employee's behavior and to demand that the employee be fired. The customer was livid, determined to get satisfaction now. Knowing this customer's reputation for extreme sensitivity, his inclination to "spin" the facts to support his conclusions and his obvious pleasure in finding an issue he could flog publicly, the president listened, made careful notes and promised to investigate. His investigation revealed, not surprisingly, that the employee had a different perception of what had happened.

Moreover, the employee had witnesses eager to confirm that the demanding customer had been out of line.

The president got back to the customer with his findings and invited the customer to meet with everyone involved to resolve the dispute. Amazingly, the customer concluded it wasn't really such a big deal after all and agreed to drop the whole thing if the president would see to it that such an incident would never happen again.

Little can be resolved during the heat of the moment. Trying to reason with an aroused bigwig mid-rant will make matters worse. Look for the kernel of truth in the caustic maelstrom and focus on that. You will be tempted to embarrass frothing bigwigs by pointing out how ridiculous they look. Don't do it. Instead, help them find a way to save face. "I can see that you feel strongly about doing the right thing and I appreciate that," is a good opening. Every bigwig loves to hear how stressful his or her job is and how that pressure sometimes spills over when things don't go as they should. You may then have to postpone further discussion until the VIP has calmed down.

Little can be resolved during the heat of the moment. Trying to reason with an aroused bigwig mid-rant will make matters worse. Look for the kernel of truth in the caustic maelstrom and focus on that.

Change the rules of the game.

A manager wanted to take over a project from a fellow manager, but he wanted it to appear to be the boss's idea. He went to his boss and asked that the project be transferred, but he asked the boss to keep their conversation a secret because he "didn't want to hurt the other manager's feelings." Meanwhile, he recruited his friends to lobby on his behalf and leaked his intention to leave the company if he didn't get his way.

Changing the story to fit the audience is not limited to professional politicians. Dishonorable leaders who don't want their selfishness exposed pursue under-the-table deals that encourage others to fight their battles while they remain above the fray. When you see this game being played, change the rules by going public. Send manipulative provocateurs detailed letters outlining the issues they have raised in private meetings with you, and then make those letters available to appropriate organizational leaders. Decline to meet with these folk alone. Force them to make their own case to their peers. Don't fight their battles for them.

Remind yourself - and others - that perception is reality.

A physician, having a bad day, absentmindedly stomped into the nursing station, slammed a chart on the desk and swore at no one in particular. A nurse at the station perceived his outburst as a personal attack and complained to her supervisor. The supervisor spoke privately to the physician and suggested that he apologize to the offended nurse. The physician refused, insisting that his behavior was not directed at the nurse, and that he therefore could not be held responsible for her misperception and overreaction.

Organizational leaders often forget that they are responsible for managing others' perceptions—even when they are convinced that they are misperceptions. In fact, bigwigs are responsible for the misperceptions they leave in their wake. Mature organizational leaders recognize this and welcome the opportunity to clarify intentions and

to correct misunderstandings. When urging leaders to accept this responsibility, making a logical case will be more effective than lecturing or preaching.

Protect your flank.

A demanding surgeon insisted on scheduling an elective case at his convenience. This was inconsistent with the department's scheduling guidelines. The nursing manager declined to schedule the case, and the surgeon threw a fit, yelling that he would have her job. The surgeon then selected the organizational bigwig he suspected would be most likely to fold in the face of his distemper and made a call. But the seasoned nurse manager had seen this coming and had warned everyone up the chain that she would require their firm support if they expected her to hold the line. Instead of giving in to petulant demands, the leaders pointed out that verbal abuse was not only inconsistent with the organization's values, but that it would decrease the likelihood that the surgeon would experience scheduling happiness in the future.

When you decide to confront a bigwig about his or her misbehavior, make sure that your flank is covered. If these folks were honorable, they wouldn't be behaving this way. You can expect them to counter punch, and they will hit hard. They will go right to the top. Make sure you have already been there. Insist that key organizational bigwigs sign off on your plan before you implement it. It is critical that your superiors hold the line when the counterattack comes. Bear this in mind when others come to you for support. You cannot expect your subordinates to take a stand unless they can be certain that you will be there to support them when the going gets rough.

Confront the perpetrator directly whenever possible.

A powerful director complained to his boss about a fellow director. He had new evidence that this director was not pulling his weight. The irate director wanted something done about it and

he wanted it done now. Implicit in this approach was the expectation that the boss should take the problem off the frustrated director's hands.

That would be a big mistake. Put yourself in the accused director's shoes. If there were a problem, would you rather hear about it directly from your aggravated colleague or from your boss, making it obvious that your colleague went behind your back? Direct confrontation is not easy, but it is the only hope that you will resolve issues in a way that promotes long-term relationships. While there are obvious exceptions to this rule, approaching misbehaving colleagues directly is usually better than having higher-ranking bigwigs do the dirty work.

Focus on behavior, not motive.

Concentrate on what they did, not why they did it. When confronted with inappropriate behavior, petty demagogues usually clothe themselves in the tired defense that the outburst was justified by the utter incompetence of the underlings at the scene. They want to change the subject from their behavior to the organizational problems that trigger their righteous outbursts.

Don't fall for it. Admit that there might have been a problem and make it clear that you are willing and eager to address any legitimate concerns. Point out that bringing problems to others' attention in an appropriate way is a more effective strategy, but stay focused on the fact that their inappropriate behavior is the issue at hand.

Rewarding bigwig misbehavior with accelerated organizational accommodation is a common mistake. Other bigwigs see this happen and wonder if it wouldn't work for them too. Responsible leaders, hacking patiently through the bureaucratic jungle, grow weary of seeing their colleagues start wild fires, and they eventually question whether protecting organizational forests is really that important after all.

Understand but don't excuse.

When a specialist found herself in a difficult spot, she predictably began lashing out at others. Irritable to an extreme, she snarled at the nurses and found fault with everything and everyone. Someone was always to blame for the case going badly. Everyone in the neighborhood knew exactly what was going on except the doctor. Insecure, she defended against her overwhelming feelings of inadequacy by trying to distract herself and others. She fooled no one but herself.

Understanding why people behave as they do will keep you from overreacting and taking their stuff personally, but you should still hold them accountable for the way they behave.

Bigwigs who behave badly may be smart or rich or powerful, but they are rarely very complex. It's usually easy to see right through them. Understanding why people behave as they do will keep you from overreacting and taking their stuff personally, but you should still hold them accountable for the way they behave. Having flawed interpersonal skills or a fragile, immature ego is no excuse. You should keep your insights to yourself, though. While consulting a therapist might be a good idea, these characters rarely possess sufficient insight to recognize that something is amiss. Uninvited analysis just strengthens resistance, and it is even less welcome than fruitcake at Christmas.

Consider the power differential.

A low-ranking employee made a mistake that embarrassed her vice-president in front of his superiors. After withdrawing red-faced, the boss tore into the employee, reducing her to tears. She was a wonderful employee. It was just a mistake. We all make them.

Organizational executives, hearing this story, considered the employee's mistake a matter of no significance but viewed the vice-president's reaction as inexcusable. But the employee has no chance of understanding this. The difference in rank muddled things. His mistake was the more serious one but the power differential blinded the employee to that truth.

Every nuance of interpersonal conflict is amplified by a differential in power. Take this into account and insist that big shots face that reality. Force VIPs to be accountable for the weight they throw around. Most misbehaving bigwigs cherish their importance and use it to intimidate others at every opportunity, but they regularly protest ignorance when caught. Leaders with big sticks must walk softly. Most leaders are too enamoured with their sticks.

Don't let victims remain victims.

A group of nursing students fell out of favor with their professor. Unwilling to confront the conflict directly, the professor withdrew into an aloof pout. It was clear that the professor was aggravated and the students were petrified. A good recommendation from this professor was critical to their continued success. The students felt trapped and victimized.

The abuse of power is alive and well in most organizations and none of us will root out this stench by ourselves, but holding our noses and looking the other way is not the right answer.

Don't stand by and let this happen. Encourage victimized persons to speak with you confidentially. Offer to mediate. Confront the aggressor on the victims' behalf. Encourage aggrieved people to go up the chain of command if appropriate. Victims who are permitted to languish in a state of helplessness and hopelessness are soon scarred for life. The abuse of power is alive and well in most organizations and none of us will root out

this stench by ourselves, but holding our noses and looking the other way is not the right answer.

Give bad actors a chance to do the right thing.

Called out in the middle of the night, the orthopedist needed a critical imaging study to decide how to proceed. Through no fault of the technician, the equipment malfunctioned. The orthopedist was furious. The technician was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. The physician unloaded on her. The technician knew that the equipment failure was not her fault, but she felt responsible, and the doctor's verbal abuse made her feel even worse. While she was writing up the incident for her supervisor, the orthopedist was lying awake feeling guilty.

The next day, the orthopedist checked the schedule and saw that the same technician was on duty that night. He came in after midnight specifically to bring flowers and to apologize. He took full responsibility for his behavior and made it clear that he valued her contribution to the team. She accepted his apology and a real collegial relationship that would deepen over time was born.

If given the chance, some bunglers will make amends on their own. This is much preferred. The satisfactory resolution of significant conflict is the threshold for any lasting relationship. When the parties directly involved address and resolve the issue, your role should be limited to commending them both. The truth is, bigwigs are more likely to take responsibility for their inappropriate behavior in an environment where it is clear that if they don't take the initiative and apologize quickly, organizational leaders will hold them accountable. We are all less likely to drive recklessly when a trooper is in plain view.

Pick the best option and then follow through.

When a bigwig behaves badly, you have a range of options. You can ignore the episode or hire an

assassin—or choose one of the better alternatives in between. Take time to explore all of your available options. Consult with others. Those not directly involved in the battle often see opportunities that you have missed because the smoke is in your eyes.

There are always options. And there is always a best option. There may not be a good option. The problem with most of us is that we spend too much time looking for the painless option that does not exist.

After you have picked what you believe is the best option, you still have to follow through. When dealing with wayward bigwigs, it is best to choose a course of action that does not require a particular response from them. For example, it is usually not reasonable to expect an apology. If one is forthcoming, that is icing. But if you take the position that the aggrieved parties will not be mollified until the sinner has repented, you have given this organizational terrorist the right to hold the recovery process hostage. Whatever you decide to do, do it with dispatch and move on.

Don't protect wrongdoers from the consequences of their sin.

Faced with a malpractice suit, a physician insisted in her deposition that she had given an order to the nurse that he had neglected to carry out. The nurse in question was an exceptional and conscientious clinician, and everyone involved knew the doctor had lied to cover her butt. Sure, the nurses will still smile and make nice, but no nurse will ever trust that physician again.

A well-healed scar is the best a slasher can hope for. When bigwigs explode over minor things and blame others for their own shortcomings, lasting damage is done. If you try to minimize the consequences of such insults, you undermine your own credibility. This is not to say that you should join the grudge-holders' fraternity, but you should acknowledge the reality that most wrongs, even when forgiven, are not forgotten.

Reinforce improved behavior.

A talented salesman became the chief organizational arsonist. A destructive dervish, he danced to the fiery music played by fiends sidelined by cynicism and resentment. He avoided pitched battles, and favored hit-and-run tactics, wild fire diversions and the occasional ambush. He became an accomplished guerilla fighter. Because he was the company's best producer, he was indispensable. Charismatic and persuasive, he recruited naïve partisans to his cause.

Suddenly, he hit a wall. He lost a number of his best accounts and his productivity fell off. His immaturity emerged into bold relief. This failure precipitated an organizational epiphany. He realized that the bilious puppeteers were pulling his strings because they enjoyed the show, not because they wanted things to improve. He realized that being part of the solution is more satisfying than remaining part of the problem. With this new insight, he began to transform himself into one of the organization's most inspirational and effective leaders.

People do change sometimes. Praise God and pass out the accolades when they do. Most venomous bigwigs will continue to cause problems until they are contained or removed from the organization. But those leaders who sincerely recognize the error of their ways and redirect their passions accordingly become rare organizational treasures. Confronting them early in their careers as destructive gadflies is the key to turning them around. Let their disruptive tendencies go unchallenged too long, and they will harden into career malcontents, poisoning the atmosphere wherever they live and breathe.

When the life of the organization is at stake, shoot to kill.

A powerful bank executive terrorized employees, plotted against enemies and tried to buy those in positions of power. He thrived on intimidation and secrecy. Because he was moody and

petulant, those around him immediately knew whether they were in or out of favor, but they never knew exactly why. Many concluded that he was unassailable. Most of his peers were hesitant to challenge him and his subordinates were resigned. Leaders on the bank's board of trustees held him in high esteem. Complaints of sexism and bigotry were buried. Those not totally paralyzed began to look for other jobs.

Sensing that the very future of the bank was in peril, his peers decided this was a hill that mattered, and they made up their minds to take it or die trying. They pulled out all the stops. They planned and practiced and they attacked with everything they had. They took the hill. In battles like this, half-hearted skirmishes will not do.

When you decide it's time to take an offender out, use overwhelming force. Take time to build a compelling case. Carefully document the transgressions that demonstrate a pattern of destructiveness that cannot be tolerated. Attempting to beat them at their own game is a serious mistake. The ultimate decision-makers in the organization must be convinced of the soundness of your argument. Those who have never engaged cornered bigwigs always think dealing with them is a lot simpler than it is. This challenge is usually a fight to the death. Don't show your hand until you are certain you have a winner. Premature or tentative assaults on enemy fiefdoms are usually rebuffed, and the injuries suffered by the virtuous knights may strengthen the positions of the evil warlords instead.

Take a look in the mirror.

Most vexing bigwigs think they are perfectly justified in behaving as they do. Their behavior works for them. For the reasons outlined above, they often get away with it. If there is no consequence to speak of, it must not be much of a problem. Many of these incendiaries come to believe their outbursts provide a valuable organizational service. Convinced that the organization's formal leaders are either stupid or underhanded, they come to think of their malicious activism as a kind of civil disobedience.

This comforting tendency to rationalize what we do means we should all take a closer look at ourselves. How do you behave when you get upset? Do you react differently with superiors than you do with your subordinates? Do your subordinates enjoy an open and comfortable relationship with you that encourages constructive feedback and challenge? Do you find that you are often angry and chronically resentful? Do you keep a mental "enemies" list? Do you secretly admire the coaches that throw chairs, the physicians that fling charts and the golfers that shatter clubs? Are you easily outraged, particularly when you feel you have been slighted? Is there a big difference in how you behave when you are safely ensconced with your cronies and when you realize you are being observed? If you have answered "yes" to any of these questions, you are at risk of being or becoming a bigwig that behaves badly.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, churlish behavior is never in short supply. Always discouraging, it is most damaging when indulged in by people of stature and clout in the organizations that we support and love. As an organizational leader, you are obligated to confront brutish behavior wherever you encounter it—whether in yourself or others. You will need wisdom, experience, determination, support, a few practical strategies, a good heart and a lot of luck.

About the Author

Dr. Stewart is the Vice President for Medical Affairs and the Chief Medical Officer of Southern Ohio Medical Center, and the Chairman and CEO of the SOMC Medical Care Foundation, Inc., a multi-specialty physician practice group, in Portsmouth, Ohio. Dr. Stewart is a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at the Ohio University College of Osteopathic Medicine, and he also still practices adult psychiatry part-time.

Dr. Stewart was born and raised in Rome, Georgia. He graduated from Berry College in Mount Berry, Georgia and received his MD from the Medical College of Georgia. He completed his psychiatric residency at the Medical College of Georgia and then served as Chief of the Mental Health Clinic at the US Air Force Hospital near Rapid City, South Dakota. He opened his private practice in Portsmouth in 1981. He returned to graduate school and earned an MBA from Ohio University in 1999.

Dr. Stewart is a Diplomate of the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and a Distinguished Lifetime Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association. He is a past president of the Ohio Psychiatric Association.

Dr. Stewart is a former Chairman of The Ohio Partnership for Excellence. He also served as a member of the Board of Examiners for the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award. Dr. Stewart is the senior author of, "A Portable Mentor for Organizational Leaders," a book published by SOMCPress in 2003. He and his wife, Fay, have two grown sons.

