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### How to Handle “Difficult” Executives

May 19 2010 by Carl Robinson

Difficult executives are the bane of their peers and a major drag on the energy of their bosses. I call a particular type the “unintentional jerk.” This difficult executive has the best of intentions and firmly believes that he or she is doing what is best for their company or team. Despite such honorable aims, however, unintentional jerks leave a trail of destruction as they plow through the organization trying to achieve their goals. And, when confronted about their behavior, they are shocked to hear that people are upset with them. Unintentional jerks aren’t necessarily passive aggressive because they aren’t doing things behind people’s back. Rather, they are blatantly pursuing their goals and running over people in the process.

Take for example, the SVP of Global Sales for a mid-market software company with \$200m revenue in the Pacific Northwest. He was recruited from a very large tech company that was known for its “take no prisoners” approach and where he had successfully built up a hard-charging team. This SVP came to the new company excited to replicate his successful strategy. Within a relatively short time, however, he had alienated key members of the executive team with his arrogant attitude.

I was asked to conduct an assessment to see if the situation could be turned around. The following is a sampling of representative comments from a series of confidential interviews with the SVP’s peers and key subordinates:

- He is condescending and rude.*
- He’s like a bull in a china shop.*
- He doesn’t ask what we think. He just makes pronouncements.*
- He orders my people around even though he’s not their boss.*
- He acts like he owns the place.*

When I debriefed him on the results of my interviews, he was dumbfounded. He said, “No one has ever complained about me like this before. I don’t understand.”

That type of response is very typical for this type of executive. They are frequently a “true believer.” In other words, they want to do what’s best but are deluded by their own grandiosity and genuinely believe their way is the best (and only) way. Their thoughts and actions convey: “I know better than you so get out of my way because I’m doing what’s best for the company.” They are not self aware and have a hard time putting themselves in other people’s shoes. Furthermore, they can’t imagine how their actions impact others, or that they might not have a license on brilliance. They are oblivious to how arrogant they appear.

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behavior if they work hard at it. I rue jerks aren't worth the investment.

Several years ago, I was asked if I would consider coaching a very talented but troublesome CTO. After meeting with him, I knew it was unlikely that he would select me. Among other assignments, I told him that I would require him to acknowledge to his peers that he had been difficult to work with and apologize for his transgressions - whether they were intentional or not. He refused. I told his boss that they were wasting their money investing in him. Not surprisingly, he ended up choosing someone less confrontational than me. I later learned that he quit two months into the coaching process ... again, no surprise. In true jerk fashion, he told his boss, “Your team is a bunch of wimps. I'll find a job where people will appreciate my honesty.”

Unlike that CTO, unintentional jerks feel remorse and want to get along with others but they need help. It can be a tedious process because you have to provide real time examples, help the executive understand how their behavior impacts others, and then work with them to try new behaviors. Frequently, you have to cover the same territory over and over in order to help them see the similarity between behaviors/incidents, other people's interpretations of their actions and the repercussions. Most have a hard time applying what they have learned from one situation to something similar. Each incident or example seems entirely unique. It takes significant patience on the part of the unintentional jerk's coach and key stakeholders. The stakeholders must especially demonstrate fortitude because they will continue to experience problems as the coachee takes two steps forward and one step backwards repeatedly.

You might ask, “Why bother? Why not just fire the executive?” If the executive is someone who has risen through the ranks, you've invested a great deal in his or her development already. If he or she is committed to changing, and can make the changes, the reformed unintentional jerk is likely to be very grateful and even more committed to your company's success. Keep in mind that the cost to recruit a new executive is significant, not to mention the down time to bring a new person up to speed. Therefore the investment in helping a committed executive turn around can be well worth it.

The SVP of a division of a family-owned \$180m business is a good example of jerk reform. Over a 15-year period he had worked his way up the ladder. He was known for being a talented financial modeling wizard and domain expert within their field. Unfortunately, he was not aware that in his zeal to have everything done his particular exacting way, he would frequently micromanage employees. He had a difficult time delegating and, as others characterized, would get “bogged down in the weeds.”

Ironically, because this SVP immersed himself in the details, his perfectionist behavior led him to frequently miss deadlines and commitments for projects that his department worked on jointly with executives in other areas. The net result was that many of his direct reports and peers felt that he didn't trust them on one hand (micromanaging by product) and that he didn't care about their needs. In the words of the CFO, “He wants what he wants when he wants it but he doesn't reciprocate. I don't think he gives a damn about my needs.”

In the case of this SVP, when I spoke with him about how others viewed him, he was deeply embarrassed. He made no excuses and sincerely expressed that he wanted to correct the situation. After a crash course of executive coaching, he did turn it around and everyone involved was relieved.

On the other hand, if the executive is fairly new (less than one year on the job), it's probably better to cut your losses and cut him or her loose. Keep in mind that changing long-standing behavior takes time. Generally it takes a minimum of six to twelve months to make the necessary changes.

**Key steps for working with and helping unintentional jerks:**

**Don't assume ill intent or you'll set them up for failure.** They will never be able to overcome your prejudice. All too frequently, those on the receiving end of this type of behavior feel that the executive must be consciously aware of his or her poor behavior. “Does he do this just to annoy me?” “He clearly doesn't care about how his actions impact me.” Once stakeholders begin feeling that the executive's behavior is malicious, resentment begins to take over. Once resentment takes hold, retaliation is often the next step. As one C-level executive told me, “I can give it as well as he can and I'm going to hit right back, even harder.” At the very least, executives on the receiving end will be disinclined to give the offending executive any breaks because they are fed up. Consequently, when the executive begins to make improvements, the other executives harbor too much animosity and have a hard time seeing, much less appreciating the positive changes the executive is making.

To counteract the potential resentment and to ensure that stakeholders are going to be actively



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concerted effort to make changes, the positive effect of the apology will be short lived.

**Provide specific examples ... in detail.** Unfortunately, I’ve heard all too often from coaching clients that they are unsure of what they need to stop doing, not to mention what they should do differently. A common statement they are told is, “You need to improve your people skills.” *What does that mean?* This type of executive has generally been doing what she has been doing because she thinks it works. It’s generally behavior that’s on autopilot. Providing specific examples helps them understand what has been happening and why it causes problems for others. For example, an effective explanation would sound like the following: “When you march into someone’s office and start off by telling them they have screwed up without explaining why you are upset, you put the other person on the defensive and they will have difficulty hearing you. In fact, what they want to do is shut you down or push back.”

**Explain the repercussions of their actions.** Don’t assume they can connect the dots. Because the ineffective behavior tends to be long-standing, and the individuals have never been confronted before, unintentional jerks frequently have no idea how their behavior is impacting others. They tend to pay attention to the results (they achieved their goal) but are unaware of the collateral damage. A helpful explanation would sound like the following: “When you micromanage your employees they feel that you do not trust them. That leads them to feel less capable and inhibits them from thinking on their own.”

**Have them team up with someone who is more “interpersonally adept” and can provide real time observations and suggestions.** There is nothing like an effective and supportive role model. Research on behavior change is very clear. Coaching clients are more likely to change (and be perceived as having changed) if they receive ongoing advice and feedback as they work on improving their skills. Stakeholders notice improvements more when you ask them for support and feedback. Also, teaming the individual with a “role model” will allow them to observe more effective behaviors in action from someone working in the same environment. Teaming with a role model helps reduce the odds that the executive will reject advice by saying, “You don’t understand my situation. Your suggestions aren’t applicable to our environment.”

**Monitor their performance and reward successive approximations to the desired behavior.** Don’t just wait to reward reforming jerks when they hit the target because they won’t the first dozen attempts. They will rehabilitate faster, however, if given useful feedback and encouragement. Making change is difficult. The executive has to contend with significant embarrassment and shame associated with being called to task while learning and practicing new behaviors. They are often afraid and psychologically deflated. They’ll need encouragement to keep at it. Acknowledging progress helps guide their efforts in the right direction while letting them know that their hard work is noticed and supported. If they are not making progress, let them know, soon, so they can try to make adjustments. Don’t keep them guessing, or deluded by the notion that “no news must be good news.”

Expect the unintentional jerk to show some progress in a reasonable amount of time. If he or she doesn’t make the attempt to change or simply isn’t able to learn after concentrated coaching after six months (maximum), then you must act in the best interest of the company. Move him or her out of a leadership role or out of the company altogether. The cost to you and your employees’ morale will be too significant if you keep the executive in a management position. Their so-called productivity/creativity will most likely not offset the toll they will take. On the other hand, if the executive successfully turns things around, everyone wins. You will have a committed, appreciative and much more effective executive.

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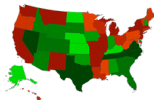
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