



Get Rid of the Jerks

Bob Tobin

What's the best way to have a better life?

Just do this one thing: Get rid of the jerks.

Yes, that's right, get rid of those people who are bothering you, the people who hold you back, the ones who don't appreciate you, the ones who complain all the time, the ones who are always criticizing you, the ones who drive you nuts, the ones who just tolerate you. In short, the jerks.

I have had them in my life. Too many of them. Consulting clients who always pushed for a price cut and were never satisfied with the work I had done for them. Faculty colleagues who spent more time spreading rumors than doing research. Gossipers who would suck me in to conversations berating others. I often didn't know they were jerks because it was so comfortable being with them. I just figured everyone was like that. It took me a while to learn otherwise.

I know from personal experience that it can be hard to get rid of the jerks. I suffered for too long with an accounting firm that did not add any value and, in fact, wasted our time. I had a long relationship with the senior partner, so I was reluctant to make the switch. A junior accountant would come to our offices and check over every single one of our receipts and question us about the smallest expenditures. He sat in the corner of our offices, spent hours checking the receipts and sales, and bothered the other consultants. Even a government tax examiner would have added more value and asked fewer questions.

Finally, we got rid of this accountant and now have a great one who is also a business partner. She helps us, gives advice, and wants to help grow the business. And she's less expensive than the accountant we fired.

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When you think about the jerks, ask yourself, “Why do I tolerate this behavior from this person?” or “Why am I spending time with this person?” Too often, you might stick with someone just because you’re used to each other. It’s only when you make a change that you realize how much better your life is.

You may think that it’s better to try to change the jerk. But let’s be serious. They will change when you change. Maybe you can change them, but don’t make that your goal. Instead, think of yourself first. Think about how much easier life will be without them. It’s easier to get rid of them than you think. But first you have to know who they are.

Do you know who the jerks are in your life? It’s not so easy to tell because your judgment might be clouded. People don’t come right up to say to you, “I’m a jerk,” or “I’m bad for you”. We usually find people whose views of the world are the same as ours. We may have chosen to be with them because of our own fears that they also share. Their views about who we are also reflect the way we see ourselves. But as we change and see ourselves more positively, we are less willing to be with people who do not value us. We no longer will tolerate others’ bad behavior.

If you have even a sneaking suspicion that some of your relationships, business and personal, are less than the best, take a careful look at them from some distance. Ask yourself whether you would choose to be with this person if they were just coming into your life now.

In case you're not sure who the jerks are, your body will give you some clues. You get a headache when you spend time with them, you do what you can to avoid them, or your stomach tightens up when they head your way. When you're trying to get some work done, they come in and plant themselves in your cubicle and you want to physically push them away. For me, it's usually the urge [although I mostly resist] to roll my eyes, or say OMG, or say to myself, "what am I doing with this person?"

Sometimes it's obvious who the jerks are. They're the ones who yell, complain, criticize everything and everyone. No one wants to work with them or be with them. Their friends are either non-existent or are newcomers who may not know better.

But it's not always so obvious. There are those friends and colleagues who keep us stuck and keep us from achieving what is possible. They tell us: "I don't think you should take that job/join that gym/go out with that guy." Of course they may have our best interests in mind, but it's also possible they are worried about us leaving them or surpassing them.

Not sure if someone is a jerk? Ask yourself what the impact of this person on your life is. Good or bad. It's a simple test that works. If the answer comes back "bad", and you're still not sure you want to get rid of them, just try spending less time with them, and ask yourself if your life is better.

You don't have to push the jerks out in a huff or get mad at them. You don't necessarily have to confront the jerks once you are ready to say goodbye. Just let them gently slide away and out of your life. Or even better, you slowly drift away from them.

If they're in your group of friends, your social circle, your golf or running club, your church or temple, you can start by spending a lot less time with them when you see them. When they call and say, "let's catch up", let them know you're busy, even if you're just gonna soak in the tub.

If you see them at a party with a bunch of friends you like, remember you have a choice about whom you talk with. Say hello, be polite, but before you get into a long conversations, excuse yourself and go up for another refill on your drink or say, "I have to run to the toilet"

Getting rid of the jerks goes for Facebook friends too. Facebook and all the social media are a way of getting to know someone, but it's also a place where jerks show up. When you have a continuous negative reaction to what someone posts, why not un-friend them or at least stop following their feed? Make life more pleasant for yourself.

At a recent conference, one guy told me how someone on their twitter feed was driving them nuts. I suggested he un-follow them. "Not a bad idea," he said. "But" he told me, "I want to know what this person is thinking about." OK, I get it. There may be some value in that—maybe the person is a competitor-but if that's the case, why waste a lot of time and get upset about it?

When I think about whom I want in my life, I like to surround myself with people who are doing something, not talking about doing something. I like people who don't gossip, people who value me, people who are fun to be with, people who like to laugh.

When people tell me they're not sure which jerks to cut, I suggest a rating scale. On a scale of 1 to 10 [with 10 being the highest], is this person someone you enjoy being with? Is he or she someone who enhances your life? Start with cutting the ones who come up as 1. When all the numbers comes back as 5 or lower, it's time to take some action, but you don't have to cut everyone all at once either.

You may very well be alone or even lonely for a while as you get rid of some of the jerks. That's one of the fears that many people have as they let go of the people in their life that they consider jerks.

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Some people create a worst case scenario in their head about being alone forever lying in the hospital hooked up to an IV with no visitors.

Do you really think that being with jerks is worse than being alone? Imagine being surrounded by jerks on your dying bed. Instead of helping you, they complain about their own wrinkles, the high cost of parking in the hospital parking lot, their fights with the boss and then they tell you that you look terrible.

When the jerks are all gone, you will likely have a transition period where you will be spending more time alone. Honestly, it's sometimes better to spend time alone. As you have more time for yourself, you'll be able to figure out whom you want in your life. And, although it may be hard to believe, the blank time in your schedule will not last forever unless you want it to. Have confidence that there are new people out there for you.

It is more likely that as the jerks disappear, the people you want will fill your life. You'll be open to meeting new people; you'll have more energy; and you'll attract others to you—for the simple reason that you have rid yourself of those who were hampering your life. You can soon spend more time with the people you want to be with, the people who support you and want the best for you. They may have stayed away because of some of the other friends you had. Others will be attracted by an unencumbered you.

Getting rid of the jerks is something you can do not only with your circle of friends and acquaintances, but at work as well. In an organization, it's a bit different, but far from impossible. No matter where you work you can get rid of most jerks. Start by spending a lot less time with them. If there are people you consider jerks in your department or organization, do what you can to minimize the amount of time you spend with them, or get rid of them.

You may not have the power to kick them out of your organization, but you can make some moves so you don't have to work with them or be around them. It's easier to deal with the person in HR you get along with instead of the one who just begrudgingly handles the tasks you work on together.

Say no to certain projects and make it your policy to work with people you want to work with. You won't always be able to pull this off, but you can at least decrease your interaction with the jerks. And as you change, it is likely they will change the way they treat you. Jerks are not always jerks to everyone.

When it comes time for lunch, rather than going out with people you don't like, take a walk by yourself or eat at your desk for a while. I've taught in universities in America and all over Asia, but there were many times I ate by myself in my office, rather than going to the faculty room where I'd listen to people complain.

If it's your boss who's a jerk, it won't be so easy to push them out. You may decide that you'll tolerate certain kinds of behavior for a short time because of what you're learning, or because you think the name value of the company or group will be an asset in the future. You might also think or hope, the boss may not last long in this position and may be replaced as their bad behavior will eventually be addressed by the organization. This does happen, but it may take longer than you think.

If your colleague or boss is a meddler, a micro manager, an interrupter, a control freak, you may want to cut out a piece of work for yourself where you can work independently and then set up a schedule of dates when you can check in or have a review. Depending on the nature of your work, schedule a weekly call or meeting. That's what one coaching client set up with the regional president he reported to in New York. Rather than talking only when there was a crisis, they kept in closer communication with weekly calls. In this way, she headed off the ongoing reviews and interruptions. Again, as you change, it is likely that their behavior towards you will also change.

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Did You Create The Jerks?

When it comes to the jerks, you have to be willing to look at your own behavior. It may not be easy to admit, but you may have created the jerk. You could have been overly critical of someone, unwittingly set them up to fail, or done something to offend them. Perhaps things never got resolved and rather than talking about it, both of you have become adversaries.

At the end of a recent talk I gave, a young CEO of an internet company, asked me how a perfectly good manager, a vice-president of his company, could suddenly become a jerk. He told me how they had worked together since the start of the firm which had rapidly expanded to about 300 employees. When the business began to slow, the CEO asked the manager to give termination notices to some people who were earning the highest salary. The vice-president refused, thinking it would be better to use a different approach. A fight ensued and eventually the president stepped in and fired four of the vice-president's staff and threatened the vice-president with losing his job as well. The vice-president soon became a problem employee. I didn't have to explain how that happened. After we talked, the CEO recognized that he created this situation.

Is there someone on your team you consider a jerk? Be willing to consider that you might have created them by the way you treated them. If you change your behavior and react to them differently or interact with them less, they may stop being jerks, or at least stop being a jerk with you.

One question I often get is, “what if the jerk is my biggest client”? They call at all hours of the night, are never satisfied, and are always adding work to the original scope of work without any additional compensation. It may not be wise to get rid of them [at least right away] because they provide you and your organization with a good revenue stream. It also might not be your choice.

Many years ago a friend told me, “Bad clients drive out good clients.” When you have a client who is draining your energy and taking an inordinate amount of your time, it leaves you less energy and time for other clients. New clients could be wary of working with you if they recognize that another one of your clients is a bad actor—a jerk.

The first step is for you to begin to change the way you work with them. Think of how the relationship got this way. Did you do anything to create this jerk—or monster—by always agreeing to their requests no matter how unreasonable. If so, it may be time to change your behavior. Set or re-set some guidelines on how you will work together. Things may change.

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But there are other options, including trading this client to other colleagues who might work more effectively with them. If you do dump them and have some blank time, you can give some thought to the kind of clients you want and how to find them.

Be careful about the new clients you take on. You have to be sure not to partner with another jerk, in the same way that some people go from one bad marriage to the next.

Don't forget that in the same way that bad clients keep good clients away, good employees and friends can be kept away in a company because of a culture that tolerates too many jerks. Bad employees drive out the best employees. If you are having trouble attracting the best people in your organization, it may be because there are some jerks there that others do not want to work with. The best people want to work with the best.

There are those times when nothing seems to work with the jerks and you have to keep them in your life for some reason. [They might be relatives.] What can you do? To begin with, minimize the amount of time you spend with them—once or twice a year at Thanksgiving and Christmas is often enough.

You also can make certain topics off-limits. When I was in my twenties, my parents would frequently ask me when I was getting married, but at the time I had no intention of getting married. Invariably, we would argue and resort to name calling. I wanted to still see my

parents, so we agreed to make the topic off-limits. You too can make certain hot-button issues not open for discussion with certain people.

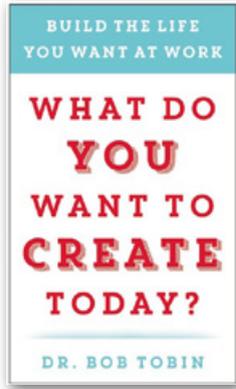
The best bosses, co-workers and clients are those who support you in what you are doing. They help you succeed. They get you involved in challenging projects. They are happy to see you progress. When you see them or work with them, you feel energized, not drained.

They value you, not tolerate you. When you get rid of the jerks and choose the best people, you'll be able to do more of what you want to do and you'll have a greater impact in the work you do. You'll welcome the connection you feel with others. You'll feel more powerful, not beaten down or second-guessed. The work you do matters, but whom you spend time with is critical to having a great life.

The economist John Maynard Keynes wrote, "The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from old ones." He was referring to ideas, but the same applies to people too. Leaving the old acquaintances is the hardest part.

You don't need any jerks in your life. It's time to live with the No Jerks Rule. 📌

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Bob Tobin has been a member of the faculty at Keio University in Tokyo since 1989 and his teaching, research and consulting focus on change and creativity in international business. His courses aim to developing the ideas, skills, talent and imagination of tomorrow's leaders and innovators. He has taught in the graduate program of Boston University, the MBA program of Pepperdine University, and has held visiting appointments at Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok, Cebu Doctors College in the Philippines, and the University of South Australia. You can learn more about his consulting and speaking [here](#).

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