I just published a new book with a mildly obscene title: *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t*. The first question that EVERYONE seems to ask me is why – given I am an apparently a respectable tenured professor – I use such a bold (and to some, offensive) title.

Here are my top seven reasons:

1. My father always told me to avoid assholes at all costs, no matter how rich or powerful they might be, because I would catch their nastiness and impose it on others. I learned, as an organizational psychologist, that his advice is supported by research on “emotional contagion”: if you work for a jerk, odds are you will become one.

2. I worked in an academic department at Stanford where we openly talked about the no asshole rule and used it in hiring decisions. It made the old Department of Industrial Engineering & Engineering Management a better place to work.

3. In 2004, I wrote an essay for the Harvard Business Review called “More Trouble Than They’re Worth,” which talked about the no asshole rule. I had published other articles in HBR, longer and more well-researched ones, but nothing had provoked such a strong response. I’ve since received more than 1,000 emails on assholes (I just counted 77 new emails from strangers in just the past week.) and have been told hundreds and hundreds of stories. Some are troubling, like the fellow going through chemotherapy whose boss “told me I was ‘a wimp and a pussy.’” Other stories are funny (like the woman whose boss kept stealing food from her desk, so she made candies out of Ex-Lax, which he promptly stole and ate) and still others are encouraging (including notes from CEOs who actively screen out and fire demeaning people). The first example was the most common, and it reflected the pain that people feel when they are treated terribly, whether they are models, engineers, or CEOs who feel abused by their boards.

4. I was determined to use the word asshole in the title because, to me, other words like “jerk,” “bully,” “tyrant,” “despot,” and so on are just euphemisms for what people really call those creeps. And when I have done such damage to people (indeed, all of us are capable of being assholes some of the time), that is what I call myself. I know the term offends some people, but nothing else captures the emotional wallop. Not everyone agrees with me; check out this fantastic letter that a reader wrote to the San Francisco Chronicle after a story about my book appeared.

5. I have uncovered quite a few companies that screen out and don’t tolerate “workplace jerks.” Many of these places – law firm Perkins Coie, the research department at Lehman Brothers under Jack Rivkin, and software firm SuccessFactors – that have (or had) such rules may call them “no jerk rules” for public consumption. But when you talk to them, they talk about screening out assholes, not jerks. For example, Harvard Business School Assistant Professor Boris Groysberg wrote me that they called it the no asshole rule at Lehman, but he had to write it as the no jerk rule in his teaching cases. My favorite company these days is SuccessFactors, which has all new employees sign 14 rules of engagement. The last is agreeing not to be an asshole! SuccessFactors is pretty successful: It has grown from 100 to 400 employees over the past year.

6. There are things that people out there who are victims of bullies can do to fight back and the word needs to get out. Consider this (edited) email that a government worker sent me about how she and her co-workers convinced management to deal with a nasty and demeaning co-worker:
“I have worked [at a government agency] for four years and encountered the asshole of all assholes very early on. After months of being tormented by her and comforting other tearful victims, I decided to document her behavior. I kept a little notebook in my pocket and wrote down her behaviors that were racist, slanderous, threatening, etc. I documented the many harmful things she did with dates and times. I encouraged her other victims to do so too and these written and signed statements were presented to our supervisor. Our supervisors knew this worker was an asshole but didn’t do anything to stop her harmful behaviors until they received these statements. The asshole went on a mysterious leave that no supervisor was permitted to discuss and she never returned.”

7. The most important reason that I wrote this book is that demeaning people do terrible damage to others and to their companies. And even though there are occasions when being an asshole helps people and companies “win,” my view is that if you are a winner and an asshole, you are still an asshole and I don’t want to be around you!

You’re out there in the trenches. I bet some of these bosses seem familiar. Some of us may see a bit of ourselves in there, too.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PbmupwKU8RY
You Can't Please Everyone: "Amusingly Poetic Vitriol"

I have written in-depth about "Why I call them assholes," why for me, no other word captures the emotions I feel when I am the victim of a demeaning creep, when I see others being abused by some jerk, or when the word I apply to myself when I have been nasty schmuck. I also understand that the word does offend some people and that they object to my dirty language. I always say (to steal phrase from William Wrigley Jr., of chewing gum fame), that "when two people always agree, one of them is unnecessary," so I respect people who object to my dirty title and I admire them for speaking-up.

I especially admire people who complain eloquently. Last Saturday, February 24th, the San Francisco Chronicle published a long story by Jessica Guynn called "Crusade Against The Jerk at Work." A reader from Palo Alto was apparently quite offended, and wrote a great letter to the Chronicle in protest. Mark Fortier, who is working with me to help promote the book, called it "amusing poetic vitriol:"

Editor -- You may call him a respected Stanford professor ("Crusade against the jerk at work," Feb. 24), but I call Robert Sutton a fallen educator, who has descended into the vulgarity and coarseness of our times.

The red-faced Chronicle is too embarrassed to repeat his book's unexpurgated title. The subject matter may be valid, but the odor of crudity and grossness has now seeped like sewage into our bastions of learning. Such low language from a Ph.D. is typical of the foul-mouthed, tasteless vulgarity that has corrupted television, radio, newspapers and other media with offensiveness and obscene billingsgate we used to hear from the mouths of naughty boys.

Sure, Sutton will sell a laxative of books with his sleazy title, but why slander that vital organ of our body? This will come to no good end.

VIC BEFERA, Palo Alto

I don't agree with Mr. Befera, but his writing is charming and funny. I would also add that one of the lessons that I learned from my product design friends like David Kelley is that, in creating something, the aim isn't always to please people, it is to make them feel alive, to think about themselves and what they value and believe. In this vein, I am heartened by the strength of the emotional response to the book, and appreciate Mr. Befera's response just as much as the woman who wrote me about how she and her co-workers used "asshole diaries" to drive out the local bully.

P.S. I don't know how Mr. Befera would feel about it, but I am pleased to report that a Reuter's story "Author Puts Focus on Office Bullies and Jerks" just came out that prints the uncensored title. The picture to the left was printed with the title, I just love it.
Are You A Certified Asshole?
Find Out With the Asshole Rating Self-Exam (ARSE)

What Are Your Gut Reactions to People?

1. You feel surrounded by incompetent idiots – and you can’t help letting them know the truth every now and then.
   - True
   - False

2. You were a nice person until you started working with the current bunch of creeps.
   - True
   - False

3. You don’t trust the people around you, and they don’t trust you.
   - True
   - False

4. You see your co-workers as competitors.
   - True
   - False

5. You believe that one of the best ways to “climb the ladder” is to push other people down or out of the way.
   - True
   - False

6. You secretly enjoy watching other people suffer and squirm.
   - True
   - False

7. You are often jealous of your colleagues, and find it difficult to be genuinely pleased for them when they do well.
   - True
   - False

8. You have a small list of close friends and a long list of enemies, and you are equally proud of both lists.
   - True
   - False

9. Sometimes you just can’t contain your contempt toward the losers and jerks at your workplace.
   - True
   - False

10. You find it useful to glare at, insult, and even occasionally holler at some of the idiots at your workplace – otherwise, they never seem to shape-up.
    - True
    - False

11. You take credit for the accomplishments of your team – why not? They would be nowhere without you.
    - True
    - False

12. You enjoy lobbing "innocent" comments into meetings that serve no purpose other than to humiliate or cause discomfort to the person on the receiving end.
    - True
    - False
13. You are quick to point out others’ mistakes.
   □ True
   □ False

14. You don’t make mistakes. When something goes wrong, you always find some idiot to blame.
   □ True
   □ False

15. You constantly interrupt people because, after all, what you have to say is more important.
   □ True
   □ False

16. You are constantly “buttering-up” your boss and other powerful people, and expect the same treatment from your underlings.
   □ True
   □ False

17. Your jokes and teasing can get a bit nasty at times, but you have to admit, they are pretty funny.
   □ True
   □ False

18. You love your immediate team and they love you, but are at constant warfare with the rest of the organization. You treat everyone else like crap because, after all, if you’re not on my team, you either don’t matter or are the enemy.
   □ True
   □ False

19. You notice that people seem to avoid eye contact when they talk to you – and they often become very nervous.
   □ True
   □ False

20. You have the feeling that people are always very careful about what they say around you.
   □ True
   □ False

21. People keep responding to your e-mails with hostile reactions, which often escalate into “flame wars” with these jerks.
   □ True
   □ False

22. People seem hesitant to divulge personal information to you.
   □ True
   □ False

23. People seem to stop having fun when you show up.
   □ True
   □ False

24. People often seem to react to your arrival by announcing that they have to leave.
   □ True
   □ False
A 24-Question Self-Exam by Bob Sutton

Scoring

0 to 5 “True”: You don’t sound like a certified asshole, unless you are fooling yourself.

5 to 15 “True”: You sound like a borderline certified asshole, perhaps the time has come to start changing your behavior before it gets worse.

15 or more “True”: You sound like a full-blown certified asshole to me, get help immediately. But, please, don’t come to me for help, as I would rather not meet you.

A 24-Question Self-Exam by Bob Sutton (http://electricpulp.com/guykawasaki/arse/)