

Crusade against the jerk at work Some companies seek to filter out toxic employees

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Robert Sutton, a respected 52-year-old Stanford University professor, is a gentleman and a scholar. But that isn't stopping him from making liberal use of an unprintable vulgarity to kick off his new campaign to jerk-proof the American workplace.

Sutton, a management science and engineering professor, says he's not trying to offend anyone with the blunt title of his new book, out this week, "The No -- hole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't." But he felt he needed to use an "emotionally authentic" term to spur corporate America to stamp out boorish behavior that decreases productivity, drives away talented workers and destroys morale.

"I am disgusted with the norm in business and sports that if you are a really big winner, you can get away with being a creep," Sutton said. "My dream is that leaders of all organizations will eventually treat acting like an -- hole as a sign of bad performance rather than an excuse for good performance."

For getting away with being profane, Sutton owes a debt of gratitude to retired Princeton University philosophy Professor Harry Frankfurt, who penned a best-selling book in 2005 on the Platonic essence of bull manure. " 'On Bull -- ' opened up the market for books with dirty titles for professors from fancy universities," Sutton said. Even Sutton's six-figure advance was based on the sales of "On Bull -- ."

Sporting a neatly pressed button-down shirt and khakis and a deep scholarly interest in the workings of high-technology, Sutton seems an unlikely gutter fighter for the rights and feelings of working people. But the preponderance of jerks, who use their position in the workplace to demean and sap the

energy of others, has always bothered him.

Sutton was familiar with the vast academic research into workplace bullying, but it wasn't until he used a profane word in a much-discussed Harvard Business Review essay that he realized the gut-level resonance it had with people. So he refused to go with a publisher who would insist on cleaning up his language. "This is language that people will remember and spread," he said.

He even made sure the book was thin enough to slide underneath a boss' office door.

Sutton fully expected title waves. But even he is a bit surprised at just how much attention he has attracted from all over the globe.

The book already has been translated into a dozen languages, and he has given interviews to media organizations in as many countries.

Sutton has received hundreds of e-mails and as many faithful visitors to his blog, all with their own nightmarish tales of suffering at the hands of mean bosses or co-workers. More than 13,000 people have taken his online " -- hole Rating Certified Self Exam" (ARSE for short). He even offers corporations a way to measure the "Total Cost of -- holes," or TCA. About 2,000 promotional " -- hole" erasers from his publisher, Warner Business Books, quickly became hot commodities in his campaign to rub out jerks at work.

That campaign is making him something of a bookish, bespectacled rock star in Silicon Valley, where companies from Google to eBay to Yahoo, trying to create worker-friendly cultures, have invited Sutton to give talks on the subject.

Silicon Valley certainly can lay claim to its share of outrageous accounts of brilliant but brutish technocrats mercilessly torturing their employees. Sutton uses Steve Jobs as the poster boy for a concessionary chapter on "The Virtues of -- holes." But Sutton says there's an unmistakable groundswell of support for his struggle to create a kinder, gentler workplace, particularly at a time when the war for talent is once again in high gear.

" -- hole bosses and cultures drive good people out," Sutton said. "Having Google as the employer of choice for many young folks ... means they have to compete with people who really do try to adhere to

the 'don't be evil' culture."

Shona Brown, Google's senior vice president of business operations, might be too polite to use Sutton's preferred terminology, but she told Sutton that Google has a zero-jerk policy, he said.

Lars Dalgaard, the 39-year-old CEO of San Mateo-based SuccessFactors and a major player in the rough-elbowed world of business software, identifies himself as a recovering Fortune 500 " -- hole." He realized as a young general manager that " -- holes stifle performance." So he explored more effective and humane ways to deliver results and hit financial targets.

Now he's famous for mandating a strict "no -- hole" rule at his 475-employee company. Job interviews are lengthy and feature probing questions designed to uncover any browbeating tendencies. Last year, he took candidates vying for a chief financial officer vacancy to lunch at a local restaurant to see how they treated the wait staff. Some got a free lunch but nothing more.

A welcome letter for new recruits spells out 15 corporate values, the last of which is: "I will not be an -- hole."

"If you don't use coarse language, people become inured to it," Dalgaard said. "No one can hear it anymore. It doesn't even stop in the ear canal."

Dalgaard demands that everyone treat one another with respect. And that means everyone. He encourages his colleagues to knock him down a few pegs if he falls out of line. Whenever he feels the temptation to revert to his old ways, he uses his company's own performance software to refresh himself on how to solve problems without creating bad feelings.

Diego Rodriguez, an associate consulting professor at the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design at Stanford who works at innovation company Ideo in Palo Alto, is another Silicon Valley denizen known for urging organizations to develop a "shock-proof, bullet-resistant -- hole detector." Ideo screens out jerks to maintain its collaborative culture, Rodriguez says.

"We are in the business of helping other companies be innovative and using the process of design as a way to get there," he said. "It's difficult to get things done if people feel they can't trust each other, be open with their ideas, feelings and insights or if someone is treating someone else poorly on a

consistent basis. That just shuts the whole process down. With that in mind, we are very careful about filtering people out in the recruiting and hiring process to ensure people don't show up and ruin the experience for everyone else. ... Life's too short to work with jerks. It's one of our cultural pillars."

A half-dozen other entrepreneurs have told Sutton they enforce a "No -- hole" rule when hiring and firing but use more polite terminology, he said.

Sutton defines a jerk as one who oppresses, humiliates, de-energizes or belittles a subordinate or a colleague, causing that person to feel worse about him or herself. Tactics include personal insults, sarcasm, teasing, shaming or treating people as if they were invisible. He distinguishes between "temporary" jerks, those with the potential to act like jerks but who don't do so all the time, and "certified" jerks, who are routinely nasty. The certified jerks are the ones who pose the greatest threat to an organization's culture. Sutton then explores ways to implement a no-jerk rule and how to survive an environment that doesn't have one. He also warns organizations that being a jerk is contagious. Hire one, and you'll soon have plenty polluting the work environment.

Sutton has had his own run-ins with jerks. As a young, inexperienced professor at Stanford, he received poor teaching evaluations from his students. He worked hard to become more effective in the classroom and was delighted when his students voted him the best teacher in his department at the end of his third year. His delight was short-lived. A colleague approached him, hugged him and whispered in his ear: "Now that you have satisfied the babies here on campus, perhaps you can settle down and do some real work."

"It's a painful memory," he said, recalling his entrepreneur father's sage advice to avoid jerks in business at all costs.

Sutton says the hardest thing for many people to acknowledge is that they themselves can be jerks. He readily admits he, too, can be a jerk. (If he didn't, his wife, a prominent Silicon Valley corporate lawyer, would remind him). But writing the book has helped him become less of one.

"I view this as a problem that we all struggle with," he said.

Dirty dozen actions that -- holes use

1. Personal insults
2. Invading one's personal territory
3. Uninvited personal contact
4. Threats and intimidation, both verbal and nonverbal
5. Sarcastic jokes and teasing used as insult delivery systems
6. Withering e-mail flames
7. Status slaps intended to humiliate their victims
8. Public shaming or status-degradation rituals
9. Rude interruptions
10. Two-faced attacks
11. Dirty looks
12. Treating people as if they are invisible

From "The No -- hole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't"

On the Web

-- Robert Sutton's blog: www.bobsutton.typepad.com/my_weblog/

-- The -- hole test: www.electricpulp.com/guykawasaki/arse/

E-mail Jessica Guynn at jguynn@sfchronicle.com.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/02/24/MNGMPOAK5A1.DTL>

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