

The No Asshole Rule
By Robert I. Sutton

CHAPTER 1

What Workplace Assholes Do and Why You Know So Many

Who deserves to be branded as an asshole? Many of us use the term indiscriminately, applying it to anyone who annoys us, gets in our way, or happens to be enjoying greater success than us at the moment. But a precise definition is useful if you want to implement the no asshole rule. It can help you distinguish between those colleagues and customers you simply don't like from those who deserve the label. It can help you distinguish people who are having a bad day or a bad moment ("temporary assholes") from persistently nasty and destructive jerks ("certified assholes"). And a good definition can help you explain to others *why* your coworker, boss, or customer deserves the label-or come to grips with why others say you are an asshole (at least behind your back) and why you might have earned it.

Researchers such as Bennett Tepper who write about psychological abuse in the workplace define it as "the sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behavior, excluding physical contact." That definition is useful as far as it goes. But it isn't detailed enough for understanding what assholes do and their effects on others. An experience I had as a young assistant professor is instructive for understanding how assholes are defined in this little book. When I arrived at Stanford as a twenty-nine-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 at Stanford.

But my delight lasted only minutes. It evaporated when a jealous colleague ran up to me immediately after the graduating students marched out and gave me a big hug. She secretly and expertly extracted every ounce of joy I was experiencing by whispering in my ear in a condescending tone (while sporting a broad smile for public consumption), "Well, Bob, now that you have satisfied the babies here on campus, perhaps you can settle down and do some real work."

This painful memory demonstrates the two tests that I use for spotting whether a person is acting like an asshole:

• **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 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 feeling 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). This episode also demonstrates that although some assholes do their damage through open rage and arrogance, it isn't always that way. People who loudly insult and belittle their underlings and rivals are easier to catch and discipline. 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.

There are many other actions-sociologists call them interaction moves or simply moves-that assholes use to demean and deflate their victims. I've listed twelve common moves, a dirty dozen, to illustrate the range of these subtle and not subtle behaviors used by assholes. I suspect that you can add many more moves that you've seen, been subjected to, or done to others. I hear and read about new mean-spirited moves nearly every day. Whether we are talking about personal insults, status slaps (quick moves that bat down social standing and pride), shaming or "status degradation" rituals, "jokes" that are insult delivery systems, or treating people as if they are invisible, these and hundreds of other moves are similar in that they can leave targets feeling attacked and diminished, even if only momentarily. These are the means that assholes use to do their dirty work.

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 e-mail 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

The not so sweet thing that my colleague whispered in my ear also helps demonstrate the difference between a temporary asshole and a certified asshole. It isn't fair to call someone a certified asshole based on a single episode like this one; we can only call the person a temporary asshole. So while I would describe the colleague in my story as being a temporary asshole, we would need more information before labeling her as a certified asshole. Nearly all of us act like assholes at times; I plead guilty to multiple offenses. I once became angry with a staff member who I (wrongly) believed was trying to take an office away from our group. I sent an insulting e-mail to her and a copy to her boss, other faculty members, and her subordinates. She told me, "You made me cry." I later apologized to her. And although I don't demean one person after another day in and day out, I was guilty of being a jerk during that episode. (If you have never acted like an asshole even once in your life, please contact me immediately. I want to know how you've accomplished this superhuman feat.)

It is far harder to qualify as a certified asshole: a person needs to display a persistent pattern, to have a history of episodes that end with one "target" after another feeling belittled, put down, humiliated, disrespected, oppressed, deenergized, and generally worse about themselves.

Psychologists make the distinction between states (fleeting feelings, thoughts, and actions) and traits (enduring personality characteristics) by looking for consistency across places and times-if someone consistently takes actions that leave a trail of victims in their wake, they deserve to be branded as certified assholes.

We all have the potential to act like assholes under the wrong conditions, when we are placed under pressure or, especially, when our workplace encourages everyone-especially the "best" and "most powerful" people-to act that way. Although it is best to use the term sparingly, some people do deserve to be certified as assholes because they are consistently nasty across places and times. "Chainsaw" Al Dunlap is a well-known candidate. The former Sunbeam CEO who wrote the book *Mean Business*, Dunlap was notorious for the verbal abuse he heaped on employees. In John Byrne's book *Chainsaw*, a Sunbeam executive described Dunlap as "like a dog barking at you for hours. . . . He just yelled, ranted, and raved. He was condescending, belligerent, and disrespectful."

Another candidate is producer Scott Rudin, known as one of the nastiest Hollywood bosses. *The Wall Street Journal* estimated that he went through 250 personal assistants between 2000 and 2005; Rudin claimed his records show only 119 (but admitted this estimate excluded assistants who lasted less than two weeks). His ex-assistants told the Journal that Rudin routinely swore and hollered at them—one said he was fired for bringing Rudin the wrong breakfast muffin, which Mr. Rudin didn't recall but admitted was "entirely possible." The online magazine *Salon* quotes a former assistant who received a 6:30 A.M. phone call from Rudin asking him to remind Rudin to send flowers to Anjelica Huston for her birthday. At 11:00 that same morning, Rudin called her into his office and screamed, "You asshole! You forgot to remind me to get flowers for Anjelica Huston's birthday!" This former assistant added, "And as he slowly disappears behind his automatic closing door, the last thing I see is his finger, flipping me off."

Nor is such behavior confined to men. According to the *New York Times*, Linda Wachner, former CEO of Warnaco, was infamous for publicly demeaning employees for missing performance goals or "simply displeasing her." Chris Heyn, former president of Warnaco's Hathaway shirt division, told the *New York Times*, "When you did not make numbers, she would dress you down and make you feel knee-high, and it was terrifying." Other former employees reported that Wachner's attacks were often "personal rather than professional, and not infrequently laced with crude references to sex, race, or ethnicity."

Famous bosses aren't the only ones who persistently demean their underlings. Many of the e-mail messages I got after my *Harvard Business Review* essay were tales about bosses who belittled and insulted their underlings day after day. Take the reader who wrote from Scotland, "A woman I know had a horrible boss. It was a very small office and didn't even have a toilet. She became pregnant and consequently needed the loo a lot. Not only would she have to go to a neighbouring shop, but the boss felt that the visits were too frequent and started counting them as her break time/lunchtime!" A former secretary at a large public utility told me that she quit her job because her (female) boss wouldn't stop touching her shoulders and her hair.

Take this excerpt from *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey* of an interview that Harvey Hornstein did with one victim of multiple humiliations:

"Billy," he said, standing in the doorway so that everyone in the central area could see and hear us clearly. "Billy, this is not adequate, really not at all." . . . As he spoke, he crumpled the papers that he held. My work. One by one he crumpled the papers, holding them out as if they were something dirty and dropping them inside my office as everyone watched. Then he said loudly, "Garbage in, garbage out." I started to speak, but he cut me off. "You give me the garbage; now

you clean it up." I did. Through the doorway I could see people looking away because they were embarrassed for me. They didn't want to see what was in front of them: a thirty-six-year-old man in a three-piece suit stooping before his boss to pick up crumpled pieces of paper.

If these stories are accurate, all these bosses deserved to be certified as assholes because they were consistently nasty to the people they worked with, especially their underlings. This brings us to test two: Does the alleged asshole aim his or her venom at people who are less powerful rather than at those people who are more powerful? My colleague's behavior at the Stanford graduation ceremony qualifies because, when the episode occurred, this person was more senior and more powerful than I was.

This notion that the way a higher-status person treats a lower-status person is a good test of character isn't just my idea. A test reflecting the same spirit was used by Sir Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin empire, to screen candidates for a reality television series where he selected "billionaires in the rough." *The Rebel Billionaire* was meant to compete with Donald Trump's wildly successful show *The Apprentice*. During the first episode, Branson picked up contestants at the airport while he was disguised as an arthritic old driver-then he kicked two of them off the show for treating him so badly when they believed he was an "irrelevant" human being.

Again, there is a difference between isolated incidents where people act like assholes versus people who are certified assholes-who consistently aim their venom at less powerful people and rarely, if ever, at more powerful people. John R. Bolton, the controversial U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, meets the test if the testimony to the U.S. Congress is correct. President George W. Bush made the controversial decision to appoint Bolton when he was on the verge of failing to be confirmed by Congress. Bolton's reputation for dishing out psychological abuse to colleagues fueled the media frenzy surrounding his appointment. Melody Townsel, for example, testified that she experienced Bolton's nastiness when she worked as a contractor for the U.S. Agency for International Development in Moscow in 1994. Townsel reported that Bolton turned mean after she complained about the incompetence of a client that Bolton (a lawyer) represented.

In Townsel's 2005 letter to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, she claimed that "Mr. Bolton proceeded to chase me through the halls of a Russian hotel-throwing things at me, shoving threatening letters under my door, and generally, behaving like a madman" and that "for nearly two weeks, while I awaited fresh direction . . . John Bolton hounded me in such an appalling way that I eventually retreated to my hotel room and stayed there. Mr. Bolton, of course, then routinely visited me there to pound on the door and shout threats." Townsel added, "He made

unconscionable comments about my weight, my wardrobe, and with a couple of team leaders, my sexuality."

In other testimony to the committee, former Bolton subordinate Carl Ford Jr. (a fellow Republican) described him as a "kiss-up, kick-down sort of guy." In my opinion, if these reports are true, they indicate that Bolton qualifies as a certified asshole because his abuse is part of a persistent pattern, not just something out of character that happened once or twice because he was having a bad day.

I am not alone in this view. The *Village Voice* published an article titled "Wanted: Complete Asshole for U.N. Ambassador," which concluded that "John Bolton has left a trail of alienated colleagues and ridiculed ideas."

Don't Replace Assholes with Wimps and Polite Clones

It is also important to define the term *asshole* because this book is *not* an argument for recruiting and breeding spineless wimps. My focus is squarely on screening, reforming, and getting rid of people who demean and damage others, especially others with relatively little power. If you want to learn about the virtues of speaking quietly and the nuances of workplace etiquette, then read something by Miss Manners. I am a firm believer in the virtues of conflict, even noisy arguments. Research on everything from student groups to top management teams reveals that constructive arguments over ideas-but not nasty personal arguments- drives greater performance, especially when teams do nonroutine work. And, as I show in my book *Weird Ideas That Work*, organizations that are too narrow and rigid about whom they let in the door stifle creativity and become dreary places populated by dull clones.

The right kind of friction can help any organization. To take a famous example, Intel cofounder and retired CEO Andy Grove can be a strong-willed and argumentative person. But Grove is renowned for sticking to the facts and for inviting anyone-from brand-new Intel engineers to Stanford students whom he teaches about business strategy to senior Intel executives-to challenge his ideas. For Grove, the focus has always been on finding the truth, not on putting people down. Not only do I despise spineless and obsequious wimps, but there is good evidence that they damage organizations. A series of controlled experiments and field studies in organizations shows that when teams engage in conflict over ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect, they develop better ideas and perform better. That is why Intel teaches employees how to fight, requiring all new hires to take classes in "constructive confrontation." These same studies show, however, that when team members engage in personal conflict-when they fight out of spite

and anger-their creativity, performance, and job satisfaction plummet. In other words, when people act like a bunch of assholes, the whole group suffers.

I also want to put in a good word for socially awkward people, some of whom-through no fault of their own-are so socially insensitive that they accidentally act like assholes at times. Certainly, people with high emotional intelligence who are skilled at taking the perspectives of people they encounter and at responding to their needs and feelings are pleasant to be around and well suited for leadership positions. Yet many extremely valuable employees-as a result of everything from being raised in dysfunctional families to having disabilities like Asperger's syndrome, nonverbal learning disorders, and Tourette's syndrome-act strangely, have poor social skills, and inadvertently hurt other people's feelings.

A few years back, I wrote a book on building creative organizations called *Weird Ideas That Work*. As I did the research, I was struck by how many successful leaders of high-tech companies and creative organizations like advertising agencies, graphic design firms, and Hollywood production companies had learned to ignore job candidates' quirks and strange mannerisms, to downplay socially inappropriate remarks, and instead, to focus on what the people could actually do. I first heard this argument from Nolan Bushnell- the founder of Atari, which was the first wildly successful computer gaming company. Bushnell told me that although he looked for smooth-talking marketing people, when it came to technical people, he just wanted to see their work because "the best engineers sometimes come in bodies that can't talk." Later, I even learned that film students at places like the University of Southern California believe that "talent"-especially script writers-who come off as a bit strange are seen as more creative, so they consciously develop strange mannerisms and dress in odd ways, a process they call "working on your quirk."

The Evidence Fits Your Experience: Workplaces Have a Lot of Assholes

I don't know of any scholarly studies with titles like "the prevalence of assholes in the modern organization" or "interpersonal moves by assholes in the workplace: form and frequency." Most researchers are too dignified to use this dirty word in print. But I do know that each of my friends and acquaintances reports working with at least one "asshole." And when people hear that I am writing about the topic, I don't have to ask for stories about these jerks-the targets seek me out and tell me one asshole story after another.

This flood of anguished and amusing anecdotes may reflect my particular idiosyncrasies. I suspect that I am more easily offended by personal slights than most people, especially by people who are rude, nasty, or detached during service encounters. I am also married to a lawyer, an occupation that is rightly reputed to have more than its share of overbearing assholes.

And because I have had a longstanding interest in the topic, I look for information about nasty people and remember it better than, say, about Good Samaritans, famous athletes, or unusually smart people.

There is also a big pile of scholarly research that reaches much the same conclusion without using the term "asshole." It is conducted under banners including bullying, interpersonal aggression, emotional abuse, abusive supervision, petty tyranny, and incivility in the workplace. These studies show that many workplaces are plagued by "interpersonal moves" that leave people feeling threatened and demeaned, which are often directed by more powerful people at less powerful people.

Consider some findings:

- A 2000 study by Loreleigh Keashly and Karen Jagatic found that 27% of workers in a representative sample of seven hundred Michigan residents experienced mistreatment by someone in the workplace, with approximately one out of six reporting persistent psychological abuse.
- In a 2002 study of workplace aggression and bullying in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Keashly and Joel Neuman surveyed nearly five thousand employees about exposure to sixty "negative workplace behaviors"; 36% reported "persistent hostility" from coworkers and supervisors, which meant "experiencing at least one aggressive behavior at least weekly for a period of a year." Nearly 20% of employees in the sample reported being bothered "moderately" to "a great deal" by abusive and aggressive behaviors, including yelling, temper tantrums, put-downs, glaring, exclusion, nasty gossip, and (on relatively rare occasions) "pushing, shoving, biting, kicking, and other sexual and nonsexual assaults."
- Studies of nurses suggest that they are demeaned at an especially high rate. A 1997 study of 130 U.S. nurses published in the *Journal of Professional Nursing* found that 90% reported being victims of verbal abuse by physicians during the past year; the average respondent reported six to twelve incidents of abusive anger, being ignored, and being treated in a condescending fashion. Similarly, a 2003 study of 461 nurses published in *Orthopaedic Nursing* found that in the past month 91% had experienced verbal abuse-defined as mistreatment that left them feeling attacked, devalued, or humiliated. Physicians were the most frequent source of such nastiness, but it also came from patients and their families, fellow nurses, and supervisors.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Michigan, Daniel Denison and I spent a week interviewing and observing a team of surgical nurses, and we were appalled by how openly rude and downright abusive the male doctors were to the (largely) female nurses. Take the surgeon

that we dubbed "Dr. Gooser" after we saw him chasing a female nurse down the hall while trying to pinch her behind.

The nurses we interviewed bitterly complained that it was useless to report him to administrators because they would be labeled as troublemakers and be told "he is just joking." All they could do was avoid him as much as possible. Christine Pearson and her colleagues have done extensive research on workplace incivility, a milder form of nastiness than emotional abuse or bullying. Their survey of 800 employees found that 10% witnessed daily incivility on their jobs and 20% were direct targets of incivility at least once a week. Pearson and her colleagues did another study of workplace incivility among 126 Canadian white-collar workers, which found that approximately 25% witnessed incivility of some kind on the job every day and 50% reported being direct targets of incivility at least once a week.

Researchers in Europe are partial to the term *bullying* rather than *psychological abuse*. Charlotte Rayner and her colleagues reviewed studies of bullying in British workplaces, and estimated that 30% of British workers experience encounters with bullies on at least a weekly basis. A British study of more than five thousand private- and public-sector employees found that about 10% had been bullied in the prior six months, and that about 25% had been victims and nearly 50% had witnessed bullying in the past five years. Studies in the United Kingdom find that the highest rates of workplace bullying happen to workers in prisons, schools, and the postal system but also reveal high rates in a sample of 594 "junior physicians" (similar to residents in the United States): 37% reported being bullied in the prior year, and 84% indicated they had witnessed bullying that was aimed at fellow junior physicians.

A host of other studies show that psychological abuse and bullying are common in other countries, including Austria, Australia, Canada, Germany, Finland, France, Ireland, and South Africa. A representative sample of Australian employees, for example, found that 35% reported being verbally abused by at least one coworker and 31% reported being verbally abused by at least one superior. A focused study of "nasty teasing" in a representative sample of nearly 5,000 Danish employees found that more than 6% were consistently exposed to this specific brand of workplace bullying. In the Third European Survey on Working Conditions, which was based on 21,500 face-to-face interviews with employees from countries of the European Union, 9% reported that they were exposed to persistent intimidation and bullying.

Much of this nastiness is directed by superiors to their subordinates (estimates run from 50% to 80%), with somewhat less between coworkers of roughly the same rank (estimates run from 20% to 50%), and "upward" nastiness- where underlings take on their superiors-occurs in less than 1%

of cases. Findings about the proportion of men versus women involved in this nastiness are mixed, although it is clear that men and women are victimized at roughly the same rate. And it is especially clear that the lion's share of bullying and psychological abuse is within gender, with men more likely to bully men and women more likely to bully women. A Web-based survey by the Workplace Bullying & Trauma Institute, for example, found that 63% of women were victims of another woman, and 62% of men were victims of another man.

The question of whether bullying and abuse tend to be done more often by men or women remains unclear, with some of the best U.S. studies (including Keashly and Jagatic's representative study of Michigan employees) showing no discernable differences between the sexes, while European studies suggest that abusers are more likely to be men. European studies also show that it is common for a victim to be "mobbed" by multiple people, typically both men and women. In short, the stereotypical jerk might be a man, but there are also huge numbers of women in every country studied who demean, belittle, and de-energize their peers and underlings.

The list of academic writings on bullying, psychological abuse, mobbing, tyrants, and incivility in the workplace goes on and on—hundreds of articles and chapters have been published. Estimates of who is doing what to whom depend on the population studied and how the particular type of workplace abuse is defined and measured. But the evidence is ironclad: there are a lot of assholes out there.

The Best Measure of Human Character

Diego Rodriguez works at IDEO, a small innovation company I've studied and worked with for more than a decade. You will hear more about IDEO in this book because it is such a civilized place to work. Diego urges organizations to develop "a shock-proof, bullet-resistant asshole detector."

This chapter proposes two steps for detecting assholes: first, identify people who persistently leave others feeling demeaned and de-energized; second, look to see if their victims usually have less power and social standing than their tormentors.

These tests imply an even more fundamental lesson that runs through this book: *the difference between how a person treats the powerless versus the powerful is as good a measure of human character as I know*. I described how Richard Branson devised such a test to help him decide which wannabe billionaires to fire and which to keep on his TV show. I've seen much the same thing on a smaller scale at Stanford, albeit accidentally. Several years back, I encountered a

perfect illustration of a senior faculty member who met this asshole test. 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 was instantly transformed into a helpful and charming human being.

To me, when a person is persistently warm and civilized toward people who are of unknown or lower status, it means that he or she is a decent human being-as they say in Yiddish, a real "mensch," the opposite of a certified asshole. Small decencies not only make you feel better about yourself, they can have other rewards as well. The sweet lesson learned by a former student of mine, Canadian Rhodes Scholar Charles Galunic, is a case in point. Charlie is now a management professor at INSEAD business school in France and is one of the most thoughtful people I've ever met. Charlie told me a lovely story about something that happened at a cold and crowded train station in Kingston, Ontario, when he was traveling to Toronto for his Rhodes Scholarship interviews. He was sitting and waiting for the train when he noticed an older couple who were standing and waiting. Charlie being Charlie, he immediately offered the two his seat, which they were happy to take. The next day, Charlie met the couple at a reception in Toronto for the scholarship finalists, and it turned out that the husband was a member of the selection committee. Charlie isn't sure if this small decency helped him win the prestigious scholarship- but I like to think that it did.

I wrote this book to help people build organizations where menschs like Charlie are routinely hired and celebrated- and, to steal a phrase from Groucho Marx, create workplaces where time wounds all heels-or at least reforms or banishes these creeps.

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