

Why jerks get ahead in the workplace

- JEFFREY ZASLOW, The Wall Street Journal
Monday, March 29, 2004

(03-29) 06:36 PST (AP) --

Are you sometimes a conniving weasel at work? Do you notice yourself stepping on other people's fingers as you scamper up the corporate ladder? Have you rudely ignored colleagues who can't help you advance?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, then you probably aren't the biggest jerk in your office.

That's because the really big jerks almost never acknowledge their devious behavior. In many ways, that's the secret to their success.

"Jerks are just normal folks carried to extremes," says Gloria Elliott, an organizational development consultant in Roanoke, Va. Having helped over 100 companies deal with obnoxious employees through her "Jerk Training" seminars, she sees a pattern: "I've never met a chronically difficult person who owns up to his actions."

So while the rest of us question our motives and behavior -- and try to resist our most ruthless impulses -- the really big jerks just keep plowing through the workplace, single-mindedly focused on furthering their own careers. To understand why a lot of them rise higher than the rest of us, you've got to understand their mind-sets.

They tend to be narcissistic, arrogant, manipulative and goal-oriented. They trust no one and refuse to collaborate. They lack a capacity for empathy but are skilled at politics. Though they purposely disregard how they're coming off to colleagues or subordinates, they're often very good at sweet-talking bosses, who remain oblivious to their dastardly ways. The result: Good people get fed up and leave companies, while jerks get promoted.

"I have seen entire departments wiped out, and the only ones left standing are the boss and his jerk," says John Hoover, an organizational leadership consultant whose new book is titled "How to Work for an Idiot."

Successful jerks make the most of what they've got. If they're tall, they use their height to intimidate you. If they're good-looking, they seduce the boss in ways that remind him that you're less attractive. If nepotism makes them untouchable in their jerkiness, they make sure their daddies are aware of your jerky tendencies.

I met my first workplace jerk during college in the late 1970s, when I was a hot-dog vendor in the stands at Philadelphia Phillies games. Invariably, the most successful vendor each night was a surly, sweaty, scowling middle-aged man I'll call Mr. Jerk. Though every vendor hated him, his jerkiness made him the top dog in terms of sales.

He knew where the money was -- out in the stands of Veterans Stadium. So each time he walked to the commissary to fill his empty kettle with hot dogs, he had no patience for the crowds of fans in the ballpark's hallways. While the rest of us vendors politely said "excuse me" as we inched our way through the shuffling mobs, Mr. Jerk would bark at people, "Watch it! Don't get burned!"

Our bulky kettles contained 50 hot dogs in a basin of lukewarm water heated by a small sterno. The outer metal box remained cold to the touch, but fans didn't know this. So when Mr. Jerk barreled toward them with his kettle, they'd jump out of his way as if scorched by a hot iron.

Back at the commissary, as Mr. Jerk hurriedly reloaded his kettle, hot dogs would sometimes bounce to the dirty cement floor. They'd roll across the room, and he'd scoop them up and toss them into his water. He had no reservations about selling those scummy hot dogs to innocent children.

Mr. Jerk also bullied young vendors, warning us to stay out of sections along the first-base line; those belonged to him, he said, because of "seniority." Through intimidation, he'd banish us to sparsely populated sections in the outfield.

Watching him each night, I recognized his positive traits -- ambition, resourcefulness, creativity -- but realized he had succumbed to the dark side.

Ms. Elliott estimates that 10 percent of people in the work force are full-time jerks. The rest of us just have our moments, which we temper with self-control, self-awareness and repentance. To survive and thrive in the presence of jerks, Ms. Elliott says, you must figure out who's redeemable and who's not.

When you've decided someone is a complete and remorseless jerk, back off. They're not "normal," so normal responses -- trying to talk things out, asking them to reconsider their actions -- rarely work. Instead, says Ms. Elliott, resist taking their bait, limit your contact with them and always be on guard. "Nice is not contagious," she says. "Don't smile at these people."

If you do choose confrontation, you need a lot of co-workers backing you up. Even then, your team can't demand a "personality transplant"; just outline the work-related behavior that you and your colleagues want changed.

Mr. Hoover recommends admitting that you are "powerless" over the jerks in your life. Otherwise, "harboring all that resentment is like drinking a cup of poison and waiting for the jerk to die," he says. Make a pledge to yourself that you won't let them rattle you, even as they keep getting ahead in life.

Sometimes people will give you strong warnings that they see their jerkiness as a necessary tool. Take note. In one of Ms. Elliott's seminars, an attendee admitted: "Look, I can be nice until 9:15 a.m., and then it's every man for himself."

Likewise, Mr. Jerk, the vendor, saw the stadium work force as a dog-eat-dog environment. In his view, any hot dog I sold was a hot dog he didn't get to sell. And in some ways, his raging competitiveness was contagious.

I spent four summers lugging a hot-dog kettle through Veterans Stadium. Eventually, I confess, I adapted a few techniques from the master. I found myself shouting, "Don't get burned!" as I muscled my way through crowds. Little kids would jump out of my way. Wives would pull their husbands to safety. I was such a jerk.

Luckily, I think I'm redeemable. Why? Because I still feel kind of guilty about it.

URL: <http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/news/archive/2004/03/29/financial0936EST0035.DTL>