

The strategist's bookshelf

Strategies for outmaneuvering an abusive boss

Harvey A. Hornstein

The Asshole Survival Guide: How to Deal with People Who Treat You Like Dirt, Robert I. Sutton (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 224 pages

Brutal bosses evidence their cruelty in a variety of ways. Perhaps you've had or, unfortunately, currently have the misfortune of reporting to a boss who screams, curses or belittles subordinates. Some spread lies designed to undermine subordinates' workplace reputations. Others respond to subordinates' comments, questions, hellos or goodbyes with silence and a blank stare, as if no one had spoken.

Scholars disagree about exactly how many working people suffer bosses' abuse during their careers. Some investigators contend that one out of three working people have had the nasty experience, whereas others point to evidence indicating that transgressive behavior by supervisors has happened to as many as nine out of ten workers. Given that there are approximately 158 million people in the American workforce. Even if the lower estimate is correct, it means that millions of working people suffer boss abuse during their work lives.

That detestable, frequent, widespread experience is one of the reasons Robert Sutton's previous book, *The No Asshole Rule*, was a best seller, with roughly 800,000 readers. Professor Sutton, an IDEO Fellow and co-founder of the Stanford Technology Ventures Program, Center for Work and the Stanford

Design Institute, is informed by his extensive experience in organizations as well as by thousands of emails from readers describing their own painful workplace encounters with abusers, including their bosses. Now Sutton has followed up his bestseller with *The Asshole Survival Guide*, which is filled with hundreds of stories about the mistreatment of ordinary working people and how they dealt with their situation. This new book begins by helping readers diagnose whether the severity of the abuse that they are suffering crosses a line and calls for a response. Then it moves on to discussing four survival strategies, their possibilities for success and their potential pitfalls.

Assessing the situation

In order to determine whether the abuse requires response, Sutton urges readers to ask themselves six questions. They are "Do you feel as if the alleged asshole is treating you, and perhaps others, like dirt?" "How long will the ugliness persist?" "Are you dealing with a temporary or certified asshole?" "Is it an individual or systemic disease?" "How much more power do you have over the asshole?" "How much are you really suffering?"

Harvey A. Hornstein, Professor of Psychology, Emeritus, formerly with the Program in Social and Organizational Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University, now operates a private organizational consulting practice (harvey.hornstein@gmail.com). He has written nine books, including *Brutal Bosses and Their Prey* (1997).



To his credit, before discussing ways of understanding ones' answers to these questions, Sutton sounds an alarm, one which he rings repeatedly throughout the book. His warning is surely pertinent to readers' answers to any of the six questions, but it is especially relevant to the answers that they give in response to the first question. Providing examples, he cautions that readers' quirks, idiosyncrasies, needs, wants and personal histories may distort their judgments of whether they're feeling "like dirt" because of another's behavior or because of what they themselves brought to the party.

Sutton's list of eleven "Asshole detection tips" is an additional tool for helping readers avoid self-deception. So, too, is his list of ten self-deluding rationalizations These are fibs that abused workers tell themselves, thus subverting remedial efforts: "It's really not that bad," "It's getting better," "I'll leave after I finish (one task or another)," "Staying is worthwhile. I'm learning and making connections," "There's no one to replace me," "I'm tough. I can handle it," "It's bad, but I keep the negative feelings at work – away from others," and "It might be worse elsewhere."

Four survival strategies

According to Sutton, employees who determine that they are victims of unacceptable abuse can respond with one of four strategic options. Devoting one of the book's seven chapters to each of the four options, he reports hundreds of real workplace stories that illustrate both the option and the circumstances arguing for and against its use.

Exiting, either by leaving a group or quitting a company, or by otherwise reducing contact with the abuser are the first two options that Sutton considers. After acknowledging that their potential usefulness is affected by both a worker's personal

circumstance and current job structure, Sutton moves on to discussing a third strategic option, one that doesn't require an overt, visible effort from abused workers. In a chapter titled "Mind tricks that protect your soul," Sutton describes mental techniques that can and have been used by victims to recast their feelings about an abuser's behavior, transforming those feelings from something painful into something palatable and, perhaps, even funny.

This third strategy's flaws do not escape Sutton. Not only is it difficult to divert attention from the pain that is being suffered in order to do the mind tricks, but successfully diverting attention may paradoxically prevent victims from taking initiatives that could actually end the abuse. Two possible avenues of action that might be derailed because of these mental tricks, for example, are the two strategic options that Sutton already discussed: exiting and reducing contact with the abuser. Another initiative that mind tricks might prevent is fighting back - the fourth, and last, strategic option that he discusses.

Seven actions that backfire

The chapter focused on fighting back begins by warning "doing battle with assholes is risky business." And, after discussing the benefits that might be realized by fighting back, the chapter ends with a chart, "The wrong way to fight assholes," containing "seven techniques that are prone to fail and backfire." These include: Do the first thing that comes to mind, RIGHT NOW; Use direct and aggressive confrontation with a powerful

tormentor – even though you lack documentation or allies; Call an asshole an asshole; Exact vindictive, and useless revenge; Find a scapegoat; Catch the disease to please; and, Ask crooked people and systems for help.

Taking on the culture

This book's seventh chapter, "Be part of the solution, not the problem," contains advice that Sutton contends will produce a better organization. Despite this last chapter's recognition of the relationship between an aggrieved employee's behavior and organizational functioning, some readers may be troubled by Sutton's focus on individual employees and what they should or shouldn't do in order to produce a better organization. Arguably there should be more focus on the organizational culture, the ways in which it is causing and/or supporting abusive behavior, and how *it* can be changed in order to produce a less abuse-supporting organizational environment.

In sixteen pages of end notes Sutton cites relevant empirical research and scholarly observation. That contribution deserves praise. But what deserves extra rounds of applause are the range of stories that Sutton regularly employs in the book's text in order to illustrate workplace abuse. They describe working people's interactions with customers and colleagues as well as with bosses, and they come from a broad array of work settings, including sports and newscasts as well as the military, academia and politics. Because the stories are on-

“Employees who determine that they are victims of unacceptable abuse can respond with one of four strategic options.”

“Sutton describes mental techniques that can and have been used by victims to re-cast their feelings about an abuser’s behavior, transforming those feelings from something painful into something palatable and, perhaps, even funny.”

point and told in lively, accessible ways, they widen both the book’s appeal and readers’ understanding.

Because the stories reflect anger and frustration they are replete with strong language that may offend some readers. And, although this Brooklyn boy thought that in some

instances very acceptable alternatives existed, I’ll defend Sutton’s choices by saying that I never once thought that the potentially offensive words were either off-point or used gratuitously.

Finally, if you are someone who insists on formulas that can be applied to

solve every situation then this book will likely fall short of your standards. Sutton’s title promises a guide, and using familiar, thought-provoking material, he delivers just that. Readers of this book receive a useful framework for examining and responding to workplace abuse. The book will make your response to an abusive boss smarter, but it won’t give you super powers.

Corresponding author

Harvey A. Hornstein can be contacted at: harvey.hornstein@gmail.com