

# The Bully Rulebook: How to deal with jerks. by Leigh Buchanan

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Call them jerks, bullies, louts, boors, or -- as Robert Sutton prefers -- assholes. Whatever you call them, such characters are a part of every organization, and Sutton, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University, has written a book about how to deal with them, *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*. Sutton shared his thoughts on the topic with *Inc.* editor-at-large Leigh Buchanan. Prohibited by her editors from using the objectionable word, Buchanan turned to a thesaurus for help.

**What got you interested in jerks?** My late father. He was an entrepreneur who started a half dozen companies. And his standard for a work relationship was if people were assholes, it wasn't worth it no matter how much money you could make. Because in the end it would drive you crazy. Then when I got to Stanford, my department had a no-asshole rule that we applied in hiring.

**Is that the term they use at Stanford?** You do see the word more now because dirty talk is more socially acceptable in organizations. When I first got to Stanford, they were talking about it. It wasn't written down, of course.

**How do you define the term?** There is a two-step definition that comes from the literature on abusive supervision. The first standard is whether someone consistently leaves people feeling demeaned and belittled and deenergized. The second standard is whether that person targets people who have less power than they do. But there's also an emotional component -- the feeling that you're being oppressed or pushed around by a bad apple.

**Does this refer only to bosses? Can someone be an entry-level brute?** Sure. It starts at lower levels when people start oppressing their peers. At that stage, they tend to be less successful because they have less power, but they can still do damage. I've even worked with undergraduates who have left me feeling bad about myself.

**It seems like schmucks can be particularly dangerous in small companies.** The thing about small businesses is there's no place to escape to. It's not like you can transfer to another division of a four-person start-up. You just have to leave. Especially when organizations are in start-up mode, people spend an unbelievable amount of time in one another's company. Assholes in that situation can have an enormous impact. Also, a company's size can create situations that can make people act like jerks. Someone wrote to me about a woman who was pregnant and worked in an office so small there was no bathroom. She had to use one in a neighboring shop. Her boss decided her visits were too frequent and started taking them out of her breaks and lunchtime.

**Explain how jackasses can take a financial toll on companies.** You can actually calculate the total cost of assholes, or TCA. One Silicon Valley executive told me he had a rainmaker who was consistently abusive. No secretaries in the company would work for him, so they had to do external

searches. He had to have training for sexual harassment and anger management. He was constantly complaining to management and to human resources about any little thing pertaining to his benefits. The HR people got so mad at him that they calculated the cost to the company of his being an asshole and it was \$160,000 a year. The firm used that information in his compensation discussion and cut his bonus to send him a message.

**How do you screen for antagonizers like this?** Mostly it's classic HR stuff. Don't believe the interview because it's so easy to fake it. Seek out people who know the candidate but weren't given as references. Try to work with people you've worked with before. It's also good to have people from multiple groups interview the candidate. That's because similar people tend to clump together, and if one group has assholes in it, they will want to work with other assholes. If there are assholes in your IT group, maybe another group will be able to keep new assholes from joining.

**What if your customers are tormentors?** That's harder to deal with. Southwest Airlines (NYSE:LUV) sent letters to abusive customers and occasionally asked them not to fly on the airline in the future. Tom Kelly at the San Francisco design firm IDEO said in his company's early days, and when things were hard, they would take on someone they knew was going to be a jerk. And they were always sorry because they were miserable and would lose good people. So it was not worthwhile. Many independent consultants talk about "asshole taxes." That is, when clients are difficult they start raising their rates. One reason is practical: Assholes generally take more of your time. It also helps justify taking the job if you're getting 25 percent more for working with a jerk.

**Can women be schmos?** My wife impressed upon me the importance of including as many women as possible, and there are many who fit the bill. Everybody I know who worked closely with Carly Fiorina will say she fits perfectly. My star female asshole is Linda Wachner of Warnaco (NASDAQ:WRNC). She had a history of routinely demeaning people, putting them down in public. When you didn't make the numbers, she would make you feel knee-high.

**Are you ever a browbeater?** People have called me an asshole and I've deserved it. But doing the research has had an effect on my behavior. I think I'm an asshole less often now, and when I am I feel even worse. In person, I'm generally okay. In e-mail, I'm a bigger danger. I'm less inhibited when I'm writing because I can't see facial expressions so I just start going off.

**If companies stop hiring rascals is there a danger that bands of unemployed harriers will roam the streets picking on small children and the elderly?** Based on what I've seen in law firms, corporate America, and Silicon Valley start-ups, there's no danger that companies are going to stop hiring assholes.