

## Work Matters

### NO JERKS ALLOWED

How and Why to Stop Angry, Rude and Demeaning Workplace Behavior

BY MICHAEL P. MASLANKA

General counsel are tagged as custodians of their companies' most crucial, yet most sensitive and volatile asset: its employees. Henry Ford saw them as one big headache, immune from any analgesic's curative powers: "Why is it that I always end up with a person, when all I really want is a pair of hands?" But, it's a person you get, and if you believe people are of value, then the question becomes how to go about managing, motivating and inspiring them — and, just as important, learning how to unlock their embedded value. Here's a guide on the do's and don'ts to reach that goal.

First, the don'ts. Having practiced employment law for nearly 27 years, I can say with absolute clarity and total conviction that abrupt e-mails, rude comments and angry directives fail — always have, always will. Confirmation of my subjective feelings comes from two business professors, Christine Porath and Amir Erez, whose revealing study of rudeness and its toxic effects is illuminating. They subjected two groups of study participants to varying degrees of rudeness, and they asked a third group to only imagine they were the object of the rudeness. All groups were then asked to perform tasks requiring cognitive functions.

The result? In all three groups the ability of the participants to think was severely impaired. Why? They were unable to use their cognitive processing power to perform the tasks, wasting their brain wattage on mulling over and ruminating upon the rudeness, or parsing the comments and figuring out how they should have responded. This included the bystander group, asked only to empathize. Talk about collateral damage. Want to learn more? Check out "Rudeness and Its Noxious Effects" in the March issue of the *Harvard Business Review*.

Want more empirical evidence? Robert Sutton's book, "The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't," is brimming with studies and experiments. Work with a rude jerk and what happens? You become one as well. It's called emotional contagion, as Dr. Michelle Duffy demonstrated in her study — which Sutton cites — of hospital employees working for insensitive bosses who acted like jerks and condoned it in others. The employees morphed into their bosses. It's true: We ape others, especially those higher in the food chain.

One study Sutton discusses, by British researchers Charlotte Rayner and

Loraleigh Keashly, translated the effects of such uncivil and rude behavior into cold, hard cash. Historical data show that 25 percent of those bullied at work and 20 percent of those who merely witness it leave their employment (once again, bystander damage). The researchers postulate that in a company of 1,000 employees, if 25 percent leave and if the average historical replacement cost is \$20,000, then the annual cost is \$750,000. Tack on two witnesses per bullied employee, 20 percent of those witnesses leave, and that adds \$1.2 million for, as Sutton puts it, a TCA (total cost of assholes) of close to \$2 million per year.

Here's one more study Sutton highlights: 41 employees carried a palm-sized computer for two to three weeks. Researchers prompted the employees at random intervals to answer questions about their interactions with co-workers and then to rate their resulting feelings as positive, negative or neutral. Here's the expected: 30 percent were positive interactions, 10 percent negative, the rest neutral. Here's the unexpected: The negative interactions had a fivefold stronger effect on mood than the positive ones and thus took much longer to get over. Talk about radioactive.

## STOP THE MADNESS

So, what's to be done? Many companies promulgate a no-asshole rule, which is, standing alone, useless. Remember this: The fundamental attribution bias makes us all believe that we are better people than we really are, including yours truly. Most people don't know they are violating the rule, thinking of themselves as sterling folks; the most clueless are in management. A rule honored in its breach is harmful. Employees see the brass violating the rule, feel the hypocrisy and are emboldened to violate it themselves. It's better to have no rule at all. Instead, create a culture that operates on automatic pilot and perpetuates an infrastructure that makes it easier to avoid a gagging of A-holes. Here are the do's.

*Limit hierarchy.* When someone thinks he is superior to others, you get — in the memorable phrase of psychology professor Philip Zimbardo — the Lucifer effect. The phrase comes from his famous Stanford University prison experiment in which students were divided into guards and prisoners, with the first group ending up abusing the second. Which are you? Sutton and management guru Peter Drucker say to listen to whether management says words like “we” and “us” as opposed to “I” and “them.”

*Curtail e-mail and calls.* Instead, encourage face-to-face conversation. It is much easier to disrespect someone over e-mail or via conference call. Communicating via technology creates low trust. It breeds harshness and anger. It lets bullies be bullies. Fly above it.

*Train corporate managers on interpersonal skills.* This is not a soft suggestion. This skill lubricates the organization, reducing friction and accordingly raising efficiency and bolstering revenues. If people manage by e-mail, make them manage face-to-face. If that's not always possible, teach e-mail etiquette. If they have anger issues, require them to stop acting out, and give them help. If they can't stop the bad behavior, give them the boot. Make them understand that being an asshole is counter-productive. My mom told me that you can't change people, you can only help people. A manager with an inner jerk will always be a jerk, but you can ensure that it doesn't escape.

*Mandate free expression.* Those on the receiving end of abuse learn to avoid it by saying nothing (not what you pay them for) or to say only what the abuser wants to hear (also not what you pay them for). It's the latter that results in the business maxim that employees start to make up the numbers when there is unrelenting abuse to make the numbers.

Whenever I work with young lawyers for the first time, I tell them they only need to know the answer to one question: Why do airplanes crash? Usually, I get answers based on physics. But, no, airplanes crash because the junior co-pilot sees a blinking red light on the console, thinks if anything was wrong then surely the senior pilot would say something or act, and just as surely thinks to himself that he will not say anything that harms his career or gets him yelled at. So, the co-pilot says nothing and that's why airplanes crash.

*Understand that it's about more than saying “please” and “thank you.”* In his book, “How Starbucks Saved My Life,” Michael Gates Gill tells how he went from a high-powered ad agency exec to a probationary employee at a Starbucks store. Post-power, he realized that being polite to those behind the counter was not the same as understanding their value, appreciating their skills and recognizing their humanity. “Please” and “thank you” are good things to say — if sincerely meant and not sprinkled about like air fresheners at the landfill — but they do not and cannot substitute for authentic respect.

*Grasp that money is often the most expensive way to motivate employees.* Or so argues Dan Ariely in “Predictably Irrational.” Ariely tells us that the work world is moving from “market norms” (paying X amount of dollars for Y amount of work) to “social norms” (employees are willing to make sacrifices for their employer, but they expect something similar in return, such as understanding when extra days off are needed). His extensive studies also show that employees will work harder, say, when they receive a personal gift worth \$1,000 than a raise worth \$1,000. His bottom line: “It's remarkable how much work companies . . . can get out of people when social norms (such as the excitement of building

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something together) are stronger than market norms (such as salaries stepping up with each promotion).” Want an example? Take a look at the February *Harvard Business Review's* “Task, Not Time: Profile of a Gen Y Job,” featuring Best Buy's program of paying employees for tasks and results — not for time — eschewing the Monday-Saturday, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. baby-boomer ethic.

Sutton suggests a Zen take on lifting oneself out of the swamp of assholes and jerks: Live in the present, and do the right thing in the right way to the person in front of you, right now. I like that. Here's my take, albeit worn thin from use, and repeated so often its freshness bled out: “Whatever you would have others do for you, do that for them, for that is the law.” Try to read this passage from the Gospel of Matthew as if you've never read it before. Its karmic power may be the simplest way to reach the highest return on your largest investment with minimal effort. Who would have thunk it? ■ ■ ■

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