

# **THE NO ASSHOLE RULE**

**By Robert I. Sutton**

A candidate may seem smart, but would this person violate our no asshole rule?

Do a ‘jerk audit’

Whatever these creeps are called, many of them are clueless about their behavior. Even worse, some of them are proud of it.

Defining an asshole can help you distinguish between those colleagues and customers you simply don’t like from those who deserved the label.

Test One: After talking to the alleged asshole, does the “target” feel oppressed, humiliated, de-energized, or belittled by the person? In particular, does the target feel worse about him or herself?

Test Two: Does the alleged asshole aim his or her venom at people who are less powerful rather than at those who are more powerful?

Although some assholes do their damage through open rage and arrogance, it isn’t always that way. Two faced backstabbers like my colleague, those who have enough skill and emotional control to save their dirty work for moments when they can’t get caught, are tougher to stop-even though they may do as much damage as a raging maniac.

## THE DIRTY DOZEN-Common Everyday Actions that Assholes Use

1. Personal insults
2. Invading one’s “personal territory”
3. Uninvited physical contact
4. Threats and intimidation, both verbal and nonverbal
5. “Sarcastic jokes” and “teasing” used as insult delivery systems
6. Withering email flames
7. Status slaps intended to humiliate their victims
8. Public shaming or “status degradation” rituals
9. Rude interruptions
10. Two-faced attacks
11. Dirty looks
12. Treating people as if they are invisible

*Nearly all of us act like assholes at times; I plead guilty to multiple offenses.* But, if someone consistently takes actions that leave a trail of victims in their wake, they deserve to be branded as certified assholes

I am a firm believer in the virtues of conflict, even noisy arguments. Constructive arguments over ideas drive greater performance, especially when teams do non-routine work. Constructive confrontation is a good thing.

Not only do I despise spineless and obsequious wimps, but there is good evidence that they damage organizations

Studies have shown that many workplaces are plagued by “interpersonal moves” that leave people feeling threatened and demeaned.

The lion’s share of bullying and psychological abuse is within gender

Approached for help by a Stanford undergraduate, he at first brushed aside and refused to assist this student, who was trapped in bureaucratic red tape. But once this uppity faculty member learned that the student’s parents were powerful executives and had donated generously to the university, he instantly transformed into a helpful and charming human being.

Every organization needs the no asshole rule because mean-spirited people do massive damage to victims, bystanders who suffer the ripple effect, organizational performance and themselves.

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.

Stories of extreme public humiliation are more dramatic and easier to remember, but such tiny indignities take their toll as we travel through our days.

Nasty interactions have a far bigger impact on our moods than positive ones, at a 5 to 1 ratio.

Coworkers, family members or friends who watch or just hear about these ugly incidents suffer ripple effects

Demeaning jerks are victims of their own actions. They suffer career setbacks and, at times, humiliation

The lesson is that if you sap the energy out of people, you may be sucking the life out of your career too.

Employers who fail to discipline aggressively and weed out (or at least train and reform) the boor, the bully, the power-monger and even the person who simply lacks basic interpersonal skills may find themselves vulnerable to expensive and difficult employment lawsuits as disgruntled employees ascribe some unlawful motivation to abusive conduct.

The best units reported far more errors because they felt “psychologically safe” to admit their mistakes.

Research shows that abusive supervisors dampen commitment to the organization

When I am stuck working for or with a bunch of assholes, I don't go out of my way to help

In most places, certified assholes are *tolerated, but only up to a point*

Even organizations that seem to glorify arrogant jerks, like sports teams, can reach a breaking point where superstar coaches or players are so destructive that they are punished and kicked out

“The more often you are right, and the more often you win, the bigger jerk you can be.”

In good organizations, temporary assholes are dealt with immediately; they quickly realize (or are told) that they have blown it, apologize, reflect on their nastiness, ask for forgiveness and work to change, rather than justify or glorify their actions.

At IDEO, we try to select for professional competence before people walk in the door so that the interviewing process can focus more on a person's qualities (or lack thereof)

-This method also keeps assholes in a hiring position from replicating. Assholes tend to stick together, and once stuck are not easily separated; they will breed like rabbits!

Jerks who are supposed to be so valuable that “you couldn't afford to lose them” turn out not to be so valuable and others fill in just fine

To keep your inner asshole from getting out, you need to be aware of places and people that will turn you into an asshole

Ruth didn't struggle against larger forces that she couldn't control. She focused instead on small ways to gain tidbits of control, including helping fellow victims cope with the jerks by teaching the victims her strategy, giving them emotional support and concentrating on helping the good

people in the company. Rather than fighting big wars that she was destined to lose and would leave her exhausted and debased like the first time this happened, Ruth was wise enough this time to look for small wins to sustain her confidence and a sense of control

Learning when and how to simply not give a damn isn't the kind of advice you hear in most business books, but it can help you make the best of a lousy situation

If you keep expecting good things to happen, but they never do or take a turn for the worse, you will suffer constant unhappiness

Passion is an overrated virtue in organizational life, and indifference is an underrated virtue.

Self-preservation sometimes requires the opposite response; learn to feel and practice indifference and emotional detachment

If you can't bring yourself to care about good colleagues, clients and organizations, it is a sign that you need a break, to learn a new skill or perhaps to move to a different job.

The feeling that one is in control can reduce feelings of hopelessness and helplessness

Progress can be made if many people take many small, positive steps in the right direction. Over time, a series of small wins may add up to a big win against that opponent

Avoid bitch sessions

A way to deal with assholes is to respond to irate people with calmness and respect

One reason that alpha males and females act like bullies is we let them, and actually subtly encourage them to get away with it.

Leadership research shows that subtle nasty moves like glaring and condescending comments, explicit moves like insults or put-downs, and even physical intimidation can be effective paths to power. People bully others to gain and sustain status

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 better when their workplace isn't riddled with fear. However, although less effective than rewards, people will work to avoid punishment.

Steve Job could convey both massive confidence in his people and express massive unhappiness when they failed.

Polite people who never complain or argue are delightful to be around, but these doormats are often victims of nasty, indifferent or greedy people

Unleashing your inner jerk can help you gain power, vanquish rivals, motivate fear-fueled performance, and bring clueless and incompetent people to their senses.

More generally, organizations that drive in compassion and drive out fear attract superior talent, have lower turnover costs, share ideas more freely, have less dysfunctional internal competition and trump the external competition.

Bullies often erroneously conclude that their nastiness is crucial to their success. They confuse their tactics that helped them gain power with the best tactics that are best for leading the team or company

Victims learn to avoid their oppressor's wrath by reporting only good news and remaining silent about, or even hiding, bad news. They learn to their survival depends on protecting themselves from blame, humiliation and recrimination rather than doing what is best for their organization.

Assholes also often don't realize that every time they deman someone, their list of enemies grows longer day after day. But as their enemies number and power grow, the enemies 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.

If you can't enforce the rule, it is better to say nothing

The truth is that assholes breed like rabbits. Their poison quickly infects others; even worse, if you let them make hiring decisions, they will start cloning themselves

Human beings will go to extreme lengths to save face, to feel respected and to avoid embarrassment and feelings of shame

If you want to build an asshole-free environment, you've got to start by looking in the mirror.

This means that you must defy the temptation to work with a swarm of assholes, regardless of a job's other perks and charms

“The best test of a person’s character is how he or she will treat those with less power, especially when no one is watching.”

Employee’s with bad bosses (essentially incompetent assholes) suffered 20-40% more heart attacks than those with good bosses

Most people see themselves in a more positive light than the facts actually warrant and that when things go wrong, people usually blame others and outside forces rather than themselves

“The Rules Don’t Apply to Me”: When people get a little more power, they feel less compassion when hearing others talk about painful experiences, such as the death of a friend.

Victims of workplace bullies are most successful at driving out their oppressors when they band together.

Although these messages contain diverse themes, most focus on a central figure in every organization; the boss. It’s that man or woman who directly oversees others’ work and is intertwined in often all-too-human relationships with followers.

Eliminating the negative is the first and most important step to take in your work and the rest of your life.

In order for a relationship to succeed, positive and good interactions must outnumber negative and bad ones by at least five to one. If the ratio falls below that, the relationship is likely to fail and break up.

Just one bad apple- a person I would call a chronic deadbeat, downer or asshole- the ensuing distraction, direct damage and contagious bad behavior injected by these deeply defective characters dragged down performance by 30-40%

Don’t dither. Expel the rotten apples as fast as possible.