

Boorish co-workers bring everyone down

by Michael Kinsman

As I sit here in the middle of a big office, I know there is guy sitting 30 feet behind me I wish would just disappear.

This co-worker is uncivil to those he allegedly works "with." This man can find it in himself to be rude to just about anyone. He is someone who is competent in his job, but frankly the way he approaches his work makes me think we'd be better off without him.

This is a person I would never want to have as a friend because I know that his character is as toxic at home as it is in the office. And, I avoid him at all costs.

Sound familiar?

Every workplace seems to have one. Some have two or three, and some workplaces are cursed with having more than that.

Robert Sutton, a professor of management science and engineering at Stanford University, believes these people - he calls them a--holes - ought to be sent packing.

In his book "The No A--hole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't" (Warner Business, \$23), Sutton challenges businesses and their employees to weed out people whose behavior is counterproductive to the company's goals.

He understands that workplaces are all about chemistry. He knows that co-workers need to respect each other, treat each other with dignity and keep lines of communication open.

When that happens, companies prosper.

When that doesn't happen, a creeping cancer develops that can undermine everything a company hopes to accomplish.

Sutton believes that civilized workplaces are not just dreams, but they can exist. He also knows that too many companies are bogged down by a--holes who bother other workers to the point they can't perform well.

He has two simple tests for determining if co-workers qualify for his blunt title:

Test 1: After talking to this individual, do you feel oppressed, humiliated, de-energized or belittled by the person?

Test 2: Does this individual aim venom at people who are less powerful?

If the answer to both questions is "yes," you have a problem.

That problem will surface when that behavior drives the best employees from the company, when other employees reduce their productivity and commitment and when employee absenteeism rises.

This fallout is often hard to document simply because human resources departments have little training in how to spot and deal with these abusive personalities. And, face it, if this person slips through the interview process and gets hired, it's probably going to take them causing a series of problems before a company acknowledges they made a mistake.

Sutton believes that companies that make a commitment to keeping a--holes out of the company will be better off. Companies need rules against that behavior, then they need employees who will recognize the behavior and management with the courage and vision to deal promptly with their abusive behavior.

If you don't do this, you probably be dogged as long as the guy sitting 30 feet behind you decides to stay.

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