

Toxic Bosses August 14, 2008, 5:00PM EST

[Are You Being a Jerk? Again?](#)

By Robert I. Sutton

If you are, it may be because you're following a bad leader

A salient theme of my book, *The No Asshole Rule*, is that although some people act badly wherever they go, all of us are capable of turning into demeaning creeps under the wrong conditions. That is why I urge people (and try to remind myself) to avoid situations that turn them into jerks.

One of the most compelling, and frightening, academic literatures I know is about something called "emotional contagion." It turns out that most people, regardless of their personality traits, will automatically and mindlessly start feeling and displaying the emotions expressed by the people around them. Related research on "the socialization process" shows that, over time, this mindless imitation, plus explicit peer pressure to be "like us," transforms many newcomers into clones who think and act much like the people they live and work with. I've succumbed many times myself.

WRETCHED CONTAGION

In fact, research suggests that nearly all human beings can catch this disease. The upshot is that, if you want to avoid acting like a nasty and insensitive creep, treat it like a contagious condition. Avoid joining companies and workgroups that are populated with mean-spirited tyrants. If you find you've joined such a place and are acting just like the other bullies, the best thing to do is to leave as quickly as possible.

A second, and equally reliable, force that makes people hard to stomach is having power over others. The belief that power turns people into selfish jerks has been around a long time. This isn't just a myth. A growing body of research—notably by professors Dachner Keltner at University of California, Berkeley, Deborah Gruenfeld at Stanford, and their students—documents that three things happen when people are put in positions of power:

1. They focus more on satisfying their own needs;

2. They focus less on the needs of their underlings;
3. They act like "the rules" others are expected to follow don't apply to them.

A particularly amusing study—undertaken by Keltner, Gruenfeld, and another colleague—shows that giving people just a little more power than their colleagues causes them to eat more cookies, chew with their mouths open, and leave more crumbs. Keltner also cites research showing that power leads people to process information in shallower ways and to make decisions that are less carefully reasoned.

How does one keep from turning into one of these people? Leaders tend to talk too much and make statements rather than listen to others and ask questions. Seek out advisers or mentors who won't hesitate to tell you (privately, of course) when you are being insensitive.

Along these lines, my colleague, professor Hayagreeva Rao at Stanford, has been hypothesizing lately that CEOs with teenage children are less likely to suffer from the power poisoning described by Keltner and Gruenfeld. He reasons that no matter how much deference they get at work, at home they face sons and daughters who constantly challenge their power and question their judgment. As the father of three teenagers, I can provide ample evidence to support professor Rao's hypothesis.

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