

UNLIMITED POTENTIAL

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Newsletter

No Jerks at Work: Preventing Desk Rage

It's a sign of the times when a well-known Stanford professor and best-selling author publishes a book titled *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't* (Warner Business Books, 2007). Robert I. Sutton argues that variations of terms like creep, jerk and bully don't carry the same authenticity or emotional appeal.

Certainly, everyone knows what he's talking about. We've all experienced the nastiness of a tormentor or unconstrained egomaniac who abuses power and intimidates others. Sutton defines two kinds: temporary and certified, which he qualifies with two tests:

1. After talking with the alleged jerk, the "target" feels oppressed, humiliated, de-energized or belittled. This person is an "energy vampire," sucking the energy out of you and your colleagues.
2. Usually, the alleged jerk targets less powerful people, depending on what you can do for them.

Jerks do not go undetected for long. Raging maniacs are easy to catch and discipline. More often, however, real damage occurs after covert backstabbing and hypocrisy. Comments are subtly demeaning. Some people couch their insults in humor and hide behind sarcasm.

Jerk Behaviors

According to Sutton, everyday jerk behaviors include:

1. Personal insults and innuendoes
2. Invading one's personal space or territory
3. Uninvited physical contact
4. Threats and intimidation, verbal and nonverbal
5. Sarcastic jokes, teasing and disguised insults
6. Email flames
7. Status slaps intended to humiliate
8. Rude interruptions
9. Two-faced attacks



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10. Dirty looks, grimaces, eye-rolling
11. Treating people as though they're invisible, keeping them out of the loop

Everyone's a Jerk

The truth is, each of us has engaged in some of these behaviors. But a real jerk is defined by the frequency with which he is demeaning and destructive.

To qualify as a true jerk, one must display a persistent pattern and a history of episodes that lead others to feel humiliated and disrespected. And a boss who's a jerk often causes anger, frustration, high turnover, absenteeism and, in extreme cases, violence.

The Rise of Boss-icide

The number of homicides in the workplace is disturbing: "Boss-icide" has doubled in 10 years. On average, workers murder three to four supervisors a month – double the number of a decade ago. The expression "going postal" has become common, describing anger that escalates to physical violence. A new term has been coined: "desk rage."

A 2000 study found 27% of workers experienced on-the-job mistreatment, with one in six reporting persistent psychological abuse.

A 2002 U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs study revealed 36% of employees reported persistent hostility from coworkers and supervisors; 20% reported moderate to severe abusive behaviors, including yelling, temper tantrums, putdowns, glaring, exclusion, gossip and, on rare occasions, pushing, shoving and sexual/nonsexual assaults.

A 2003 study of nurses reported 91% had experienced verbal abuse that left them feeling attacked, devalued or humiliated. Physicians were the most frequent source of such nastiness, but it also came from patients, families and supervisors. Surely, not all physicians are abusive or tyrannical by nature, but there's a clear differential in power and feelings of control between nurses and doctors.

The problem is hardly unique to the United States, studies indicate. Many other studies show psychological abuse and bullying are common in countries like Austria, Australia, Canada, Germany, Finland, France, Ireland and South Africa.

Much of the nastiness is directed by superiors to their subordinates (50%-80%), with 20%-50% among coworkers.

Secondhand Jerk Effects

Bystanders also suffer ripple effects. A jerk poisons more than one victim. The damage spreads to coworkers, family members and friends who watch or hear about attacks, creating a larger pool of secondhand sufferers. The result is devastating, zapping people's energy and causing absenteeism, loss of productivity, high turnover, depression and disengagement.

Nasty interactions have a 500% greater impact on our moods than positive interactions. It takes numerous encounters with positive people to offset the energy and happiness sapped by a single episode with one jerk.

Organizations may inadvertently shelter jerks and, in some cases, promote and forgive them. The message: It's OK to be a jerk, as long as you produce results. These individuals may be considered eccentric or artistic in temperament.

But organizations that shelter jerks risk greater legal costs because of victims' claims of sexual harassment and discrimination. While there is no law prohibiting equal-opportunity jerk behaviors, companies that fail to discipline or weed out bullies find themselves vulnerable to expensive and difficult employment litigation.

The Costs of Harboring a Jerk

Sutton lists factors to consider when calculating the cost of protecting versus firing an abusive jerk. The consequences of failing to discipline an offender or sever employment include:

1. Distraction from tasks
2. Reduced productivity
3. Reduced psychological safety, more fear, less creativity
4. Loss of motivation and energy—disengagement
5. Stress-induced illness
6. Impaired mental functioning
7. Absenteeism
8. High turnover
9. Higher-than-average theft or loss rates
10. Loss of focus on strategically important goals

Also consider these additional management chores, with time spent:

1. Appeasing, calming, counseling or disciplining
2. Cooling out victims
3. Managing dissatisfied customers, suppliers and other key outsiders
4. Reorganizing teams and departments
5. Interviewing, recruiting and training replacements

Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely

Some workplaces encourage everyone to act competitively. Enron, for example, was an organizational culture in which winning and making the numbers counted more than interpersonal relationships.

Stories abound of famous mean bosses: “Chainsaw” Al Dunlap, producer Scott Rudin and former CEO Linda Wachner are infamous for their difficult behaviors.

People like basketball coach Bobby Knight and Terrell Owens get away with more than would be tolerated in normal circumstances because we embrace clichés like “winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing” in the United States. It may appear that the more one is right and the more one wins, the bigger jerk you can be.

Leaders in most organizations not only get paid more than others; they also enjoy constant deference and false flattery. A huge body of research shows that when people are put in positions of power, they:

- Start talking more
- Take what they want for themselves
- Ignore what other people say or want
- Start ignoring how less powerful people react to their behavior
- Start acting more rudely
- Generally treat any situation or person as a means for satisfying their own needs

Studies show power corrupts people and causes them to act as though they’re above rules meant for others – and this is widely accepted. Even trivial power advantages can change how people think and act, and usually for the worse.

Pay is a vivid sign of power differences, and a host of studies suggest that when the difference between the highest- and lowest-paid people in a company is reduced, good things happen: improved financial performance, better product quality and enhanced productivity.

And yet, the idea of reducing pay differences isn’t catching on. CEOs of large corporations make more than 500 times what the average worker earns.

“If you want to have fewer assholes and better organizational performance, reducing the difference between the highest- and lowest-status members of your organization is the way to go,” Sutton asserts.

This doesn’t, however, mean you can eliminate the pecking order. Some people are more important to the organization than others because they are more difficult to replace or have more essential skills. This is the power-performance paradox.

Status differences will always be with us. But successful companies are doing everything they can to downplay and reduce status and power differences among managers and employees. Companies like Costco, the Men’s Wearhouse and Southwest Airlines are prime examples.

Top 10 Rules for Enforcing a “No Jerks at Work” Rule

Having all of the right business philosophies and management practices in place to support the “no jerks at work” rule is meaningless unless you treat the person right in front of you, right now, in the right way. It’s the little things that make the big differences:

1. **Say the rule, write it down, and act on it.** If you have a policy, make sure you act on it.
2. **Jerks will hire other jerks.** Don’t include them in hiring decisions.
3. **Get rid of jerks fast.** Organizations generally wait too long to fire jerks.
4. **Treat certified jerks as incompetent employees.** Even if people perform extraordinarily well and achieve great results, persistent meanness should be equated with incompetence.
5. **Power breeds nastiness.** Giving people even a little bit of power can turn them into big jerks.
6. **Embrace the power-performance paradox.** Downplay and reduce unnecessary status differences.
7. **Manage moments, not just practices, policies and systems.** Change the little things, and big things will follow.
8. **Model and teach constructive confrontation.** Make sure people know when and how to argue respectfully.
9. **Adopt a one-jerk rule.** If you permit one jerk to stay, use a reverse role-model approach to remind people of what not to do.
10. **The bottom line: Link big policies to small deficiencies.** When people talk to one another and work together with respect, managing jerk behaviors is natural.

Rules of Engagement for Non-Jerks

Perhaps companies should be clearer about what it takes to keep a workplace free of jerk-like behaviors. If new hires were required to take a pledge and re-sign it each year during their performance reviews, there could be fewer incidents of jerk-like behaviors.

A sample pledge for non-jerk behaviors follows:

1. I will be passionate about my work and keep in mind what I love about what I do, especially when things are stressful or not going well.
2. I will respect others, even when I disagree with them.
3. I will listen with an open mind and learn from others, regardless of their position in the company.
4. I will strive to know when it is wise to take a firm stance and when to be flexible.
5. I will do what it takes to get the job done, within legal and ethical boundaries.
6. I will not waste money, and I will question costs. I will not take advantage of my position in the company for status reasons.
7. When I have a complaint and see something that isn't working well, I will speak up and suggest actionable recommendations.
8. I recognize team efforts are needed to win and will give credit to others who help me succeed. I will ask others how I can help them succeed.
9. I will admit to not knowing everything and be willing to learn from others—even those lower in rank.
10. I will be dedicated to pursuing customer success. I will constantly ask how we can do things better from the customer's perspective.
11. I will be transparent and honest. I will strive to promote a culture of trust. I will not let my negative moods infect others around me.
12. I will be a good person to work with—as a person in charge, team member and subordinate. I will not act like a jerk.

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