



Damian King

# ARE YOU A JERK AT WORK?

**Robert I. Sutton** explains how to handle bullies in the office—and prevent your own “inner jerk” from getting out.

WHEN I ARRIVED AT STANFORD University as a 29-year-old researcher, I was an inexperienced, ineffective, and extremely nervous teacher. I got poor teaching evaluations in my first year on the job, and I deserved them. I worked to become more effective in the classroom and was delighted to win the best-teacher award in my department (by student vote) at the graduation ceremony at the end of my third year.

But my delight evaporated when a more senior colleague ran up to me immediately after the ceremony, gave me a big hug, and whispered in my ear in a condescending tone (while sporting a broad smile for public consumption), “Well, Bob, now that you’ve

satisfied the babies here on campus, perhaps you can settle down and do some real work.” She secretly and expertly extracted every ounce of joy I had been experiencing.

When I encounter a mean-spirited person like this, the first thing I think is, “Wow, what an asshole!”

I bet you do, too. You might call such people bullies, creeps, jerks, weasels, tormentors, tyrants, serial slammers, despots, or unconstrained egomaniacs, but for me at least, “asshole” best captures the fear and loathing that I have for these nasty people. And most of us, unfortunately, have to deal with assholes in our workplaces at one time or another.

Who deserves to be branded an asshole? I like to use two tests before passing judgment. First, after talking to the alleged asshole, do you feel oppressed, humiliated, de-energized, or belittled? In general, do you feel worse about yourself? Second, does the alleged asshole aim his or her venom at people who are *less powerful* rather than at those people who are more powerful?

I can assure you that after that interaction with my colleague—which lasted less than a minute—I felt worse about myself. I went from being the happiest I’d ever been about my work performance to worrying that my teaching award would be taken as a sign that I wasn’t serious enough about research (the

main standard used for evaluating Stanford professors).

My colleague's behavior also passes the second test because when the episode occurred, this person was further up the ladder than I was. I learned a lot about her from the way she treated one of her subordinates—in this case, me.

I believe the best test of a person's character is how he or she treats those with less power. The brief nasty stares, the teasing and jokes that are really camouflaged public shaming and insults, the exclusion from minor and major gatherings—they're all exercises of power, and they don't just hurt for a moment. They have cumulative effects on our mental health and our commitment to our bosses, peers, and organizations.

Georgia State University professor Bennett Tepper's research on abusive supervision, for example, examined a cross-section of 712 adults in a Midwestern city who worked in the private, nonprofit, and public sectors. He found that many of these employees had bosses who used ridicule, put-downs, the silent treatment, and insults like "Tells me I'm incompetent" and "Tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid." These demeaning acts drove people to quit their jobs at higher rates and sapped the effectiveness of those who remained. A six-month follow-up found that employees with abusive supervisors quit their jobs at accelerated rates, and those still trapped in their jobs suffered from less work and life satisfaction, reduced commitment to employers, and heightened depression, anxiety, and burnout. Similar findings have been uncovered in dozens of other studies. They all suggest that assholes can severely undermine an organization's productivity.

Given the psychological and financial harm done by assholes, you'd think that most organizations would refrain from hiring them, or be quick to expel these creeps once their true selves are exposed. But it's not so simple. Although I suspect that some people are genetically predisposed to be nasty, years of research has suggested that, under certain circumstances, almost any of us is susceptible to becoming an asshole. This is especially true of people who assume positions of power. Study after study has found that giving people even a little bit of power over others can induce them to abuse that power. It isn't just a myth: Power can turn any of us into assholes.

Fortunately, there's also evidence that we can limit the negative influences of power and keep our offices civil, supportive, and even inspiring places to work. I've identified several strategies for combating

assholes—and preventing ourselves from becoming one of them.

## Are assholes born or made?

Yes, some assholes are born that way. But there is also strong evidence that no matter what our "personality" is, we all can turn into assholes under the wrong conditions. This happens frequently and with shocking speed and intensity when people assume powerful positions. A huge body of research—hundreds of studies—shows that when people are put in positions of power, they start talking more, taking what they want for themselves, ignoring what other people say or want, ignoring how less powerful people react to their behavior, acting more rudely, and generally treating any situation or person as a means for satisfying their own needs. What's more, being put in positions of power often blinds them to the fact that they are acting like jerks.

## I believe the best test of a person's character is how he or she treats those with less power.

One of my Stanford colleagues, Deborah Gruenfeld, has spent years studying and cataloging the effects of putting people in positions where they can lord power over others. She's found that even tiny and trivial power advantages can rapidly change how people think and act, and usually for the worse. In one experiment, student groups of three discussed a long list of contentious social issues, things like abortion and pollution. One member was randomly assigned to the more powerful position of evaluating the recommendations made by the other two. After 30 minutes, the experimenter brought in a plate of five cookies. The more powerful students were more likely to take a second cookie, chew with their mouths open, and get crumbs on their faces and the table.

This study might sound silly, but it scares me because it shows how having just a slight power edge causes regular people to grab the goodies for themselves and act like rude pigs. I was on the receiving end of such boorish behavior a few years ago. It was at a lunch with the CEO of a profitable company who had just been ranked as one of the top corporate leaders by a famous

business magazine. He treated our little group of four or five professors (all 50-plus-year-old professionals) as if we were naïve and rather stupid children. Although, in theory, he was our guest, he told us where to sit and when we could talk. He interrupted several of us in mid-sentence to tell us he had heard enough or didn't care about what we were saying. He even criticized the food we ordered, saying things like "That will make you fat." He generally conveyed that he was our master and commander and that our job was to focus our efforts on satisfying his every whim.

The most striking part was that he seemed completely oblivious to the fact that he was bullying us and that we were offended. This is consistent with research showing power makes it harder for people to see the world from the perspectives of others. In one recent study, Adam Galinsky of Northwestern University and his colleagues divided participants into two groups: Members of one group were made to feel powerful by recalling and writing about an incident where they had power over others; the other group was asked to write about an incident in which someone had power over them. Then all the participants were told to draw the letter E on their forehead. If a person drew the E so it seemed backwards to himself but legible to the rest of the world, this indicated that he had considered how others would see the letter. If the E seemed correct to himself but backwards to everyone else, this suggested a failure to take other people's perspectives into account.

Sure enough, Galinsky and his colleagues found that people who had been primed to feel powerful were nearly *three times* as likely to draw the E so it seemed legible to themselves but backwards to others. In other words, power made them much less likely to see the world through other people's eyes.

## Fight the power

These findings may seem discouraging, but they don't mean we're condemned to working with assholes. I've spent much of the last few years thinking about how to sustain a humane workplace and how employees can deal with nasty bosses and peers. Based on research and stories that I hear, I've developed a few tips for victims of workplace assholes.

My first tip is in a class by itself: Escape if you can. The best thing to do if you are stuck under the thumb of an asshole (or a bunch of them) is to get out as fast as possible. Not only are you at great emotional risk; you're also at risk of emulating the behavior



Psychological Science

In one recent study, participants made to feel powerful were three times more likely than others to write an E on their forehead so it was forwards to themselves but backwards to others (right), suggesting they were less likely to consider other people's points of view.

of the jerks around you, catching it like a disease—what I call “asshole poisoning.”

Indeed, experiments by psychologists Leigh Thompson and Cameron Anderson have shown that even when compassionate people join a group with a leader who is “high-energy, aggressive, mean, the classic bully type,” they are “temporarily transformed into carbon copies of the alpha dog.”

Despite the risk of asshole poisoning, escape isn't always possible. As one woman wrote me in response to this advice, “I have to feed my family and pay my mortgage, and there aren't a lot of jobs that pay well enough to do that around here.”

In those cases where a victim can't escape (at least for now), I suggest starting with polite confrontation. Some people really don't mean to be jerks. They might be surprised if you gently let them know that they are leaving you feeling belittled and demeaned. Other jerks are demeaning on purpose, but may stop if you stand up to them in a civil but firm manner. For example, an office worker wrote me that her boss was “a major jerk,” but she found that he left her alone after she gave him “a hard stare” and told him his behavior was “absolutely unacceptable and I simply won't tolerate it.”

Next, if a bully keeps spewing venom at you, limit your contact with the creep as much as possible. Try to avoid any meetings you can with him or her and try to talk by phone rather than in person. Keep conversations short; be polite, but don't provide a

lot of personal information during meetings of any kind, including email exchanges. If the bully says or writes something nasty, try to avoid snapping back as that can fuel a vicious cycle of asshole poisoning. Also, recent research suggests that stand-up meetings are just as effective as sit-down meetings, but are shorter. So if you have to meet with jerks, try to meet in places without chairs and avoid sitting down whenever possible. This will limit your exposure to their abuse.

I also recommend keeping an “asshole diary,” in which you carefully document what the jerk does and when it happens. A government employee wrote me a detailed email about how she used a diary to get rid of a nasty, racist co-worker:

I documented the many harmful things she did with dates and times. ... I encouraged her other victims to do so too and these written and signed statements were presented to our supervisors. Our supervisors knew this worker was an asshole but didn't really seem to be doing anything to stop her harmful behaviors until they received these statements. The jerk went on a mysterious leave that no supervisor was permitted to discuss, and she never returned.

If all else fails, try to practice indifference. Management gurus and executives are constantly ranting about the importance

of commitment, passion, and giving all you have to a job. That is good advice when your bosses and peers treat you with dignity. But if you work with people who treat you like dirt, they have not earned your passion and commitment. Don't let their vicious words and deeds touch your soul: Learn to be comfortably numb until the day comes when you find a workplace that deserves your full commitment. Until then, direct your passion elsewhere, like your family, your hobbies, or perhaps a volunteer organization.

## Assholes are us

I want to stress again that being an asshole isn't just something that only happens to others and can't possibly happen to wonderful people like you and me. All of us are at risk. As I like to say, *assholes are us*.

But I have identified some strategies for handling the jerk within. One way to do that, as I've mentioned, is to stay away from assholes as much as possible and thus avoid asshole poisoning. But, especially if you take a position of power, there are several additional things you can do to stop yourself from turning into an asshole.

One is to eliminate as many unnecessary power differences between yourself and others. For instance, when Frank Blake became CEO of Home Depot last year, he eliminated the executive dining room, cut his own pay, and, according to *The New York Times*, distributed an image called the Inverted Pyramid, which places customers and employees above the chief executive.

Pay is an especially vivid sign of power differences and many studies suggest that when the difference between the highest- and lowest-paid people in a company or team is reduced, a host of good things happen, including improved financial performance, better product quality, enhanced research productivity, and for baseball teams, a better won-lost record.

In the United States and other Western countries, we are always pressing to create bigger differences among winners, also-rans, and losers. To be sure, some people are more important to an organization than others because they are more difficult to replace or have more essential skills. Status differences will always be with us. But Frank Blake and other, like-minded leaders build organizations with fewer assholes and spark better performance by embracing what I call the “power-performance paradox.” They realize that their company has and should have a pecking order, but they do everything they can to downplay and reduce status and power differences among members.

Another step you can take to avoid becoming an asshole is to get some friends and colleagues who will tell you when you are acting like one. Better yet, hold others responsible for telling you when you’re being an asshole—make it safe for them to do so. And when they tell you, listen to them. Remember, power will blind you to all the ways you are acting like a jerk and hurting other people. If people tell you that you’re acting like an asshole and your reaction is that they’re wrong, odds are that you’re fooling yourself.

I’ve learned that competition breeds assholes, so it’s essential to try not to foster an overly competitive workplace. Many organizations constantly rate and rank people, giving the spoils to a few stars and treating the rest as second- and third-class citizens. The unfortunate result is that people who ought to be friends become enemies—ruthless jerks who run wild as they scramble to push themselves up the ladder and push their rivals down. They act on the dangerous and widespread assumption that professional life requires cutthroat competition. In truth, it is nearly always a blend of cooperation and competition, and organizations that forbid extreme internal competition not only are more civilized but perform better as well, despite societal myths to the contrary.

Research on “framing” by social psychologists suggests a few tricks you can use to avoid being overly competi-

tive. The assumptions and language we use—the lenses through which we see the world—can have big effects on how we treat others. Even seemingly small differences in language that we hear and use can determine whether we cooperate or compete. Stanford researcher Lee Ross and his colleagues have run experiments in which they had pairs of students play a game. If the students cooperated, they’d share a reward equally, but if they competed, one player would take the lion’s share of the goodies.

Ross and his colleagues told some players that the game was called the “Community Game” (conjuring up images of shared fate and collaboration); they told others they’d be playing the “Wall Street Game” (conjuring up images of a dog-eat-dog world). People who played the Community Game were dramatically more cooperative and honest about their intentions than those who believed they were playing the Wall Street Game. These findings were later replicated with U.S. Air Force Academy Cadets. Related experiments show that when people are first exposed to words like enemy, battle, inconsiderate, vicious, lawyer, and capitalist, they are far less likely to cooperate than when first exposed to words like helped, fair, warm, mutual, and share.

The implication is that if you want to quell your inner jerk, use ideas and language that frame life in ways that will make you focus on cooperation. For instance, make a conscious effort to use the word “we” rather than “I” and “me.” Tape-record and listen to yourself and colleagues at a couple of meetings; if they are nearly all about “me, myself, and I” and “us versus them,” it might be time to start changing the way you talk.

Taken together, these steps can help you enforce a No Asshole rule. If you manage your organization so that you address the disturbing influences of power *and* manage yourself to avoid catching and spreading asshole poisoning, you can fuel a virtuous cycle and help sustain a civilized workplace.

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## Little Dictator

BY PETE SIMPSON



A decade ago, I had a job on the shop floor of a Cash & Carry supermarket. The pay was awful but I had a lot of friends there, and we had

a great time together—playful banter and practical jokes were the order of the day. It more than made up for the low paycheck.

I had been quite happy there for around six months when a position opened up for an IT manager in the company. This sounded great, so I applied; a week later, I started my new job. I welcomed the change in my life, but I didn’t realize how much would change, or how quickly.

Within a week of becoming a manager, I found myself transformed into a horrible and arrogant dictator. I ordered my friends around like slaves, never shared a laugh with them, and no longer went to the staff room for my breaks. I had total disdain for people to whom I’d felt so close just one week earlier. Once I even stopped a good friend from going home because his work wasn’t finished.

I saw the effect I was having on other people, but I didn’t care. My newfound power was like a drug, and it had taken over. On some level, I knew I had changed, but I wouldn’t completely admit it to myself—until the day my four-year-old son asked his mummy why daddy had become so horrible. That stopped me in my tracks. The next day, I asked for my old job back. I didn’t want to be this person any longer. I was told “no chance,” so I handed in my notice and left without a backward glance.

Lessons learned? Plenty. The main one is to look in the mirror every day. If you don’t like the person looking back at you, then do something about it *fast*. I realize how the power went to my head as I had *control* over other people. Now I’m a freelance designer, and I love every second of it. Never again will I be poisoned by power.

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