

Advice for Building a Civilized Workplace

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I was fortunate to instruct an MBA course at The College of New Jersey this summer entitled “**Corporate Responsibility & Business Ethics**”. During the course, we discussed numerous case studies that involve serious breaches of ethical conduct throughout corporate America. The consequences of this unethical behavior run the gamut from costly lawsuits, civil fines and penalties, multi-million dollar settlements, to loss of reputation and brand image, and even incarceration for the convicted perpetrators.

In many of these cases, the “bad actors” are powerful bullies motivated by greed, arrogance and self-aggrandizement. In addition, when they are accused of wrongdoing they often deny any improper conduct, and instead blame others in the organization for their lack of ethics.

Our review of these cases reminded me of a book I bought a few years ago when I was performing research for a bullying article I authored in 2019. The book is entitled “**The No Asshole Rule – Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t**” by Stanford University Management Professor Robert I. Sutton. The primary theme of Professor Sutton’s book is that bullying behavior in the workplace worsens morale and productivity. He then suggests a rule to screen out toxic staff members – the No Asshole rule! He offers the reader two tests 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?

If the answer to these questions is yes, then there is a good probability that this person is not only an asshole, but acting like one to other peoples’ detriment.

What is the cost of assholes in your organization?

Those of us who have personally worked with (or for) bullies know first-hand the harmful impact that these individuals have on the organization, and its employees. Thankfully, Professor Sutton has devised an approach to measure the cost of assholes in an organization that he calls TCA (the total cost of assholes in your organization). He then provides the factors that should be considered when calculating the TCA, as follows:

- **Damage to Victims and Witnesses**
- **Woes of Certified Assholes**
- **Wicked Consequences for Management**
- **Legal and HR Management Costs**
- **When Assholes Reign: Negative Effects on Organizations**

His analysis of each of these factors comports with my own experience, and helps explain the magnitude of this issue in today's workplace.

What are the top 10 steps for enforcing the "No Asshole Rule"?

Professor Sutton indicates at page 88 of his book that "Effective asshole management entails an interplay, fueling a virtuous, self-reinforcing cycle between the "big" things that organizations do – the stated philosophies; the written policies; the training and official hiring, firing, and reward practices – and the smaller ways in which people actually treat one another."

He further states that "Having all the right business philosophies and management practices to support the no asshole rule is meaningless unless you treat the person *right in front of you, right now, in the right way.*"

So, what are the top 10 steps for enforcing the no asshole rule, according to Professor Sutton?

- **Say the rule, write it down, and act on it** – if you can't or won't act on it, then it is better to say nothing at all to avoid being known as a hypocrite
- **Assholes will hire other assholes** – it is important to keep your resident jerks out of the hiring process so they do not hire "jerks like me"
- **Get rid of assholes fast** – many organizations wait too long to get rid of certified and incorrigible assholes
- **Treat certified assholes as incompetent employees** – even if they do other things very well, they ought to be treated as incompetent
- **Power breeds nastiness** – beware that giving people even a little power can turn them into big jerks
- **Embrace the power-performance paradox** – do everything you can to downplay and reduce unnecessary status differences among employees
- **Manage moments – not just practices, policies, and systems** – effective asshole management means focusing on, and changing, the little things that you and your people do so big changes can take place
- **Model and teach constructive confrontation** – develop a culture where people know when to argue and when to stop fighting and, instead, gather more evidence, listen to other people, and implement a decision (even if they disagree with it)

- **Adopt the one asshole rule** – no asshole rules might be most closely followed in organizations that permit one or two token jerks to hang around so that these “reverse role models” remind everyone else of the wrong behavior
- **Link big policies to small decencies** – effective asshole management happens when there is a virtuous, self-reinforcing cycle between the “big” things that organizations do and the little things that happen when people talk to one another and work together

Professor Sutton also reminds us that “the true test of an organization’s no asshole rule comes when things are going badly.” Perhaps this is the ideal time to reassess the organization’s activities, and formulate a plan of action for enhancing policies that are designed to thwart those who treat fellow employees with disdain and disrespect.

What is the organizational impact for making positive change?

In conclusion, the need in today’s business environment to build more civilized and respectful workplaces is at an all-time high. Whether you follow the approach suggested by Professor Sutton or employ another technique to weed out the bullies and jerks in your organization, it is well worth the time and effort.

The evidence strongly suggests that taking these steps has tangible benefits, not the least of which include:

- **Improved individual and organizational performance**
- **Decreased turnover and absenteeism**
- **Enhanced engagement and commitment to work**
- **Better productivity**
- **Superior employee satisfaction**

In light of the above, what actions will you undertake to implement positive changes in your organization that build a more civilized workplace where employee performance can thrive, and where employees desire to learn, grow and make valued contributions in collaboration with their colleagues?