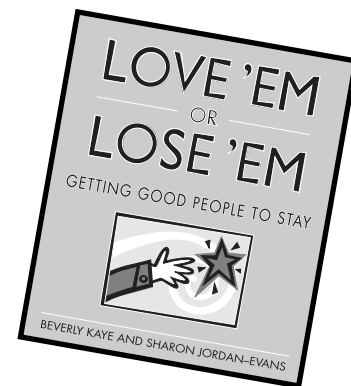


Who Me, a Jerk?

Your stars won't stay if their boss is a jerk.

by Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans



Talented people will leave any organization if they don't like their boss—even if they're well-paid, get recognized for their work, and have a chance to learn and grow. In fact, "disliking the boss" is one of the top reasons for talent loss. Take a look at this exit interview:

Interviewer: Matthew, why have you decided to leave the organization? I know that we pay competitively, plus you just received a bonus.

Matthew: Is this confidential?

Interviewer: Yes, definitely.

Matthew: The pay is fine. The work is fine. But my boss is a complete jerk. He is impossible to work with, and I've decided life is too short to spend it working for a jerk.

It is dangerous, however, to label some people as jerks and let others off the hook. Since most of us exhibit jerk-like behaviors—at least occasionally—the key is to assess which behaviors we exhibit and how often and then try to change for the better. Why? To keep our talented people, for starters.

What Is a Jerk?

We asked dozens of people, "What do jerks act like or look like?" In response, we heard that jerks:

Intimidate	Yell at people
Condescend or demean	Lie
Act arrogant	Act above the rules
Withhold praise	Enjoy making people sweat
Slam doors and pound tables when angry	Act superior to or smarter than everyone else
Swear	Show disrespect
Behave rudely	Act sexist
Belittle people, often in front of others	Act racist
Micro-manage	Withhold critical information
Manage up, not down	Use inappropriate humor
Always look out for number one	Blow up in meetings
Give only negative feedback	



Start every sentence with "I"
Steal the spotlight and credit from others
Block career moves by preventing promotions or holding on to stars
Distrust everyone
Show favoritism
Embarrass and humiliate others
Criticize constantly, often at a personal level
Overuse sarcasm
Deliberately ignore or isolate certain people

Set impossible goals or deadlines
Never accept blame, letting others take the hit
Undermine authority
Show lack of caring for people
Betray trust or confidences
Gossip and spread rumors
Act as if others are stupid
Take things out on others
Use fear as a motivator
Show revenge

Who, Me?

We are all jerks sometimes. We might do it when we feel backed into a corner or stressed out or when someone pushes the wrong buttons. Or, maybe, we've allowed these ineffective behaviors to become habits for us.

Whatever the reason, are these behaviors negative enough or frequent enough to inhibit your effectiveness as a manager? How are your employees *really* viewing you, and how does it affect their job satisfaction? How many of them are considering leaving you for a better boss?

Give the jerk checklist some serious thought. Ask your friends at work to look at the list with you and give you honest feedback. (If you don't have any friends, that may be a clue.) Ask family members to give you insight, too. If others agree that you often exhibit more than one or two of these behaviors, you are at high risk for losing talent. After all, jerk-like behaviors are so damaging that even one or two can negate all of your other strengths as a boss.

Sadly, too many corporate heroes operate in jerk mode too much of the time. Some have temper tantrums in staff meetings and even throw things. Others embarrass and humiliate people openly. Because of their status, many have been "allowed" to behave as jerks.



To Do

- ★ *Get honest feedback. You need a clear picture of how you look to others.*
- ★ *Think about the implications of your jerk-like behaviors. Are they getting in the way of your effectiveness? Causing good people to leave?*
- ★ *If you decide to change, seek help from others. Get a coach or a counselor. Attend a personal-growth seminar or read a self-improvement book. Ask people to monitor your behavior and give you feedback as you attempt to change.*
- ★ *Exercise.*
- ★ *Eat well.*
- ★ *Sleep more.*

If it works for them, why not for you? Because you are more effective if your people like and respect you. People respond when they are treated with dignity. They work harder for bosses they like. With competition for good people increasing, it is critical that you keep your stars and recruit new talent when necessary. Jerks are unable to do either, particularly as their reputation spreads.

Once a Jerk, Always a Jerk?

Just as you can learn new leadership skills at any age, you can stop ineffective behaviors or replace them with more effective ones. It may not be easy, but it is possible. The difficulty of changing ineffective behaviors depends on several factors:

- ★ How ingrained is the behavior? Have you been acting this way for 50 years or three years? Long-term habits are certainly more difficult to break than those more recently acquired.
- ★ Are you clear about what the desired behaviors look like? A clear picture of the goal certainly makes it easier to get there.
- ★ Do you have resources available to help you? It's easier to change if there are people supporting you.
- ★ How complex is the behavior? You may be able to simply stop telling off-color jokes, while negative reactions under stress are more complicated and interwoven. They require more focus, more resources, and more time. You may even need to develop a whole new repertoire of behaviors from which to choose.
- ★ Do you really *want* to change? (If you can't answer this question, you will not change. You've got to want to.)

The Bottom Line

Once you decide to change your jerk-like behaviors, create an action plan and stick with it. It may be the most important thing you do to keep your talent on your team.

