



THE
Upside of Assholes:

IS THERE VIRTUE IN
BAD WORKPLACE BEHAVIOR?

BY BOB SUTTON



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I despise nasty bosses and peers, those creeps who leave behind a trail of demeaned and de-energized victims. I call them assholes because, at least for me, more polite synonyms, such as bully, abuser, despot, or tyrant, don't quite capture the pain and anger that these creeps provoke in others. And when I am nasty to someone or use humor to put them down, I don't say to myself, "Bob, you are acting like an abusive person; you've got to be nicer." I tell myself, "You are acting like an asshole; shame on you."

This little obsession drove me to write *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't* (Warner, 2007). This book is about the dark side of demeaning people. “Workplace bullying” is a widespread problem, a fate suffered by approximately 1 in 5 workers, and in some occupations, the problem is far more severe. For example, surveys show that 90% of nurses report being victims of abuse ranging from taunting, to insults, to being treated as if they are invisible—especially by doctors. There is emotional and financial damage inflicted by nasty people: Workplace bullies provoke anxiety, depression, reduced self-esteem, as well as physical symptoms, in victims. And abusive bosses provoke reduced effort and commitment, and increased turnover and absenteeism, among their underlings.

Companies might be wise to calculate their “total cost of assholes,” as the damage that these creeps do is sometimes surprisingly high. Consider the case of “Ethan,” who was consistently ranked in among the top 5% of producers in a Silicon Valley company. My conversations with senior executives suggest that Ethan qualifies as a certified asshole: his temper is legendary, he treats his coworkers as rivals—routinely insulting and belittling them, his nasty late night email rants are infamous, and many insiders refuse to work with him. His last assistant lasted less than a year. Meanwhile, HR managers and, at times, senior executives, were spending huge chunks of time running interference between Ethan and the company’s support network. In the prior 5 years, several colleagues and administrative assistants had lodged “hostile workplace” complaints against Ethan. The company also spent a substantial amount of money on Ethan’s anger management classes and counseling. When the HR people sat down and calculated the total cost of this one asshole for one year it came out to \$160,000. They didn’t fire him; but they did deduct about \$100,000 from his bonus.

So, I decided to write a book that focuses on what it takes to build a company that screens out, trains, and rewards people for treating others in a civilized fashion, reforming employees who fail to do so, and expelling incorrigible bullies. Yet, as much as I despise workplace assholes (including myself when my inner jerk rears his ugly head), I am also committed to a fact-based approach to organizational life. My commitment to evidence-based management means that I try to argue as if

I am right, but listen as if I am wrong. In that spirit, *The No Asshole Rule* contains a chapter on the virtues of assholes. I didn't want to write it, but the data made me do it!

I started writing my chapter on the upside of assholes after some of my closest and smartest friends kept arguing that it was a necessary evil. They convinced me that the book would be naïve and incomplete without it. And they kept raising compelling examples of people who seem to succeed BECAUSE of—rather than DESPITE—being certified assholes. Exhibit one was Steve Jobs, who is CEO of Apple and now the largest shareholder in Disney (after he sold them Pixar). It sometimes seems

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as if his full name is “Steve Jobs, that asshole.” When I was writing the book, I put “Steve Jobs” and “asshole” in Google and got 52,400 matches—I just googled it again and got 100,000 matches. Not content to stop there, I asked some insiders to nominate the most (allegedly) demeaning leaders in entertainment and high-technology to get some “comparison assholes,” as Jobs’ companies are in these industries. Michael Eisner, former Disney CEO, was mentioned constantly; yet “Michael Eisner” and “asshole” produced a relatively paltry 10,500 hits (I just got 1,370). And in high-technology, Oracle’s infamously difficult “Larry Ellison” and “asshole” generated a mere 560 hits (1080 hits a few minutes ago).

I am a professor in the Stanford Engineering School, and I talk to lots of industry groups that visit Stanford and in the Silicon Valley—and if I just mention that I have written a book about assholes, someone nearly always comes up to me (they just about always start by saying “don’t use my name, but...”) and tells me a story about Steve Jobs. The most scary, and entertaining, stories come from people who have worked directly with Jobs. *Wired* magazine summed up a reunion of 1300 ex-Apple employees in 2003 by saying even though Jobs didn’t attend, he was the main topic of conversation, especially tales of his tirades and tantrums. In one attendee’s words, “Everyone has their Steve-Jobs-the-asshole story.” Take the manager I spoke with (just days after it happened) about a tantrum that Jobs had at his now-defunct computer company, NeXT. He told me that Jobs started screaming and making threats because the color of the new NeXT vans did not precisely match the shade of white that the manufacturing facility was painted. To appease Jobs, NeXT manufacturing managers had to spend precious hours (and thousands of dollars) getting the vans repainted in exactly the same shade.

Yet the people who tell these stories also report that Jobs is among the most imaginative, decisive, and persuasive people they’ve ever met. He inspires astounding effort and creativity from his people. And all suggest—although his tantrums and nasty critiques have driven the people around him crazy and driven many away—they are a crucial part of his success, especially his pursuit of perfection and relentless desire to make beautiful things. One Silicon Valley insider recently told me that he had seen Jobs demean many people, and made some of them cry, but added, “He was almost always right.” Even those who despise him most, ask me, “So, doesn’t Jobs prove that some assholes are worth the trouble?”

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For me, it wouldn't be worth the trouble to work with Jobs or someone like him. But I've become convinced that it is naïve to assume that assholes always do more harm than good. So this essay, and the longer chapter from my book that it draws on, considers the upside of assholes. Beware, however, that these ideas are dangerous: They provide ammunition that jerks can use to justify, and even glorify, their penchant for demeaning others.

The Virtues of Nastiness

GAINING PERSONAL POWER AND STATURE

Numerous studies show that we expect powerful people to spew out anger at powerless people, and there is also evidence that such nastiness can help people gain more influence over others. Even if we don't realize it, we expect powerful people to express pride and take credit when things go well, and to convey anger and blame toward underlings when things go wrong. One reason that alpha males and females act like bullies is we let them, actually subtly encourage them, to get away with it.

Studies by Stanford's Lara Tiedens and her colleagues suggest it is often a "kiss-up, slap down world," and the strategic use of anger and blame can help push you up the hierarchy and knock others down. Tiedens demonstrated this in an experiment where she showed subjects film clips of then U.S. President Bill Clinton (during U.S. Senate debates about whether he should be impeached): In one clip, Clinton expressed anger about the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal, and in the other, he expressed

sadness. Subjects who viewed an angry Clinton were more likely to say he should be allowed to remain in office and not be severely punished, and that “The impeachment matter should be dropped”—in short, he should be allowed to keep his power. Teidens’ concludes from this experiment, and from a host of related studies, that although they are seen as “unlikeable and cold,” people who use a strategic use of anger—outbursts, snarling expressions, staring straight ahead, and “strong hand gestures” like pointing and jabbing—“create the impression that the expresser is competent.”

More broadly, leadership research shows that subtle nasty moves like glaring and condescending comments, explicit moves like insults or putdowns, and even physical intimidation can be effective paths to power. Rod Kramer, another Stanford colleague, showed in the *Harvard Business Review* how “intimidators” including former U.S. President Lyndon Johnson, former Hewlett-Packard CEO Carly Fiorina, former Miramax head Harvey Weinstein, former Disney CEO Michael Eisner, and of course, Apple CEO Steve Jobs gained and expanded their power through the strategic use of nasty stares, put downs, and bullying. Kramer explains how Lyndon Johnson studied other people closely, and used strategic insults and temper tantrums that were fine-tuned to play on the insecurities of fellow politicians. And he reports that Carly Fiorina was admired and feared for her ability to “stare down opponents.”

Kramer focuses on the power of intimidation. But there is also evidence that being a nasty jerk can help you get ahead in another way: By making you seem smarter than others. Jeffrey Pfeffer and I saw this style of power-grabbing in action when we studied a large financial institution a few years back, where people seemed to get ahead for saying smart things rather than doing smart things. Putting down other people and their ideas was part of the status game at the company. These attacks were often done in front of senior management, as junior executives used biting criticisms (which sometimes bordered on personal attacks) to move their targets down the pecking order and to move themselves up. These nasty status games might be explained by research on the

“Brilliant but Cruel” effect uncovered by Harvard’s Teresa Amabile. She did a controlled experiment with book reviews: some reviews were nasty and others were nice. Amabile found that negative and unkind people were seen as less likeable but more intelligent, competent, and expert than those who expressed the same messages in kinder and gentler ways.

INTIMIDATING AND VANQUISHING RIVALS

As Rod Kramer shows, threats and intimidation can be used for gaining and sustaining a position at the top of the heap. Just like “alpha male” baboons that glare at, bite, and push their fellow primates to maintain their standing, people bully others to gain and sustain status. The use and virtues of intimidation to gain power over rivals is most obvious when physical threats are routine. If you’ve seen the *The Godfather* or *The Sopranos*, you’ve watched mob bosses and organizations sustain dominance through threats and violence. My father learned that these aren’t just fictional stories when he and a business partner tried to go into the vending machine business in Chicago during the early 1960’s. They tried to place vending machines in bowling alleys, restaurants, and other places that dispensed candy and cigarettes. Vending machines were controlled by organized crime at the time, as it was a cash business that produced revenues that were difficult to trace. My father and his partner were warned that if they didn’t get out of the business, they would be harmed. My dad went back to his old job. But his partner remained defiant—until the mobsters broke his legs and he decided that, after all, it was a good idea to get out of the business.

Intimidation is also part of the game in sports, especially in football, boxing, and rugby, where winning entails gaining physical dominance over opponents. But it also helps people succeed in sports where physical domination is less explicit, such as baseball. The great Hall of Fame outfielder Ty Cobb was perhaps most famous for bullying his way to dominance. Ernest Hemingway put it harshly, but fairly, “Ty Cobb, the greatest of all ballplayers—and an absolute shit.” He played from 1904 to 1928, had over 4000 hits and a lifetime batting average of .367. Cobb was infamous for

hurting opponents and getting in fights with teammates, opponents, and virtually anyone else he encountered on and off the field; his motto was “Give me room or get hurt.” Cobb’s biographer Al Stump described what happened when a player named Bill Barbeau tried to stop him from sliding into second base: “A hurtling body, spikes extended, had hit Barbeau at the knees, sending him backward, stunned. Torn from his grip, the ball had rolled into the outfield. Cobb was safe. Barbeau’s leg had been cut, and the game-winning run had scored.”

MOTIVATING FEAR-DRIVEN PERFORMANCE AND PERFECTIONISM

Fear can be a powerful motivator, driving people to avoid the sting of punishment and public humiliation. A huge body of psychological research shows that rewards are more effective motivators than punishments, and there is substantial evidence that people and teams learn and perform much more effectively when their workplace isn’t ridden with fear. Yet there is also psychological research going back at least to famous psychologist B.F. Skinner that, although less effective than rewards, people will work to avoid punishment. And famous sociologists including Erving Goffman have also shown that people will go to great lengths to avoid public embarrassment. Numerous famous leaders have instilled the fear of punishment, scorn, and humiliation in their subordinates, and apparently have used it to good effect. Rod Kramer described how the famously tough U.S. General George S. Patton used to practice his scowling “General’s face” in front of the mirror, because “he wanted it to be as terrifying and menacing a countenance as he could possibly make it.” Patton’s soldiers feared his wrath, but also fought hard for him because they admired his courage and did not want to let him down.

BRINGING UNFAIR, CLUELESS, AND LAZY PEOPLE TO THEIR SENSES

Unfortunately, even if you aren't a certified asshole, and even if you despise people who deserve the label and avoid them like the plague, there are times when it is useful to play the part of a temporary asshole to get something that you need or deserve. Polite people who never complain or argue are delightful to be around, but these doormats are often victims of nasty, indifferent, or greedy people. There is much evidence that the squeaky wheel DOES get the grease. To illustrate, if you don't complain to your health insurance company when they initially decline to pay a medical bill, the odds are virtually zero that they will reverse the decision and send you a check later. But complaining apparently pays off. A recent study by researchers at the Rand Corporation and Harvard University found that, of 405 appeals by patients to U.S. insurance companies that denied payment for emergency room visits, 90% were eventually paid, for an average payout of about \$1100.

Certainly, for both your own mental health and the mental health of your targets, all complaints and other efforts to get what you deserve and to bring people to their senses ought to be made, for starters, in a polite way. But there are times when getting nasty, even having a strategic temper tantrum, seems to be the only method that gets through to people. In the 1990's, I studied telephone bill collectors. I spent hours listening in on their collection calls, went through a week training,

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and spent about 20 hours making my own collection calls to people who were late with their Visa and MasterCard payments. We were taught to “slam” debtors who seemed too calm or indifferent about their late bills. Skilled collectors used a harsh and tense tone with debtors who didn’t seem “worried enough” about their bills; they made (legitimate) threats like, “Do you ever want to buy a house? Do you ever want to buy a car? If you do, you better pay up right now.” The best collectors were especially nasty to the nice, relaxed, or seemingly indifferent debtors— because it helped create “alarm” and a “feeling of urgency.”

The Upshot

SOME VIRTUES ARE REAL, MANY ARE DANGEROUS DELUSIONS

The unfortunate truth is that, yes, there are advantages to acting like an asshole. If you want to be the best asshole that you can possibly be for yourself and your organization, see the following “Do You Want to Be an Effective Asshole?”. But I should warn you that these ideas are dangerous: People who are destructive jerks can use the ideas to justify and glorify their wicked ways. The weight of the evidence shows that workplace assholes do far more harm than good. Sure, there are successful assholes out there, but you don’t have to act like a jerk to have a successful career or lead a successful organization. There are lots of warm and caring people to demonstrate this point. I think of successful business leaders like A.G. Lafley of Procter & Gamble, John Chambers of Cisco, Richard Branson of Virgin, and Ann Mulchay of Xerox. I think of Oprah Winfrey and one of the most thoughtful and polite superstars of all time, Elvis Presley.

Do You Want to Be an Effective Asshole?

1. Expressing anger, even nastiness, can be an effective method for grabbing and keeping power. Climb to the top of the heap by elbowing your “colleagues” out of the way by expressing anger rather than sadness, or perfecting a “general’s face” like George S. Patton.

2. Nastiness and intimidation are especially effective for vanquishing competitors.

Follow in the footsteps of baseball legend Ty Cobb, and succeed by snarling at, bullying, putting-down, threatening, and psyching-out your opponents.

3. If you demean your people to motivate them, alternate it with (at least occasional) encouragement and praise. Alternate the “carrot” and the “stick,” because the contrast between the two makes your wrath seem harsher and your occasional kindnesses seem even sweeter.

4. Create a “toxic tandem.” If you are nasty, team up with someone who can calm people down, clean-up your mess, and who will extract favors and extra work from people because they are so grateful to the “good cop.” If you are “too nice,” you might “rent-a-jerk,” perhaps a consultant, a manager from temporary staffing firm, or lawyer.

5. Being all asshole, all the time, won’t work. Effective assholes have the ability to release their venom at just the right moment, and turn it off when just enough destruction or humiliation has been inflicted on their victim.

This then raises a difficult question: Why do so many people act like an assholes and believe it is generally effective even though there is so much evidence that it is a downright stupid way to act? My hunch is that many assholes are blinded by several intertwined features of human judgment and organizational life. If you are concerned that you or someone else you know is suffering from such delusions of effectiveness, see the attached, “Why Assholes Fool Themselves,” which highlights two major blind spots. The first is that, although many jerks succeed despite rather than because of

their vile ways, they erroneously conclude that their nastiness is crucial to their success. One reason this happens, as much psychological research shows, is that most people look for and remember facts that confirm their biases, while they simultaneously avoid and forget facts that contradict their dearly-held beliefs. The second blind spot stems from defensive measures that victims use to protect themselves from the asshole's cruel and vindictive actions—which shield assholes from realizing the damage they inflict. Victims learn to avoid their oppressor's wrath by only reporting good news and remaining silent about, and even hiding, bad news. This feeds an asshole's delusions of effectiveness.

Why Assholes Fool Themselves: Are You Suffering From Delusions of Effectiveness?

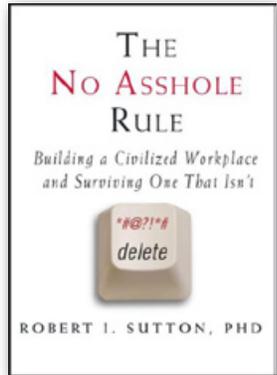
- 1. You and your organization are effective DESPITE rather than BECAUSE you are a demeaning jerk.** You make the mistake of attributing success to the virtues of your nasty ways, even though your demeaning actions actually undermine performance.
- 2. You mistake your successful power grab for organizational success.** The skills that get you a powerful job are different—often the opposite—than the skills needed to do the job well.
- 3. The news is bad, but people only tell you good news.** The “shoot the messenger” problem means that people are afraid to give you bad news, because you will blame and humiliate them. So you think things are going great, even though problems abound.
- 4. You are being charged “asshole taxes,” but don't know it.** You are such a jerk that people will only be willing to work for you and your company if you pay them premium rates.
- 5. Your enemies are silent (for now), but the list keeps growing.** Your demeaning actions mean that, day after day, you turn more people against you, and you don't realize it. Your enemies don't have the power to trash you right now, but are laying in wait to drive you out.

Finally, assholes also often don't realize that every time they demean someone their list of enemies grows longer day after day. Fear compels most of their enemies to stay silent, at least for a while. But as their enemies' numbers and power grows, they can lie in wait until something happens to weaken the bully's position, such as organizational performance problems or a small scandal. Then they pounce—and knock the bully out of power. Indeed, this appears to be at least part of the story behind several recent CEO firings including Disney's Michael Eisner and Hewlett-Packard's Carly Fiorina.

I believe that my life and the lives of the people I care about are too short and too precious to spend our days surrounded by jerks.

In closing, I want to make my personal beliefs crystal clear. Even if there were no performance advantages to barring, expelling, and reforming nasty and demeaning people, I'd still want organizations to enforce the no asshole rule. I believe that my life and the lives of the people I care about are too short and too precious to spend our days surrounded by jerks. We all die in the end, and despite whatever "rational" virtues assholes may enjoy, I prefer to avoid mean-spirited jerks and will continue to question why so many of us tolerate, justify, and glorify so much demeaning behavior from so many people. After all, even if acting like an asshole helps you win, in my book, you are still an asshole and I don't want to get near you.

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For more details or to buy a copy of Robert Sutton's *The No Asshole Rule*, [click here](#).

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[Robert I. Sutton](#), a professor of Management Science and Engineering at Stanford Engineering School, is the best selling author, with Jeffrey Pfeffer, of [The Knowing-Doing Gap: How Smart Firms Turn Knowledge Into Action and Hard Facts](#) and [Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense: Profiting from Evidence-Based Management](#). He is also the author of [Weird Ideas that Work: 11 ½ Practices for Promoting, Managing, and Sustaining Innovation](#). In addition, he has consulted for and spoken at companies including Proctor & Gamble, IDEO, SAP, People Magazine, Institute for the Future and McKinsey, and shared his research and opinions on television and in publications nationwide. This manifesto is based on his newest book, *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't* (Warner, 2007).

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