

[Stanford psychologist on the art of avoiding assholes](#)

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Interview by Sean Illing



Javier Zarracina/Vox

The world is full of assholes. Wherever you live, whatever you do, odds are you're surrounded by assholes. The question is, what to do about it?

Robert Sutton, a psychology professor at Stanford University, has stepped up to answer this eternal question. He's the author of a new book, [The Asshole Survival Guide](#), which is basically what it sounds like: a guide for surviving the assholes in your life.

In 2007, Sutton published [The No Asshole Rule](#), which focused on dealing with assholes at an organizational level. In the new book, he offers a blueprint for managing assholes at the interpersonal level. If you've got an asshole boss, an asshole friend, or an asshole colleague, this book might be for you.

I sat down with him recently to talk about his strategies for dealing with assholes, what he means when he says we have to take responsibility for the assholes in our lives, and why he says self-awareness is key to recognizing that the asshole in your life may be you.

"You have to know yourself, be honest about yourself, and rely on people around you to tell you when you're being an asshole," he told me. "And when they are kind enough to tell you, listen."

Our full conversation, lightly edited for clarity, follows.

Sean Illing

How does a Stanford professor come to spend so much of his time thinking about assholes?

Well, there's some intellectual logic to it. I've done a lot of research on the expression of emotion in organizational life, including how to deal with assholes. I wasn't using that word at the time, but that's basically what I was doing. I even did some ethnographic work as a telephone bill collector, where I was dealing with assholes all day long. I was also part of an academic department that had a no-asshole rule — seriously. And we actually enforced it.

Sean Illing

Wait, what? What does a "no asshole" policy in an academic department look like?

Robert Sutton

We would talk about this explicitly when we were making hiring decisions. Stanford's a pretty passive-aggressive place, so it wasn't really in your face. But if someone was acting like a jerk, we would gently shun them and make life difficult for them. The idea was to avoid hiring assholes if at all possible, and if one squeezed through the cracks, we would deal with him or her collectively.

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Sean Illing

Before we can talk about surviving assholes, we need a proper definition of assholery. Can you give me one?

Robert Sutton

There are a lot of academic definitions, but here's how I define it: An asshole is someone who leaves us feeling demeaned, de-energized, disrespected, and/or oppressed. In other words, someone who makes you feel like dirt.

Sean Illing

So an asshole is someone who doesn't care about other people?

Robert Sutton

I would make a distinction between temporary and certified assholes, because all of us under the wrong conditions can be temporary assholes. I'm talking about somebody who is consistently this way, who consistently treats other people this way. I think it's more complicated than simply saying an asshole is someone who doesn't care about other people. In fact, some of them really do care — they want to make you feel hurt and upset, they take pleasure in it.

Sean Illing

How many people looking for asshole survival strategies fail to notice they're part of the asshole contingent?

Robert Sutton

A great question. The reason that I have this definition of assholes as somebody who makes

you feel demeaned, de-energized, and so on is that you've got to take responsibility for the assholes in your life. Some people really are so thin-skinned that they think everyone is offending them when it's nothing personal. Then the other problem, which you're also implying, is because assholiness is so contagious, that if you're the kind of person where everywhere you go, the people objectively treat you like dirt and treat you worse than others, odds are you're doing something to prompt that punishment.

You can see this with Donald Trump. I don't want to talk about him too much, but I think that's part of what's going on with him. If you insult virtually everybody, they're going to throw the shit back at you.

Sean Illing

Well, I'm not going to call the president an asshole here, but I will say that he's checking all the asshole boxes you've set forth in this book.

Robert Sutton

Yeah, I won't call him one either, but I agree with your assessment.

Sean Illing

What's the surest way for someone to recognize that they're being an asshole? I assume that most of us are occasionally assholes but prefer not to be.

Robert Sutton

Absolutely. There's some evidence in the book about how few people will say that they're assholes compared to how many people will say they're oppressed by assholes. There's a huge disparity. The main thing this research on self-awareness says is that the worst person to ask about someone's assholiness is the asshole himself, and the best people to ask are the people around him or her who know that person at least fairly well. Bottom line: Assholes need someone in their life to tell them they're being an asshole.

Sean Illing

Being an asshole isn't a great relationship-building strategy, but it does seem to correlate with professional success. I'm thinking of a famous asshole like Steve Jobs. Why is that?

Robert Sutton

Yes, if you are in a situation where it's an "I win, you lose" kind of game in the organization, then you don't need any cooperation from your competitors, and leaving people feeling like dirt might be worthwhile.

But there are two problems with that. One of them is that in most situations, you actually need collaboration. And we have plenty of research that shows that people who are givers rather than takers tend to do better in the long term. If you're playing a short-term game, then yeah, being an asshole might pay dividends — but I'm fairly convinced that doesn't work in most situations.

Sean Illing

And, to be fair, there are examples of assholes in business being upended by their own assholery. I'm thinking of [Uber's former CEO Travis Kalanick](#). Right. There are typically

costs for being an asshole in the professional world. When you're climbing the corporate ladder, for example, you might be destroying the organization around you by driving out the best people, undermining their productivity, creativity, and so on.

Sean Illing

Let's get to the meat and potatoes of the book, which is about how to deal with assholes. So tell me, what's your best asshole neutralization strategy?

Robert Sutton

First, it depends on how much power you have. And second, on how much time you've got. Those are the two questions that you have to answer before you can decide what to do. Assuming that you don't have Dirty Harry power or you're not the CEO and can't simply fire people you don't like, I think you have to do two things in terms of strategy.

To begin with, you've got to build your case. You've also got to build a coalition. One of my mottos is that you have to know your assholes. We already talked about temporary versus certified assholes, but another distinction that's really important is that some people, and you mentioned this at the outset, some people are clueless assholes and don't realize they're jerks, but maybe they mean well.

In that situation, you can have backstage conversations, gently informing them that they've crossed a line. This is simple persuasive work. But if it's somebody who is one of those Machiavellian assholes who is treating you like shit because they believe that's how to get ahead, in that case you've got to get the hell out of there if you can.

Sean Illing

Let's make this more concrete. Say you're someone who's struggling against an asshole boss. Obviously, there's a power asymmetry, so it's not as simple as telling him or her they're an asshole. I imagine this is a common situation for many readers interested in this book. What's your advice?

Robert Sutton

The first question is, can you quit or transfer to another department? If you're stuck under a certified asshole, that means you're suffering. And if that's the case, you should get out — it's that simple.

The second question is, if you must endure, are you going to fight or are you just going to take it? If you're going to fight, you need a plan and a posse, you need to collect your evidence, and then you have to take your chances. In any case, I tell people to try to have as little contact as possible with assholes, and I offer strategies for doing that in the book.

One of the simplest — but admittedly hardest — things you can do is simply learn not to give a shit. Not giving a shit takes the wind out of an asshole's sails. When an asshole's being nasty to you, ignore him. Think about when you'll get home later that night and the fact that that asshole won't be there and won't matter. Think about how a year from now that asshole won't be in your life, but he'll still be the asshole he always was.

Sean Illing

What if you've got an asshole as a peer or a colleague? Does that call for a different strategy?

Your chances of getting rid of them are higher because you have more power. But there's a simpler way to handle a situation like this: just freeze them out. I'm in academia, which means there are lots of assholes we can't fire, but we can absolutely freeze them out. We don't have to invite them to events or gatherings. We can shun them politely and smile at them as necessary, but other than that we just ignore them. That's how we deal with assholes.

But there are some situations in which you may have to be an asshole to survive because you've got no choice but to push back against them. This isn't ideal, but if that's what you have to do, then that's what you do.

"Sometimes you have to speak to the asshole in the only language they understand, and that means you have to get your hands dirty"

Sean Illing

That dovetails nicely with my next question: Is it ever appropriate to out-asshole an asshole?

Robert Sutton

Sure. I try to see this from the perspective of the reader. If somebody has a long history of hurting you, and they have a Machiavellian personality, the only thing they understand is a display of force. If that's the case, the best way to protect yourself is to fire back with everything you've got.

Look, some people deserve to be treated badly. More importantly, they need to be treated badly. Sometimes you have to speak to the asshole in the only language they understand, and that means you have to get your hands dirty.

Sean Illing

Most of us don't want to be assholes, but sometimes we are. When I wake up in the morning, for instance, I'm frequently a grumbling asshole. I don't want to get up for this or that reason, so I roll out of bed and spend the first 30 minutes of my day stampeding around like an asshole. Not every day is like this, but it happens and it's embarrassing. So I guess my question is, how we can better check our own asshole tendencies?

Robert Sutton

First, it sounds like you're self-aware and that's a good thing. But look, there are certain situations that turn most of us into jerks, and we have to be aware of that and work on developing techniques to calm ourselves down. Sleep deprivation, for example, is one of the most reliable ways to become an asshole. If you're tired and in a hurry, you're likely to be an asshole. If you have an excess of power in a situation, you're at risk of becoming an asshole. One thing I've learned is that great differences in power bring out the worst in us.

Ultimately, you have to know yourself, be honest about yourself, and rely on people around you to tell you when you're being an asshole. And when they are kind enough to tell you, listen.

Sean Illing

Plato famously argued in *The Republic* that a tyrant, however powerful, ultimately suffers in the end by corrupting his own soul. You make a similar argument about assholes — that they might win at life but still fail as human beings.

Wow, I've never heard the Plato connection. That's not a question I expect to hear from a journalist, but I guess that's the former political theorist speaking. I have to say, I love that connection. We know that assholes have a corrosive effect on the people around them. There are longitudinal studies that demonstrate pretty clearly that people who, for example, work under assholes for many years end up being more depressed, more anxious, and less healthy.

So there's compelling evidence that assholes are terrible human beings who do harm to other people. I think way you described Plato's analogy is far more elegant than anything I could say.

At the end of the day, if you're an asshole, you're a failure as a human being because you promote unnecessary suffering. What else is there to say?