Curbing, Not Rewarding, Jerk Behaviors on the Job

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Abstract

Are more "jerk" behaviors on the part of employees associated with more promotions for those same employees? Yes, says a study of business school alumni. However, almost all employees exhibit such behaviors at some time, making it more astute for managers to reduce those activities organization-wide instead of trying to identify those who exhibit them. To accomplish that task, possibilities include education, ranging from Webinars to a management book club with a discussion of how to apply what the books recommend, but especially C-level modeling of helpful rather than jerk behaviors, and reconsidering reward structures that lead to internal competition.

Identifying "jerk" behaviors in the workplace is hardly a challenge. Last week in the life of a prototypical, although fictional, employee, two co-workers shifted blame for their mistakes to him. Yesterday a team member prolonged a meeting for nearly 20 minutes to get her way on an issue that couldn't possibly matter to anyone but herself. Just this morning a supervisor clearly played favorites in handing out assignments, and within the next hour a colleague absolutely blew up at two subordinates over a small problem.

Will such actions, presumably detrimental to employee morale and organizational effectiveness, actually pay off in promotions for those whose poor interpersonal skills frustrate those who work with them? While that result seems counterintuitive, scholars in the fields of organizational behavior and organizational psychology have suggested just such an unhelpful relationship. Managers have every reason to consider whether those scholars are right, and if so what their own organizations might do to

lower the odds that those exhibiting such behaviors move up the corporate ladder.

We, therefore, describe here our two-part study investigating whether such behaviors help people get ahead in their organizations. Following that description, we suggest how organizations can curb employees' jerk behaviors and thereby avoid promoting those who exhibit them.

Identifying Jerk Behaviors

Researchers say that many professionals (as many as 98%) have engaged in "jerk behaviors" at some point, some even on a daily or weekly basis.[1, 2] Associating the term with poor interpersonal and communication skills as early as 1996, Candace Jones quotes a producer in the film industry: "When you work that many hours, under that much stress, and you get some jerk, he makes life miserable."[3] More recently, readers of management journals could learn about "a jerk boss who has thrived on being a gatekeeper for information and suppressing... people's opinions,"[4] or about "how to handle a colleague who's a jerk when the boss isn't around."[5] A human resources manager notes that "jerks leave a trail of human carnage that does long-term damage," citing a McKinsey study that put the cost of a single toxic salesperson at $160,000. His assessment of the consequences of jerk behavior: "staff turnover spikes, absenteeism rises, good ideas die and productivity tanks."[6]

Previously, the behaviors that involved treating others disrespectfully in the work setting were categorized as "incivility." However, they were thoughtfully discussed by academic researchers and deplored as harmful to individuals and organizations. For example, Cortina and co-authors found nearly two decades ago that 71% of the 1,180 public sector employees they surveyed reported some experience of workplace incivility in the past five years, and as many as one third of the most powerful people within an organization instigated jerk behaviors, which led to employees' job dissatisfaction and withdrawal. Lim and Cortina further found that jerk behaviors could lead to sexual harassment.[7, 8]

Other researchers find the incidence of such behaviors increasing. Nearly 20% of the 3,066 U.S. workers surveyed by the Rand Corp., Harvard Medical School and UCLA reported a hostile or threatening work environment, and about 55% of these surveyed workers reported facing "unpleasant and potentially hazardous" conditions.[9] The interpretation offered by Estes and Wang indicts the busy and highly transient nature of work. They perceive that people have less time for niceties of business life and pay more attention to short-term contributions and performance, a value shift so drastic that to the extent that "people come to the business world with little or no sense of

what is right or wrong."[10] Williams laments that as the pace of work becomes faster, the workplace becomes more interpersonally disconnected, and fundamental moral values are replaced by rudeness, discourtesy, insults, bullying, and aggression. In his view, uncivil or jerk behaviors have been spreading like cancer and shaping the new behavioral norm in the U.S.[11] In a report on rudeness in America, the vast majority of Americans believed that jerk behaviors had become a serious societal problem.[12]

Overall, then, many observers of organizational life take jerk behavior as a given. The research question we explored is whether it pays off. Our interest in that question stems from assertions that those who engage in jerk behaviors move up in their organizations, despite the costs such behaviors inflict on employees' productivity, morale, and cooperation.

For example, Stanford professor/author Jeffrey Pfeffer observes: "We *believe* we want people who are modest, authentic, and all the things we rate positively" to lead us, but "we find it's all the things we rate negatively [e.g., arrogance] that are the best predictors of higher salaries or getting chosen for a leadership position." He adds: "Most of my students have a problem because they're way too nice."[13] A Canadian business writer see organizations operating so that those who behave like jerks get ahead,[14] and according to a *Wall Street Journal* commentator, "being obnoxious often pays off in the workplace. And there isn't much you can do about it."[15]

Do employees who act like jerks really move ahead in their organizations? Because this argument largely has come from anecdotes rather than research evidence, we set out to empirically investigate the issue. We conducted a two-part study. First, we identified from a preliminary assignment to working MBA students in a large college of business the most common jerk behaviors, based on those listed by Marshall Goldsmith in his 2007 book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There.*[16] We then assessed in an online survey of alumni of that same business school the association of those jerk behaviors – as well as helpful behaviors – with the frequency of receiving one or more promotions and with an employee's standing on the corporate ladder.

Appendix 1 describes the methods employed in our study. In the assignment to MBA students, all of whom were employed at least part time, the eight most prevalent jerk behaviors identified were -- in order of frequency -- failing to listen, putting down a colleague's suggestion, making a destructive remark, letting anger control a conversation, "needing to win," playing favorites, ignoring feedback, and unapologetically shifting blame. Appendix 2 shows examples of how they described these behaviors, as well as how those who described them planned to improve.

These eight most-identified jerk behaviors were juxtaposed in the second phase of our research, the alumni survey, with three helpful behaviors:
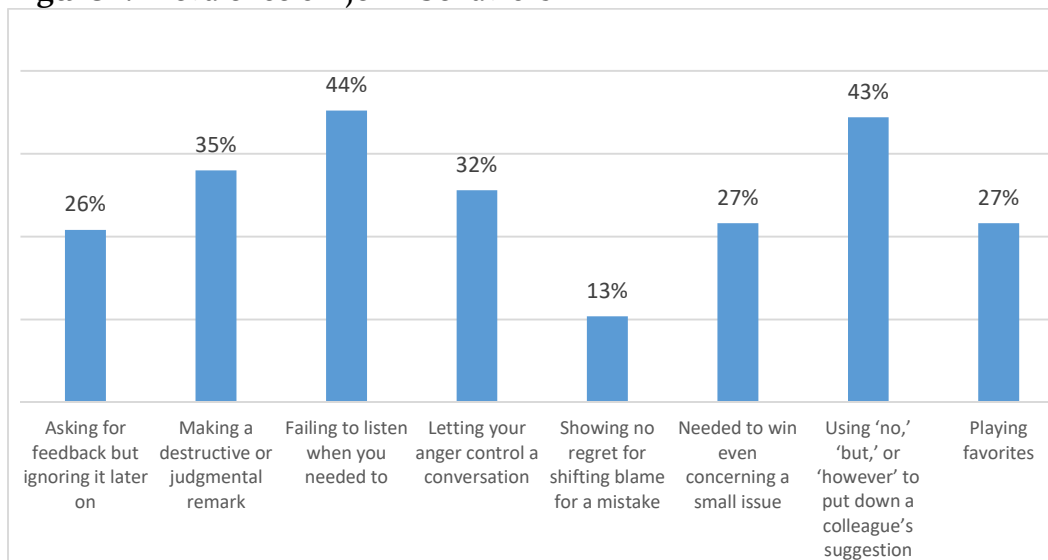
offering compliments or positive remarks to a colleague, volunteering to help a colleague, and offering a beneficial suggestion. We asked the alumni to check off whether in the last three years they had engaged in any of the 11 behaviors, randomized in the order in which they were presented.

What We Learned about Jerk Behaviors

Among the 757 business school alumni we surveyed, the two most prevalent jerk behaviors were failing to listen and putting down a colleague's suggestion by saying "no," "but," or "however." Each such behavior was self-identified by more than 40% of those surveyed. Making a destructive or judgmental remark was self-identified by more than one quarter of those surveyed, as were letting anger control a conversation and needing to win even concerning a small issue. Figure 1 shows the proportion of alumni checking off each of the eight jerk behaviors we asked about.

Figure 1. Prevalence of "jerk" behaviors

However, our basic research question was whether jerk behaviors could predict the frequency of job promotions, with other factors controlled for: gender, ethnicity, organizational tenure, citizenship, job location (in the U.S. or not), and the frequency of promotion requests. We found that among the respondents who said they had the possibility of job promotions in the past three years (60% of our sample), jerk behaviors were positively related to the frequency of promotions whereas helpful behaviors were not a significant predictor. Neither jerk behaviors nor helpful behaviors significantly predicted the frequency of promotion requests, suggesting that the frequency

of such requests could not explain why those who act more like a jerk get promoted more frequently.

Notably, an individual's standing on the corporate ladder was not significantly associated with jerk behaviors, whether the possibility of job promotions was present or absent. That result fails to support the idea, published previously, that the higher up individuals go, the greater jerk behaviors they exhibit.[17, 18] On the other hand, while standing on the corporate ladder was not significantly associated with helpful behaviors in the past three years among the respondents eligible for promotion, such standing was positively associated with helpful behaviors in the past three years among the other 40%, those who categorized themselves as not eligible for promotion. This result suggests that while jerk behaviors rather than helpful behaviors are rewarded with promotions, nevertheless, at some point up the ladder – facing no more possibility of job promotions – helpful behaviors may matter more than they did at lower levels, and employees opt to exhibit them.

Insights for Organizations

What might explain our research finding that those acting like jerks do get promoted more frequently when promotions are possible for them? It seems reasonable to assume that those exhibiting such behaviors also demonstrate a high level of competence; otherwise they might no longer be employed, given their negative influence on others. However, at least one other explanation may apply as well. According to psychological research, jerk behaviors might serve to others in the organization as a social signal of power, and exhibiting more such behaviors signals even more power. [19] If so, acting more like a jerk may help an employee to acquire more control over decisions and achieve more deference for his or her views, leading to a power increase.

What can organizations do to curb jerk behaviors? Unfortunately, deciding not to promote those who act like jerks is far easier than implementing such a policy. Donald Palmer, a University of California at Davis professor of management, makes an important point: organizational wrongdoing is not an abnormal phenomenon, but rather is normal and prevalent.[20] In agreement with this perspective, we see jerk behaviors as normal phenomena, to be discouraged systematically throughout the organization. Since so many professionals have shown jerk behaviors at some point – and in our study, 79% of those who responded did so – trying to identify the jerks so as to thwart their promotions appears futile.

Instead, we recommend actions to reduce the collective, as opposed to individual, incidence of jerk behaviors. Adopting such actions requires that

organizations replace reactive approaches with a range of proactive efforts, well aware that they are setting out to combat a widespread propensity. Our suggestions for doing so involve education, social (leader and peer) influence, and human resource practices.

Opportunities for Education

Educating employees in relationship skills offers a first step. If jerk behaviors are so common, many employees may well consider them to be simply how the world works. Therefore, the organization has the responsibility to communicate otherwise. One premise of Goldsmith's book, mentioned earlier in this discussion, is that professionals who have thrived in their careers often attribute their success to everything they have done – accomplishments, and also interpersonal style. Such individuals may fail to consider that despite their accomplishments, they are failing in the way they interact with others. Goldsmith attributes such failures to two human traits: the overwhelming need that people exhibit to tell you something you don't know, and the propensity to succumb to emotion – regardless of what might be appropriate or helpful in a given situation.

Such a perspective offers an argument for confronting employees with jerk behaviors they may recognize in themselves. Webinars and videos offer an obvious start. Less obvious is initiating a business book group for those in or aspiring to management, thus offering the opportunity to have books with Goldsmith's or similar messages read and discussed. A possible exercise would be to ask participants to consider how a challenging conversation they will have in the next month will go better, based on what they have read and learned, and then to describe that conversation in specific terms.

The jerk behaviors checked off most often in our study may prompt a more specific education opportunity. As noted earlier, the two most frequently checked were failing to listen when one should do so and disagreeing with the statements of others by using "but," "however," and similar verbal editing. The latter behavior represents a misguided attempt to add value and/or to appear wiser than the speaker, making such behavior the equivalent of a double win in the eyes of someone offering an addition or correction.

Here again, attracting prospective managers to a book discussion group can be helpful, particularly with suggestions for how to listen, a skill rarely taught in any educational context outside of music appreciation.[21] Learning to avoid the other most prevalent jerk behavior, "improving" someone else's idea, seems less a skill to be learned than an exercise in consciousness raising. Goldsmith suggests token monetary fines for using less-than-helpful words

to edit the ideas of others, but clearly the intent of such an approach is basically to remind current or future leaders what not to do.

Social Influence

Education, however, is no panacea if influential aspects of the current organizational environment communicate that jerk behaviors are what we do around here. We recommend examining and if warranted improving three influences on employees' jerk behaviors: leader influence, peer influence, and the organization's human resource practices. Each will be discussed in turn.

We begin with leader influence, given the assumption that leaders provide the most important role models for employees and that by setting a good example they play a critical role in nurturing and maintaining a civil work climate. That opportunity for example-setting mandates the avoidance of jerk behaviors not only during face-to-face social interactions but also via virtual channels such as e-mail, phone, and Skype.

Pro-active steps can do even more, however. If there is a Webinar, video series, or management book course, executives should take it first. If there is a system of "fines" for jerk behaviors, they should adopt it first. Goldsmith recommends not only changing one's behaviors with regard to others, but also telling those you treat badly that you plan to change and want to be reminded when you revert to former flawed approaches.

Nothing is more important than reducing toxic behaviors of leaders. A familiar cliché notes, "when my boss screams at me, I scream at my direct reports," but more is involved here than emulating the behaviors an employee sees. Realistically, the screaming boss precipitates emotional upset that clouds an employee's judgment concerning the jerk behaviors he or she might otherwise be wise enough to avoid.

Likewise, leaders' favoritism may evoke envy among employees, and leaders' selective incivility or discrimination may evoke resentment, precipitating jerk behaviors by their targets.[22, 23] Negative emotions like envy and resentment can also create an organizational climate conducive to jerk behaviors by those down the organizational ladder. In a parallel to the way that unnecessarily "adding value" appears, erroneously, to be a double win for someone engaging in such an action, jerk behaviors by leaders are a double loss.

Co-workers constitute a second source prompting either jerk behaviors or those that are helpful. Recent research in a tech-focused company even associates "the people we sit near at work" with productivity, and finds productivity drastically harmed by proximity to those "toxic" enough to be fired.[24] The explanation is not obscure: actions directed at a peer are likely to evoke negative reciprocity, creating a "jerk" spiral. Overall, the extent to

which peers powerfully influence the actions of those with whom they interact provides sufficient justification for quashing jerk behaviors, whether via videos, Webinars, book groups, leadership-focused group lunches – whatever programs seem practical. Realistically, reducing jerk behaviors among a few can be expected to likewise reduce such behaviors among the imitating or retaliating many.

Human Resource Practices

A final key issue involves human resource practices. Many organizations emphasize goal setting and adopt pay for performance approaches to incentivize individual effort. Such practices ignore their potential influence on jerk behaviors,[25] but can make employees think like competitors rather than colleagues. The alternative – using team rather than individual incentives – can maintain the benefits of matching rewards to effort, but increase cooperation rather than competition.

Besides incentives, job design also matters. Instead of focusing on task characteristics as key concerns when designing jobs, organizations may also consider how employees can have close contact with the coworkers and/or customers who benefit from their efforts, giving them direct feedback on how their job affects its beneficiaries. According to Adam Grant, making job designs more relational in nature strengthens human connections and increases employees' prosocial motivation, which leads to more civil behaviors and inhibits those who ignore the reality that they are dealing with human beings.[26]

The perspective offered here can be implemented only if organizations, during the recruitment and hiring process, thoroughly check references to get some indication of whether job candidates have consistently engaged in jerk behaviors in the past, instead of just focusing on candidates' competence and achievements. It may seem unclear how to do so, given the reality that almost all employees exhibit these behaviors at some point. However, asking about consistent interpersonal issues may uncover a red flag. Depending on the role a prospective employee played in his or her previous job, it may be possible to find a subordinate to ask about "how your boss operates with people," or may be possible to find a customer willing to answer a similar question. Then of course organizations should regularly evaluate employees' interpersonal skills as part of assessing their work performance.

Final Thoughts

The three areas discussed above, all necessary to curb jerk behaviors throughout the organization, are offered as an alternative to attempts to single out those who exhibit such behaviors so as to thwart their promotions.

However, it may prove feasible to identify and reward behaviors that instead benefit co-workers. Our results did not associate helpful behaviors with promotions in a three-year time frame, but for those who saw no more possibility of promotions, standing on the organizational ladder did predict such behaviors.

Perhaps they realized that giving a compliment or positive remark to a colleague, volunteering to help a colleague, or making a suggestion that could benefit one or more colleagues was expected at a higher level – and surely astute organizations will convey that message. The alternative is to continue to promote jerks.

<div style="background-color:#c00; color:white; padding:4px">Research Process</div>

First Phase
Initially, we asked 136 MBA students at a well-regarded, large business school that enrolls primarily working professionals to read Marshall Goldsmith's book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There,* which lists the kinds of behaviors associated with career stagnation. The author, a consultant, asserts that while competence and drive take employees part way up the corporate ladder, their progress will likely be halted by faulty interpersonal skills.

The MBA students used the list from Goldsmith's book to identify (anonymously) their own jerk behaviors at work. Appendix 2 provides examples of what the students wrote.

Second Phase
We used the jerk behaviors that were mentioned most frequently to create a list for an online questionnaire, to be answered anonymously. We emailed that questionnaire to alumni of the same business school, first asking about their promotions—(a) whether they were eligible for a promotion; (b) if they were eligible, how many times they had been promoted in the last three years; and (c) how many times they asked for a promotion in the last three years. Then the questionnaire asked them to indicate their own behaviors from the given list.

Specifically, respondents checked off whether in the last three years they had engaged in any of the following behaviors (randomly ordered):
- "asking for feedback but ignoring it later on"
- "making a destructive or judgmental remark"
- "failing to listen when you needed to"
- "letting your anger control a conversation"
- "showing no regret or shifting blame for a mistake"
- "needing to win even concerning a small issue"
- "using 'no,' 'but,' or 'however' to put down a colleague's suggestion"
- "playing favorites."

These items were retained for our data analysis due to their satisfactory factor loading scores in our factor analysis.

In the same list, we interspersed the (randomly ordered) indicators of helpful behaviors, asking whether in the last three years respondents had engaged in:

- "giving a compliment or positive remark to a colleague"
- "volunteering to help a colleague"
- "making a suggestion that can benefit one or more colleagues."

In addition to the demographic questions (gender, ethnicity, organizational tenure, citizenship, and job location), we literally sketched a ladder and asked each respondent to indicate his or her standing on their organization's corporate ladder (from Rung 1 to 10).

We received 757 usable responses. The average age of respondents was 41, with an average organizational tenure of 7.26 years. The proportion who were female was 39%, who were white was 61%, and who were U.S. citizens was 94%.

We counted the number of items assessing jerk behaviors checked by each respondent and likewise scaled each respondent's helpful behaviors by number of the items checked. Next we regressed the frequency of promotions on jerk behaviors, helpful behaviors, the frequency of promotion requests, and other control variables.

In addition, we tallied the proportion of respondents checking each jerk behavior, as shown in Figure 1.

Identifying Jerk Behaviors and What to Do Instead -- Examples

I struggle to listen attentively. After reading Goldsmith's book, I began to notice that when I talk with others in my department, I often interrupt while they are speaking. That can come across as rude and disrespectful. I will try in the future to follow Goldsmith's suggestion of asking "Is it worth it?" before speaking, so that I am considering how the other person will respond to what I say. I think that will lead to my saying far more often "Please tell me more about that," but not until I'm sure the speaker has finished.

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Goldsmith points out the downsides of speaking while angry. I remember an incident when I screamed at a co-worker for what I considered a bone-headed decision, and when the co-worker complained, I said "Well, my hard drive just crashed and I'm just not feeling very happy right now." That was just dumb. Other problems will come up throughout my career that will make me angry, and instead of yelling at the next person I talk to, I need to do something else right away. Goldsmith writes, "The next time you start to speak out of anger, look in the mirror [to find the root of your rage" – yourself]. I'll even improve on that advice: when I am furious about something I'll look in the mirror before talking to anyone about anything. I will keep looking in the mirror (probably I'd better keep one on my desk) until I'm ready to smile at that image in the mirror and tell myself that I'm a lucky guy with a good job, and it isn't a perfect world.

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Goldsmith describes how the habit of "making destructive comments" is devoid of value. I can be sarcastic, but I'm going to follow the advice in the book. I'm asking my team members: "if you catch me putting someone down, call me on it, I'll pay you a buck." Obviously, I'm really telling them that I want to operate differently.

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I know that "not listening" is my most serious offense. I downloaded an iPhone app that allows me to record phone conversations. After recording a number of calls, I added up the minutes that I was speaking and that I was listening. The ratio was almost two to one, in the wrong direction! Goldsmith writes the negative message sent by a poor listener is "I don't care about you." By regularly checking in on this application to see how my listening skills improve, I hope to signal that I really do care about other people.

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The book made me realize that I've been guilty of trying to shift negative pressure and blame to others, in other words, passing the buck. The most recent example came at my annual evaluation. My boss said that the group I'm managing is underperforming, and I defended myself by listing all the reasons that happened – and they pointed in every direction except back to me. Now I realize an effective leader should shoulder the blame so that the people around him will be protected and will learn to trust his character and dependability. No one is expected to be right all of the time, but I need to be humble enough to take criticism and have the ability to learn from my mistakes. Before my next evaluation I need to analyze my own behavior over the past year and recognize ways that I can improve to make my team more productive.

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I've been living by the words of the late Al Davis, "Just win, baby!" I've been someone always trying to outshine everybody else to make sure my boss knows I'm working hard. I hardly ever compromise during arguments. Goldsmith says that an innate desire to win is not a negative trait, but the desire to win at *everything* is. I recognize that it's a mistake to be someone who's winning too much, because one of these days one of the other guys on our team might get promoted over me and then I'm working for him – the guy I was always trying to beat out. I should be a supporter of my team members instead of an opponent. If I lose an argument, I'll make a point of supporting the idea I opposed, and the energy I've spent trying to "shine" can be invested in helping my team members manage their workload.

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I recognize that at least part of my "not listening" habit" is really a way of putting down the person talking to me. I remember telling someone junior to me "Next Slide" while she was presenting, to show that I already knew what she was about to present. And I need to stop twiddling my thumbs and pre-formulating thoughts when employees are speaking to me. I also need to stop showing in meetings that I'm just plain bored, by looking at my laptop screen or my phone. I want people to know they have my full attention.

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