10 Lessons for Arrogant A-Holes at Work

by P.W. Joseph

This is a work of creative nonfiction.

The author has made all effort, at great grammatical strain, to conceal the identity of any referenced person, living or dead. Anyone who recognizes themself in this work is kindly requested to keep their mouth shut.

All events recounted herein actually happened, pretty much as described, as best as the author can remember, which is not very much. Factual disputes and/or discourses on the nature of Truth can be submitted at the email address below.

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If being nice were easy, children wouldn't need (at least some) whippings, society wouldn't need (at least some) police, and Jesus and the Dalai Lama could have pursued their true passions (artisanal micro-brewing and watch repair, respectively. [That second one is not a joke, it's really one of the 14th D.L.'s favorite hobbies, look it up]).

But, at least for our species, being nice is hard. Just ask the too-busy organization Genocide Watch, the homeless person you walked past earlier, or the researchers who found out that human babies are just tiny lying racists.[1]

This book is intended for readers who find being nice not only difficult, but difficult to understand. It is for readers who are naturally cold, calculating, and arrogant. Readers who were sorted into Slytherin, and who rooted for Sauron, the Cylons, and the Empire. Readers who grew tired of people misunderstanding them, and so at some point stopped trying to be understood. Readers who think other people are weighed down by sentiment and emotion, and so display neither.

But at the same time, this book is not intended for irredeemable sociopaths. True sociopaths would not be interested in a book of lessons for becoming less sociopathic; they would want a roadmap for dominating officemates and getting ahead.[2] That is not this book. Rather, this book is for assholes who realize (or, if you're gifting this to

[1] See Nakayama (2013), Chapter 11 in Sapolsky (2017), and, apparently, a 2022 Supreme Court Justice confirmation hearing.

[2] True sociopaths harm others with their antisocial behaviors, either directly or indirectly, and do not care that they do so. And yes, sometimes true sociopaths eat people—but only the cool ones. (If light cannibalism humor offends you, you may want to request a refund. But there are some truly fascinating cannibal studies out there; for example, see Raymond, Léger, and Gasman's (2019) "Psychopathological Profile of Cannibalism".)

someone, are capable of realizing) that they are assholes. Someone who doesn't intend to keep offending or hurting people's feelings, and regrets when those things happen (or at least, the consequences of those things). Someone who worries that they might be a bad person and wishes they could be a better one (or at least, that they would stop getting bad reviews at work). Someone who doesn't want to eat people (or at least, would only do so if they were stranded on a deserted island and a fair but very high-stakes game of paper-rock-scissors could be played).

Maybe you were recently passed over for an expected promotion because of 'tone' or 'attitude' or something else you've heard before but just can't seem to fix. Maybe you made a friend or colleague cry and don't know why. Maybe the team stopped inviting you for margarita night, and sure, that was great at first because you already see too much of those people during the workday and love getting home on time and you don't even drink tequila anymore since that time in Cancún; but now you're worried people won't think you're a team player and you'll continue getting assigned to only the boring, simple projects. Maybe colleagues are uncomfortable traveling with you because of your too-openly-shared stance on emergency cannibalism.

These are the types of people I wrote this book for—people who have realized (or whose gift-giving friends or colleagues have realized) that their particular misanthropies are holding them back professionally.

For the past twenty years, I have struggled with literally all of the above examples. My first email address is the subtitle of this prologue,[3] which probably did not help my early career. Until recently, I left behind at least one lifelong mortal enemy every time I changed jobs. A problematic 'tone' has caused me to miss out on raises, promotions, and potentially rewarding professional relationships more times than I can count.

After one such lost promotion opportunity several years ago, I began searching for resources to try and do better. How to be confident, without being cocky, or how to be assertive, without being an ass. It surprised me to find out that there was very little

[3] Well, very similar to it. I want the hackers to have to steal my identity the old-fashioned way—by cracking the woefully under-protected mega-corporate databases where a horrifying amount of our lives are stored.

guidance for the types of issues I had. I scoured the *Harvard Business Review*, *Forbes*'s 'Leadership' section, and that drawer in my desk where I stuffed all the materials from HR trainings. Sure, there were plenty of overly general businessy self-improvement books (e.g., *How to Win Friends and Influence People in the Digital Age*), and books about how to recognize or "defend" yourself against office psychopaths (e.g., *Snakes in Suits*, *The No Asshole Rule*), and the entire derivative webiverse of pages on 'leading with humility'. Plenty of reading lists or passive-aggressive gift-book ideas exist "for the asshole in your life",[4] a sub-genre perhaps best represented by *How Not to Be an Asshole*. There were useful insights in those materials, and I will reference some of them throughout this book.

But all of those resources seemed made for someone else, someone 'normal'... or at least capable of fundamental personality changes far beyond what was feasible for my damaged psyche. If they did describe someone with my type of challenges, it was from a critical, disparaging perspective—habits to 'get rid of', or sinful behaviors for which to repent. Those resources were, in a word, unhelpful. What I needed was experience-based insight, written in helpful, empathetic terms, from the point of view of someone like me. *That* did not exist.

So for several years, I reflected deeply on my own experiences, trying to capture what insights I could. I imagined I could advise my younger self and dodge some of the more frustrating mistakes I made (because, let's face it, obviously I wasn't going to listen to anyone else's advice). In this book, I hope to share some of what I've learned.

Some chapters have strategies for overcoming the most frequent or persistent challenges people like us face. Others are hard-learned realizations and lessons about ways we self-sabotage and how to avoid them. Others just describe how we're different from 'normal' people, or how normal people are different from us.

However, this book won't 'fix' anyone; there are no earth-shattering insights that will lead anyone to intellectual rebirth. Even more than the general public, it is unlikely that any of us will achieve sainthood unless we get the Mother Theresa

[4] See for example a 2015 list compiled by Kate Venman, published on *DMARGE*.

propaganda treatment, which hid the fact that, to quote a *Vice* article explaining her true identity, she was actually "kind of a heartless bitch".[5]

But there are hopefully a few (ten, to be exact) eye-opening lessons that will lead at least some assholes to be a little better at getting along in the office.

The advice is from one asshole to another, and some of it therefore comes across as conniving, manipulative, and occasionally bordering on the pathological. Even so, this book is *not* a series of social hacks to strengthen your manipulation toolkit. If you approach it with that mindset, the strategies will not work and may even backfire, making your colleagues think even less of you than they already do (if that's possible). But if you approach the content with an open mind, even if that opening was recently forced by yet *another* visit to Human Resources, I believe there are insights that can help you.

The book is also short. Most of these realizations clicked for me pretty suddenly, and I suspect the same will happen for you. In the chapters, I do not exhaustively survey the psychological literature, tell long-winded stories about semi-hypothetical people, or recount military strategies and royal court maneuverings from centuries ago.[6] Rather, I explain the concept (since it's probably not obvious from the too-cute chapter titles), refer to one or two actual experts to show it's not total bull, and give one or two examples from my own experience. As wheelchair-bound Franklin Delano Roosevelt (allegedly) advised, with great self-aware humor, "Be sincere, be brief, be seated."[7]

I am seated, and the book is brief, so all that leaves is sincerity. In the interest of full disclosure, I am by no means what anyone would call an expert in business, psychology, sociology, or any other (relevant) academic field. I don't have a doctorate,

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[5] See Sunderland (2015) for a summary of Mother T's sins.

[6] All offense intended for the space wasted on those distractions in books like *Influence, How to Win Friends*, and *The 48 Laws of Power*.

[7] I couldn't track down a reliable source for the quote, but a few books on public speaking attribute this as FDR's advice to his son on how to give a good speech.

I don't run my own company, and I don't lead my own organization. I am only a slightly above-average dresser.[8]

But I do have one unimpeachable credential. One unassailable basis for authority. One unquestionable qualification.[9]

I am an arrogant asshole who tired of his assery inhibiting his success and did something about it. I hope I can help you do something about it, too.

[8] Which you might think is irrelevant, but then you must not have taken RuPaul's Masterclass.
[9] Besides reading a lot, which, in addition to overusing thesaurus.com, is why I'm so wordy.

SECTION THE FIRST: ACKNOWLEDGING YOUR ASSERY

"P.W., I'm going to tell you the truth," said Mr. B, the 10th grade Accelerated Biology teacher, as he handed me my latest A+.

"What's that, Mr. B?" I asked, with an arrogant smirk. I saw that he had crossed out the "Too Easy!" I had written next to the bonus question on the last page.

"I don't like your attitude, and I don't like your face. I don't want you to win the highest average award. I'm going to make it as hard as possible for you. T., over there, T. deserves it. T's nice, and humble. I'm going to offer T. private help that might just include warnings about pop quizzes. I'm going to schedule those pop quizzes for when I think you'll be least prepared. I'm going to make you take the practical exam last, after everyone has knocked all the pins loose from the fetal pigs and you can't tell where they were supposed to be."

"Sir, I—"

"That's what you get," he cut me off. "You might still come out on top, but it's going to be a lot harder than it had to be."

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