

SUMMARY

THE NO ASSHOLE RULE

ROBERT I. SUTTON



Summary of “The No Asshole Rule” by Robert I. Sutton

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Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One
that Isn't

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Introduction

The No Asshole Rule began more than fifteen years ago when Sutton was in a faculty meeting at Stanford University. When discussing who they should hire as a new faculty member, a fellow colleague simply stated, “Listen, I don’t care if that guy won the Nobel Prize... I just don’t want any assholes ruining our group.” They all had a good laugh, but whenever they had similar discussions in the future, it always went back to “The candidate seems smart, but would this hire violate our no asshole rule?” The rule went on to make the department a better place. You see, nasty people can be found in every occupation and in every country, but there is something you can do about it. Sutton hopes that what you learn here will provide comfort for those who feel oppressed by the jerks you work with, serve, or struggle to lead. He also hopes he can provide you with practical ideas for driving out and reforming nasty people, or even just limiting the damage they do if they are unable to reform.

Certified Assholes Versus Temporary Assholes

At just twenty-nine-years-old, author Robert Sutton began working at Stanford as a researcher. When he arrived, he was inexperienced, ineffective, and extremely nervous. Naturally, he got poor teaching evaluations during his first year on the job, but he continued to work hard to become more effective in the classroom. By the end of his third year at Stanford, he won the Best Teacher Award in his department. Voted for by the students, Sutton relished in the delight of his accomplishment. However, that feeling didn't last long.

Immediately following the graduation ceremony, a jealous colleague came rushing up to him to offer a congratulatory hug. During that hug, she aimed to extract every ounce of joy that Sutton was experiencing by whispering, "Well, Bob, now that you have satisfied the babies here on campus, perhaps you can settle down and do some *real* work." We can use this memory to demonstrate the two tests that Sutton uses for determining 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? 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?

In this particular interaction, that lasted less than a minute, Sutton went from feeling the happiest he's ever felt about his work performance to worrying about whether or not a teaching award was a sign that he wasn't serious enough about research. This interaction also shows the many types of assholes there are in the workplace. Some assholes loudly insult and belittle those who they believe are lesser than. Others, like Sutton's colleague, are two-faced backstabbers who keep a good reputation and save

their dirty work for moments in which they can't get caught. This type of asshole is much more damaging and even tougher to stop.

Additionally, this interaction also helps to demonstrate the difference between a *temporary* asshole and a *certified* asshole. It would be unfair to call his colleague a certified asshole based on this one interaction. Instead, she would be considered a temporary asshole; something we might all be guilty of at some point. For instance, Sutton once became angry with a staff member who he (wrongly) believed was trying to take an office away from the group. He admits to being a jerk in that situation. To be a certified asshole, one would need to display a persistent pattern of belittling, humiliating, disrespecting, and oppressing others.

The Total Cost of Assholes

There are many ways in which assholes will try and demean and deflate their victims. Some use personal insults, others aim to shame or make jokes, some even treat people as if they are invisible. There are hundreds of other moves assholes can use that leave victims feeling attacked and diminished, even if only momentarily. The twelve common everyday actions that assholes use are what Sutton calls the “Dirty Dozen.” They are:

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

Unfortunately, many workplaces allow this poor behavior to continue without realizing the damage it causes. In fact, research states that negative interactions with others have 500% more impact on victims than positive interactions. Even more, employees with low morale are more likely to engage in behavior that would be bad for business, like resigning, taking sick leave, or generally being less productive. They may even try and skip work and resort to stealing from the business.

The nastiness that many people experience in the workplace is typically directed by superiors to their subordinates, roughly 50% to 80%. Assholes in powerful positions can be even more damaging to the workplace. For instance, employees who work under the management of an asshole are

under constant threat of humiliation, creating an unproductive and fearful atmosphere. As a result, employees tend to spend their time and energy avoiding the asshole and sacrifice producing good work. As you can see, simply tolerating assholes in the workplace can be bad for business. Not only does it bring the morale of the company down, but it can become costly as well. In fact, researchers have studied the total cost of assholes, or TCA, to determine just how much assholes can cost a company.

For an organization with 1,000 workers, the cost can be nearly \$2 million annually in just personnel replacement costs. This doesn't even include legal fees or settlement fees to victims who might file suit against companies who don't protect victims of assholes. Even worse, victims aren't the only ones who are affected by the abuse and mistreatment. Additionally, their relatives, coworkers, and friends deal with secondhand suffering. But that's not all, jerks harm themselves too. While some certainly get ahead in business, many of them lose their jobs or even suffer public humiliation. For example, after Linda Wachner was fired as CEO of the financially troubled Warnaco in 2001, a *New York Times* story revealed her abusive actions, reporting that she routinely made ethnic and racial slurs. Even business partner Calvin Klein commented, "She is abusive to our people. Verbally, the language is disgusting." This is why each workplace should apply the No Asshole Rule to every person in the workplace, no matter his or her qualifications or status.

Adopt the No Asshole Rule and Make it Stick

When you adopt the No Asshole Rule in your workplace, you make the commitment to treating each employee with respect. Not only will you save money but you'll see morale and loyalty increase as well! If you need inspiration on how to implement this rule yourself, take a look at Google's slogan: Don't Be Evil, which is a good way to ensure the rule is known by all employees. Limiting the rule to your workplace won't do you any favors either; instead, you should extend this rule to customers and clients too. For example, certain airlines blacklist customers who have mistreated their staff by screaming at or threatening them.

If you want the rule to stick, you'll need a few tips. The first is to say the rule, write it down, and act on it. We saw an example of this in Google's slogan above. Essentially, you'll want to make the rule part of your organization's culture. The next tip is that assholes will hire other assholes. That's because people are likely to hire people who are like themselves. Therefore, do your best to keep jerks far away from the hiring process to avoid adding to the assholes in the workplace. In fact, if you do have an asshole in the workplace, get rid of him or her fast. A nasty attitude and behavior can have long-term consequences.

Next, embrace the "power-performance" paradox. You see, studies show that people who are given higher status are more likely to behave like assholes. They talk more, they take what they want, and they generally view others as a tool to get what they want, eventually taking personal credit for something an entire group took part in. The power-performance paradox suggests that organizations with fewer gaps in status and job prestige will produce fewer jerks. In other words, businesses who reduce the social distance between employees will experience more respectful behavior between managers and subordinates. So how can you lessen the gap?

One way of bridging the gap between managers and employees is to keep wage differences as narrow as possible. In the business world, earnings play

an important role in assigning status and prestige. However, if you keep wage gaps relatively small, organizations can lessen one of the factors that typically lead to workplace bullying. In addition to embracing the power-performance paradox, you'll need to learn to manage moments. Just as we focus on the little things in relationships, the same can be said for workplace behavior. One unkind word, insult, or temper tantrum can soon escalate into dealing with a certified asshole. Therefore, make it a point that you won't tolerate even the slightest incident of rudeness.

Foster Healthy Competition and Cooperation

Of course, assholes can have their place in every organization too. Adopting the one asshole rule is okay for most organizations, that is where companies keep one or two token jerks around to serve as “reverse role models,” and remind everyone how *not* to act. In fact, the right kind of friction can help any organization. Let’s take a look at Intel cofounder and retired CEO Andy Grove, known for being a strong-willed and argumentative person. He is renowned for sticking to the facts and for inviting anyone to challenge his ideas.

During these challenges, Grove focuses on finding the truth over putting others down. He believes spineless wimps can be just as damaging to organizations as assholes. Studies show that organizations that engage in conflict over ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect end up developing better ideas and performing better. For this reason, Intel teaches employees how to fight, even requiring all new hires to take a class in “constructive confrontation.” Additionally, being cold and ruthless can be an advantage in the business world when it comes to negotiations and such. However, this doesn’t mean that companies should promote assholes to positions of power or even tolerate their aggression.

Instead, there are many techniques that companies can use to help motivate their employees: incentives and recognition. These positive techniques get better results than aggression and punishment while also keeping office morale at an all-time high. When working in an aggressive environment, the best employees will easily find work elsewhere, meaning your best workers will simply take their talents elsewhere. That’s why a No Asshole Rule will not only keep your talented workers but will also attract new ones.

As we’ve mentioned before, the business world thrives off a competitive atmosphere. In fact, competition can be natural and even healthy for a successful company. When companies reward ambition, their employees

become more motivated, take more risks, and come up with better ideas. However, too much internal competition can turn a company into an uncivilized, unproductive workplace. Therefore, it's far more productive to foster an environment of cooperation. Many companies do this simply by changing their vocabulary. A good place to start is replacing aggressive words and phrases like, "the enemy" or "battleground" with more positive cooperative words like, "help," "fairness," and "community."

You can also begin making more simple changes like replacing "I," "my," and "them," with "we," "our," and "us." This reminds employees that everyone is on the same team and directs the focus on cooperation instead of competition.

Avoid Assholes and Learn How to Tolerate Them

Have you ever heard the proverb, “Lie down with dogs and you’ll rise with fleas?” Well, there is some truth to the saying. When you surround yourself with angry and aggressive people, you’ll find that your mood and behavior can be drastically altered. When too many jerks occupy a workplace, they can suck the kindness and civility of anyone they come in contact with. Even Sutton himself has fallen victim to this behavior, noting how he began treating his wife worse after spending too much time around assholes. Therefore, if you want to avoid becoming a certified asshole in both your private and business life, then avoid them.

The MIT Media Lab uses a “Jerk-O-Meter” device to determine whether someone is acting like a jerk or not. The device analyzes speech patterns over the phone and determines if the speech is kind or not. Because it analyzes speech from moment-to-moment, it is a highly accurate device to tell you if you’re being an asshole! Unfortunately, you won’t be able to get your hands on a Jerk-O-Meter, but you can monitor yourself and avoid the highly contagious asshole behavior. Keep minimum contact with assholes by avoiding them in meetings, as best you can. Additionally, don’t meet with a jerk one-on-one unless it’s absolutely necessary.

It is impossible to completely avoid contact with assholes, so it’s also important to learn how to coexist with them. The most important thing to remember is to not let your office jerk drag you down to his level. When an asshole insults or demeans you, don’t stoop down to their level; instead, stay calm. Don’t respond to aggression with more aggression. Avoid self-doubt and don’t internalize what they say to you or about you; remind yourself that they are the asshole and that they are the problem, not you. You’ll need to build an emotional distance between you and the asshole and enter each interaction with a positive frame of mind. To do this, remind yourself that the problem is only temporary, you are not the cause of the problem, and the problem is not going to affect you for the rest of your life.

Another way you can approach interactions with jerks is by hoping for an ideal outcome, but expecting a bad one. In other words, you should simply accept that being mean and nasty is simply their default state, they will not change. When you avoid emotionally investing yourself in their bad behavior, you remain confident in who you are as a person and don't allow their negativity to bring you down. Detach yourself and become indifferent towards them. As Walt Whitman once said, "Dismiss whatever insults your soul."

A Time and Place for Assholes

As mentioned previously, assholes have their place in every organization. In fact, sometimes you need to be a jerk to get things done. For example, Apple CEO Steve Jobs is perhaps the best example of how being a petty tyrant can result in producing an incredibly successful user-friendly product with sleek designs and a cult following. Despite his temper tantrums and bad behavior, Jobs inspired creativity from the people who worked for him. However, that doesn't mean that all companies thrive in this type of environment, it simply means that it worked for Steve Jobs. There are, however, times and situations in which acting like a jerk is more effective.

For example, baseball legend Ty Cobb was best known for his fearsome runs to the bases. His technique involved sliding into bases with his cleats up, exposing needle-sharp cleats. Cobb simply believed in the tactic, "Give me some room or get hurt." This can be applied in other areas in life as well; you can get rid of your competitors through intimidation. Additionally, you've likely heard the technique "good cop/bad cop" that cops use to try and get what they want. There's a reason they use this technique, it works! If you find that you are a pushover or struggle to speak up for yourself, perhaps find someone you can work with who can assume the "bad cop" role and throw a little weight around.

Lastly, we are all too quick to identify the jerks and assholes in our lives. What we fail to do, however, is to take a look in the mirror and determine if *we* are being a jerk to others. If you find that you are an asshole, it's time to change that negative behavior. Ask yourself, "When was the last time I acted like an asshole?" If you find the answer to that question is today, or yesterday, or every day last week, then it's time to turn a new leaf. Luckily, *not* being an asshole is quite simple: be friendly and respectful to others at all times in your personal and professional life. When you give respect, you get respect. It's that easy!

Final Summary

We all have that one person, or group of people, at work who we avoid. Every time you interact with them, they make you feel incompetent, or that you aren't doing your job well. We call these people bullies, or assholes might be more appropriate. Because these people can have such damaging effects on people and the companies they work for, each place of business should adopt the No Asshole Rule. Assholes, like the flu, are contagious and should be avoided at all costs. Of course, avoiding assholes all the time is impossible; therefore, emotionally distance yourself from them and remind yourself that they are the problem. By remaining calm and distant, you can remain confident in yourself and avoid allowing the asshole from making you feel inferior and incompetent. Apply the No Asshole Rule in both your private and business life, and use it all the time. Life is too short to deal with assholes.



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