

Article location: <http://www.fastcompany.com/resources/talent/bksje/062705.html>

June 27, 2005

Are You the Jerk at Work?

By [Beverly Kaye](#) and [Sharon Jordan-Evans](#)**Q:**

I just got confidential feedback from my boss, peers, direct reports, and some internal customers. I was shocked and dismayed to find that many of those people believe I'm really tough to work with. One person said he plans to leave if I don't change or move on. What do I do with that?

Who Me?

We are all jerks sometimes. After all, we're overworked and overstressed along with everyone else. With competition for good people increasing, it's important to define and assess your own "jerk-like" behaviors -- and once you identify them -- decide to change.

We've asked thousands of people to describe what they mean by a jerk. Here is a sample of the 50 (yes, 50!) jerk-like behaviors we've found. How many do you occasionally, accidentally exhibit?

- Intimidate
- Condescend or demean
- Act arrogant
- Withhold praise
- Slam doors, pound tables
- Swear
- Behave rudely
- Belittle people in front of others
- Micromanage
- Manage up, not down
- Always look out for number one
- Give mostly negative feedback
- Yell at people
- Tell lies or "half-truths"
- Act above the rules
- Humiliates and embarrasses others
- Always have to be in control

If you exhibit none of the behaviors above, you're either a saint or you have a few blind spots. In other words, most of us exhibit some of these behaviors some of the time. The question is, how many and how often? And what effect does your behavior have on the people who report to you?

Our ongoing research on this topic is revealing. We continue to ask the survey question, "What 'jerk-like' behaviors would make you walk right out the door?" The top five responses are these. People will walk if their boss:

- Belittles them in front of others -- 40.5%
- Lies -- 34.2%
- Condescends or demeans -- 31.5%
- Humiliates and embarrasses others -- 23.9%
- Micromanages -- 21.9%

Give your responses to the list if sample jerk behaviors 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, there's a clue for your clue-bag.) Ask family members to give you insight as well. If others agree that you often exhibit more than one or two of those behaviors, you are at high risk for losing talent. Jerk-like behaviors are so damaging that even one or two can negate all of your other strengths as a boss.

If you have never had an in-depth 360-degree feedback assessment (input from your boss, co-workers, and peers), consider it. The feedback should come to you anonymously, and it should be used for your own awareness and development. Recognizing your ineffective and potentially damaging behaviors is the first step to doing something about them.

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.

Because behaviors are learned, we know that it is possible to change. It may not be easy, but it is possible. The difficulty of changing ineffective behaviors depends on the answers to several questions:

- How ingrained is the behavior? Have you been acting this way for 50 years or for three? Some of those long-term habits are certainly more difficult to break than those more recently learned.
- Are you crystal clear about what the desired behavior will look like? A clear picture of the goal will certainly make it easier to get there.
- Do you have resources available to help you? It's easier to change if you have people supporting you.
- How complex is the behavior? You may be able to decide simply to stop telling off-color jokes and never do it again. Negative reactions under stress are more complicated and interwoven, so they will probably require more focus, more resources, and a longer time to change. You may need to develop a new repertoire of behaviors from which to choose.
- Do you really want to change? Why? If you can't answer this question, you will not change. You've got to want to.

Once you decide to change, you're ready to create your action plan. For example, you can:

- Get honest feedback somehow. You need a clear picture of how you look to others.
- Ask, "So what?" Think about the implications of your behaviors. Are they getting in the way of your effectiveness? Are they causing good people to leave?
- Take a stress management course.
- Exercise. Eat well. Sleep more. You choose.
- Try Tai Chi, yoga, meditation, or prayer.
- If you decide to change, seek help from others:
 - Get a coach.
 - Seek counseling.
 - Attend a personal growth seminar.
 - Read self-improvement books.
 - Ask people to monitor and give you feedback as you attempt to change.

It is critical that you keep your stars in today's competitive environment and recruit new talent when necessary. Jerks are unable to do either, particularly as their reputation spreads. 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 can do to positively impact your organization's bottom line.

The list of jerk-like behaviors was adapted from *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay* (Berrett-Koehler, 2005)

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