

Transcript for Bob Sutton | The Asshole Survival Guide (Episode 666)

Full show notes found here: <https://theartofcharm.com/666/>

**JORDAN:** Robert, thank you for coming on the show. I know that you deal with a lot of assholes, hence the title of your book, so I appreciate you putting up with two more. Jason came across your work because -- actually Jason, how did you come across his work?

**JASON:** I read [the first book](#) a long time ago and then, you know, I have basically a Google alert for "assholes" and it came across that a new book was coming out, so I said, "Hey, let's get him on the show because I loved the first book."

**JORDAN:** If you have a Google alert for the word asshole, you must have really interesting stuff in your inbox every morning.

**JASON:** I'm just keeping an eye out for you, man. I've got your back, man.

**JORDAN:** All right, I appreciate it. So, of course, the new book [The Asshole Survival Guide: How to Deal with People who Treat You Like Dirt](#), your other book [The No Asshole Rule](#) took the world by storm. I say that slightly tongue-in-cheek. Everybody heard about that book, probably because of the provocative title, but also the fact that everybody works with an a-hole here or there, and often we have no way around it.

It's common now to say things like, "Well, you know, if you work with people you don't like, just switch jobs." Not exactly an ideal scenario because you could be in the C-Suite at Apple. You're going to quit because you don't like your boss' attitude? I'm sure it happened but also people were stuck working with Steve Jobs and there are books written about this, right? So, how did you begin to learn to navigate the minefield of working with people who treat you poorly?

**ROBERT:** Well, I actually did not mean to get involved in this at all, since I mostly do stuff on leadership and innovation stuff, but after I

wrote the first book -- which was also sort of an accident -- I thought the first book was about how to build a relatively asshole-free work culture, so I talked about things like how to select employees, how to socialize them, how to give them feedback, who to fire, things like that, but the response to the book was that everywhere I went, both in person and especially over email, people would tell me their stories about the assholes that they dealt with from a CEO of a local tech company here in Silicon Valley writing me and saying me, "What do I do about board holes or douche boards?" nasty members of board of directors to lawyers to people who work at Costco, and they all asked the same question which is, "I'm dealing with an asshole or a bunch of them; what do I do?"

So I did two things. I collected all my emails and responses and then there's a pretty big peer reviewed on all things asshole. One of the most amazing things is although I don't specialize in all things asshole, I kind of keep track of it and there's a good 200,000 peer reviewed academic articles in the last decade about all aspects of jerks. It's just astounding. There's been an explosion in my behavioral science business.

**JORDAN:** Right, so basically lots of us are working with jerks and lots of us don't know what to do, given that body of work.

**ROBERT:** It's amazing how little academics study what to do. They mostly study all the ways -- and if you work with somebody who's rude to you, who bullies you, who yells at you, who treats you like you're invisible -- what effect does it have on your physical health, your mental health, your productivity, and occasionally they'll sort of get into ways to fight back. So, I talk about that a little bit, or ways to cope with it, but it's really astounding how impractical my people are. We mostly just write about all the ways that being treated like dirt is terrible. The help for what to do is not always there. In the book I combine both practical things that I've learned and seen and also some hints from the academic literature, so it's a combination of the two.

**JORDAN:** So let's definite this a little bit. Let me put myself in my dad's shoes here for a minute. Maybe not *my* dad but just 'the dad' shoes. If I said in my twenties or thirties -- where I currently am -- "Oh, I work with this person and they're such an a-hole," he'd probably say, "Well, that's just part of work." Is it bad or is it just something I need to suck it up and deal with it and there's people like that everywhere, so what?

**ROBERT:** So, we had different dads. My dad always told me not to work with assholes, but he worked with plenty of them. So, if you look at the range of research on abusive supervision, on abusive customers, on air rage, you go down the list, if you have regular exposure to somebody who leaves you feeling demeaned, disrespected, and de-energized -- that's how I would kind of define an asshole -- you're more prone to anxiety, depression -- If you have a boss who treats you like dirt over a long period of time, there's good studies that show you're more likely to have heart disease and a heart attack.

There's other studies that show that you have sleep problems. Still other studies that show that your relationships will start degenerating with the people in your family and your close friends, so that's the well-being part. And then we can talk about if assholes finish first, which I think they mostly don't, that when people treat others like dirt, they're less productive, they make more errors, they're less creative, they tend to quit, they're less willing to go the extra mile. So, all sorts of evidence that although sometimes it might help the jerk to get ahead, on the whole, they're doing all sorts of damage.

**JORDAN:** And everyone right now is going, "Oh, my gosh. I work with assholes." But also, it's kind of a case study in, "Oh, crap, now I'm going to die ten years younger because I work with assholes and I haven't done anything about it up until now."

**ROBERT:** There's lots of evidence that negative emotions are contagious. So, they do these cool studies that show that nastiness spreads like a common cold. So, if you're around people who treat you like dirt, you'll probably start treating other people like dirt, too.

**So, you will become what is making you sick. So, that's the other part that's bad about it.**

**JORDAN:** You know, I've noticed this. I noticed just from hanging around with certain people back in college, that I was a lot less nice than I was before. A lot of my friends are like, "Oh, how did that happen? I haven't seen you in a while. Oh, maybe you're really stressed out," and I thought, "I'm not. I've just been hanging out with assholes."

**ROBERT:** So, I've been teaching at Stanford for over thirty years now, and the advice that I always give my students when I see them is that when you interview for a job, look at the people at the workplace you're interviewing at. You will become like them. They are not going to become like you. Those forces are very powerful. You're very perceptive, because that happens to all of us human beings.

**JORDAN:** Wait a minute, I'm a positive person, I've got a great emotional balance, I'm working with these assholes, how come they're not becoming great, healthy people with great emotional balance? How come I'm going in that direction? How come the river flows towards asshole, is I guess what I'm asking?

**ROBERT:** The river does not just flow towards asshole, it flows towards who you're around. So let's just talk about one kind of cool little study. There's a study some Harvard researchers did. They tracked 2,000 people who were in a big company in an open office environment and they actually rated toxic people and constructive stars.

**And what they found is, if you're within 25 feet of somebody who is a toxic person, on average, classic open office environment, your odds of becoming a toxic person yourself go up and your odds of being fired, that's the bad news. The good news is, if you are within 25 feet of a constructive, cooperative superstar, you will become more constructive and more cooperative. Those who you lie or sit with, that's who you're**

going to become. So there is a good news part about it, but be careful who you hang with; it's going to change you.

JORDAN: Wow. But, I think a lot of folks think, "Great, no problem. I can just choose to spend more time with these types of people, or I can choose to elect qualities from these types of people, and I can try to block out these other types of people," and what you're saying is, "Nope, not really."

ROBERT: I don't know whether everything is completely determined, but at the margin, you can decide who you hang with, you can decide who you work with, I hope. We can also talk about if you're around people like this, it's not like you're this helpless person, like, "Oh, I'm just going to get sick or turn into an asshole." There's ways you can defend yourself. But, one of the ways to defend yourself is to limit your contact with the worst people in your life.

JORDAN: Get the heck out of there, yeah. Because I think a lot of us feel like we can't get away from that and part of the reason for that is that -- maybe this is just an American thing, but I think it's probably a western culture thing in general -- a lot of people believe that assholes finish first.

ROBERT: So, there are some people who -- there's even been a book called [\*Assholes Finish First\*](#), but if you actually look at the evidence -- so, there's a whole bunch of research by a guy named [Adam Grant](#). The evidence is essentially that if you are in a world, there's some organizations that are like this -- Microsoft used to be like this. They've actually changed; they've gotten better -- where it's, "I win, you lose," sort of game. If you're in a situation like that, probably the way you get ahead is by stabbing people in the back and it's a zero sum game.

Most organizations, at least organizations that reward collaboration, that the people who get ahead are the people who help other people succeed -- some organizations I know, Pixar, The Cleveland Clinic in healthcare, McKinsey the consulting firm, Goldman Sachs -- I don't have a lot of positive things to

say about Goldman Sachs but they do reward cooperation among their workers, not destructive competition. So a lot of it just depends on the game where you're at.

And then to sort of go back, let's go back to the Steve Jobs myth which you're talking about. So I'm somebody who even in [The No Asshole Rule](#), I talked about Steve Jobs being an asshole. I got to know in the subsequent years Ed Catmull. Ed Catmull is the president of both Pixar and Disney Animation Studios. He worked with Steve Jobs for 26 years, met with him at least once a week for 26 years, and Ed's argument is one nuance that is missed with Steve Jobs is he wasn't exactly a doormat in the last 15 years of his life, but he was pretty much of a flaming selfish asshole in the early days at Apple.

And then he got kicked out of Apple, he started NeXT and that failed, and he sort of wandered in the wilderness, and he came out a much more cooperative, collaborative, more sensitive and empathetic human being, and that's the Steve Jobs who got famous. He didn't exactly become warm and fuzzy; it was at least the more civilized, less asshole-ish Steve Jobs who people really worship.

I'm sitting here in Silicon Valley right now. You look at people like Reed Hastings of Netflix fame, or you want to pick somebody, Warren Buffett, who many of your listeners will know -- there's a lot of people who are perfectly able to be successful and to still finish first. And my motto is that if you're a winner and an asshole, you're still a loser in my book, because what you've done in the process of succeeding, is you have damaged a whole bunch of people along the way. So, why do you have to act like a jerk and damage others when it's still possible to get ahead? And I don't know the degree to which Jobs learned that lesson.

Another story about Jobs -- this is not third hand, this is first hand. A good friend of mine, David Kelley, got serious cancer and was in the Stanford hospital for about two weeks and kept going back for treatment. And this was right during the first

iPhone launch, it's not like Steve Jobs had anything to do. Steve Jobs would go to the hospital every day and see David. And him being Steve Jobs, he'd yell at the nurses a little bit on his behalf, because he is Steve Jobs, right? But, just simply labeling somebody like Steve as this unsympathetic asshole, well he could be tough, but he was a complex person who did care about the people around him.

**JORDAN:**

This work also matters because, literally tens of millions of people in the U.S. and elsewhere, are reporting things like workplace bullying, navigating nastiness -- these things have consequences for your health, you covered that -- but what I've also noticed, and I used to call this jokingly back in the day, the cycle of yelling, because I would get yelled at, at work, and I'd come back and yell at my colleagues, and then they would yell at their girlfriends, and we'd be like, "What are we doing to each other? This is terrible." So, we called it the cycle of yelling. The extreme example is, guy gets yelled at, at work by his boss who got yelled at by his boss. Guy goes home, yells at his wife, who yells at the kid, who kicks the dog.

**ROBERT:**

Right, redirected aggression, we call that in Intro to Psychology. Another thing about people who leave others feeling demeaned, de-energized, and disrespected is that we tend to think of the stereotypical boss with the veins bulging and screaming, but there's at least two other ways that people do dirty work which are at least and possibly more destructive.

The second way is the classic backstabber. I talked this CEO who was talking about -- so, this guy is his subordinate and he was always kissing up to the boss, just kissing up. "Oh, boss, yes boss, you're so smart. I can do that right away," and then he'd turn around, badmouth the boss, and would either not implement what he said he was going to do, or do it badly to try to make the boss look bad. And backstabbers can come in all sorts of guises and I always say I would much rather deal with somebody who yells and screams at me rather than somebody who smiles, kisses up, and tells me how wonderful I am, and then screws me behind my back. It's much more difficult to

deal with that kind of person who -- especially if they're socially skilled.

And then there's a third kind of way in which people leave others feeling disrespected, which I think is also another problem, and especially powerful people will do this. They'll treat the human beings around them as if they're invisible or they're just objects to satisfy their needs as if they're not human beings. There's different ways to cope with that, but it isn't just the screamers and yellers, there's other things that people do to leave the people around them feeling demeaned and de-energized.

And my line always is if you're going to cope with a jerk or an asshole, you've got to know you're a jerk or know you're an asshole to try to figure out the best way to manage the situation, if you will. And this is one reason that I use this definition of somebody who leaves us feeling demeaned, de-energized, and disrespected, that some of that might be happening as well. We've got thin skin; maybe we're treating them like dirt, and they're throwing it back, so you've got to be a little careful about labeling everybody as an asshole because there's a lot of reasons why it may happen and you've got to look at your motivation of maybe being a little too thin-skinned and a little bit touchy about it.

And by the way, if somebody is leaving you feeling physically and mentally ill, and you're having trouble sleeping and you're having trouble being productive, you've got a problem you've got to deal with, even if it's not their fault. I tend to call people assholes who don't do what I want either, but then I have to catch myself.

**JORDAN:**

Well, how do we know if we're just thin-skinned, or if we're actually dealing with an asshole, because I think we've got to start there. Because there's a lot of people who go, "I work with assholes," and then I know plenty of people who tell me all the time, "This person screwed me over in this way. This person screwed me over in that way," and I thought, "Man, you work at



the worst place," and then guess what happened? I got a text from his sister, who I was friends with forever, and it was like, "Actually, now he's mad at you," and I thought, "What are you talking about? How am I being an asshole?" and then I realized, from his perspective, every single person in his life is terrible and he's a victim.

**ROBERT:**

I like your story because it's got the two diagnostics to figure out whether it's you or whether it's them, or both. To me, the first diagnostic is if everywhere you go, everybody is an asshole, this is a sign that you've got a problem. You've got one of two problems, one is that you're too thin-skinned, the other one is, when you throw shit, people throw it back at you. So, I think you got the diagnostic.

The second one is -- gosh, researchers have a lot of evidence to support this -- it's amazing how bad we human beings are at recognizing our own weaknesses, including being an asshole. And you had it in your story too, so having somebody in your life who can tell you the truth and maybe just tell your friends the truth, is very important. The ability of people to recognize when they're being jerks is really, really limited. The two ways to tell: "Everybody's an asshole," well that's a sign that you've got a problem, and the other one is who in your life can tell you the truth that you trust?

**JORDAN:**

Well, how do we figure out what to do? Okay great, I know I work with assholes. Great, tell me something I don't know. Now what do I freaking do?

**ROBERT:**

The first thing is I wish there was one-size-fits-all strategies. There's a few things that you might want to think about. I'll get to the main strategies in a minute but there's a few things you might want to think about. One is, what kind of asshole am I dealing with? Am I dealing with what I call a temporary or certified asshole? If you're dealing with somebody who's just having a bad day, well you just kind of avoid them for a little while. If day in and day out, they're treating you and others like dirt, you've got a different sort of problem.

The second thing that I always say that is essentially are you dealing with one person who's a jerk, or are you in a [Lord of the Flies](#) situation where it's just assholes everywhere? You've got a different sort of problem. One of the most important determinants of what you do is how much power you have. So, one of the heroes of the book is a guy named Paul Purcell. He's CEO of a company called Baird that has a no asshole rule. Well, he fires assholes. It's good to be king, if you can fire them, that's great. Most of us don't have that option.

JASON: Do you remember [Cloudflare who kicked the Nazi assholes off their service](#)? He was the king of the, "Yeah, I don't like assholes on my service. Get out."

ROBERT: So, isn't that great? It's great to be king, right? So if you can do it, go for it. It's both to have both courage and power. So after, while thinking about that stuff, to me there's four different options we probably should talk about, that you kind of got to play off. One is, "Can I get out?" the second one is, "Well, if I can't get out, can I create some distance or just learn to take it?" That's kind of two and three.

And then the final one is fighting back. Can I change the situation? So, we can start, if you want, with getting out. My motto is, if you've got a co-worker, a boss, an organization, a customer who's treating you like dirt, can you just leave the situation? So, that is, if you've got somebody who is berating you, can you find another job? And I don't believe in the Johnny Paycheck, "[Take this job and shove it](#)." I believe in leaving in such a way, you can get a good recommendation, perhaps. Perhaps you might sort of lie in wait, but making the decision of, "Can I find another job?" is really important. With clients and customers -- a lot of your listeners who have clients and customers -- sometimes you've just got to take it because they're so important to your livelihood. A lot of times you can fire them or pass them on to someone else.

There was a wine buyer in Berkeley who I had some conversation with some years ago and he used to describe how, basically in his business, you either could be an asshole, or somebody who didn't pay, but if you were both, you were gone. So, I kind of liked that sort of decision making. The first set of questions is basically, "Can I quit and can I leave the scene?" and if you can, I recommend that you get out.

**JORDAN:**

Right, you're wasting mental faculty and stress, having to deal with it. So ideally, you just surgically remove yourself from the situation, if possible. But if you can't, then you've got to make some other determinations and in [\*The Asshole Survival Guide\*](#), you've got some different types of assholes. Can we talk about these types? Because I think it's very easy to say, "Oh, well my boss was a total asshole last week, so now I have to quit my job." That doesn't seem right. There's different levels here.

**ROBERT:**

Right, so let's start out with temporary versus certified. If you've got a boss who's just having a bad day or a co-worker or client and they yell at you -- I actually have an example of me giving one of my friends a bunch of grief because I was having a bad day in the book. Well, that's not such a serious situation, but if you're facing it day in and day out, that's a sign that maybe you should get out or at least you've got to take more extreme measures to fight back. That, to me, is one of the important distinctions that you have to make. This idea of strategic versus clueless assholes is one that's really important.

My wife was managing partner of a large law firm, so that means that part of having a lot of lawyers reporting to you or you have to oversee, is that you with their asshole problems. And she would always make the determination, is that somebody who thinks that the rewards system that we have here is such that if I treat people like dirt, I'm going to get ahead? Well, that was much different conversation -- usually about money, by the way -- than the ones who were unintentionally ignoring people or treating people like dirt. For those folks, sometimes, simple self-awareness was enough to get them to change their behavior. To say you realized that

**you've been interrupting people constantly in meetings, you've been treating like they've been invisible, people like that would be a much different, sort of if you will asshole strategy than ones who were strategic.**

**JORDAN: Right, okay, because it has to do with ignorance versus people who are trying to proactively figure out how to screw you over.**

**ROBERT: So the psychologists say people that have Machiavellian personality are the classic people that when they see you suffer, their brain lights up. And if you're dealing with somebody like, that, oooh, you've got to fight back or you've got to get the hell out. So, those are your two main options.**

**JORDAN: Yeah, let's talk about fighting back because what about the for real, certified, trying to figure out how to make your life miserable asshole?**

**ROBERT: So, from what I can tell, when you're in a situation like that, you've got to decide whether you can do open warfare and win -- so that's my big motto is, you don't fight unless you have a reasonable chance to win. If you don't have immediate power, you perhaps put together a posse, a bunch of people to fight back. All sorts of evidence that the more people on your side, the better you do, and also documentation is very important. So, that's the kind of stuff you need to increase your odds of winning. In terms of the classic person who is trying to get ahead by treating you like dirt and thinks it's going to work, there's this thing called porcupine power that some psychologists talk about. The notion that if somebody is pushing you and treating you like dirt, if you sort of return their fire to some degree, they realize you're not a weak person -- you're not somebody who is just a doormat. So, if you're dealing with that classic sort of person, you should figure out what your options are, but shooting back is a good idea.**

**JORDAN: Of course if someone is a higher rank than us or a boss or well-respected, we have to make up for it in numbers. And it sounds like that might be what happened with Harvey**

Weinstein, right? He just stepped on so many people that eventually the critical mass was impossible to ignore.

**ROBERT:** Yeah, I think that is true with Harvey Weinstein. The bloom was off the rose, he's starting to have some trouble in his company, and a lot of times when you're a powerful asshole, people smile and they make excuses for you and they enable you, but then when you show a little weakness, it's amazing how quick your enemies can come out of the woodwork and shove you down. And to me, it's sort of a cautionary tale that when you're an asshole, especially one who's abusive, your enemies lie in wait and look for weaknesses, and then they all come out at once. And you also saw this with Bill Cosby, by the way, as well.

**JORDAN:** Ugh, yikes. How do we fight back? We get a posse; what other things can we do? What if we can avoid working for an asshole in the first place? Do you have some red flags you might be able to show us?

**ROBERT:** The best thing in life is, as you say, is to avoid them in the first place. So, you can do stuff like go on [Glassdoor](#) and Google them, but actually, the evidence is that that doesn't work very well. And the reason it doesn't work very well is that the particular organization you're in is not a very predictor of what your situation is going to be.

So, the things that I like to say is, try to find some socially constructive gossip. This is one of the most useful things, and I say this to my students all the time, is, "See who you can find who works for somebody in that situation." It's amazing the speed at which the well-connected young folks can get to somebody who has the exact same boss they're going to work for. And then the best thing is if you can do a little project, and in this area of the gig economy, a lot of times it's possible.

There's a story that I just love to talk to this co-author and friend [Huggy Rao](#). This is about seven or eight years ago and we were going to get involved in a long term innovation consulting

project and we spent all day in a room with this guy who was just honestly -- Huggy would call him a hippopotamus.

He was the highest paid person in the room and he had little ears and a big mouth. He just talked and talked and interrupted us and talked and talked and talked. So, we figured out by the end of the day that what was going to be a one year gig, we all of a sudden declared we were too busy, because we knew if we got entangled with this asshole, our lives were just going to be miserable. So, if you do a job interview, you can look and see how your boss treats other people. But my favorite two things: the best information, get the gossip, and see if he can put a toe in the water and do a little project with him.

**JORDAN:** Oh, interesting. "Hey, I'd like to do something where I prove my worth here, can I be on trial for 45 days?" "Oh, that's a great idea."

**ROBERT:** Well, a day or two is usually enough, by the way. That's my perspective.

**JORDAN:** 45 days is a lot of time to spend with a hippopotamus.

**ROBERT:** Yeah, it is a lot of time to spend with a hippopotamus, although it might be necessary in some cases. But that is the advantage of the gig economy. So many people I know get jobs after working temporary, it happens all the time.

**JORDAN:** Nobody named Huggy could ever be an asshole. That's a good cover right there.

**ROBERT:** Huggy? I agree! Oh, Huggy is the most delightful human being that I've ever met. He's my co-author. He's a good guy.

**JORDAN:** So, okay, we can avoid them in that way by trying not to work with them at all. You said get the gossip. What ways do you recommend trying to get that type of thing? Do we just ask people at the company, "Hey, is Mike cool to work for?" "No, he's terrible."

**ROBERT:** This is one of the great things about social media. It's amazing if you use LinkedIn or Facebook -- I've even done this with Twitter -- the speed at which you can get to people if you're subtle is unbelievable. And what also happens in particular occupations. In academia it's like this. I know tech firms, I know Hollywood is like this. That the world seems really big until you start breaking it down into little occupations. I teach in the Stanford Engineering School and people knew -- I'm talking about my female computer science students who I teach -- they knew that Travis was not a person, if you were a woman, to get anywhere near for years. I've heard that for three years. Before all the negative gossip came out and everything.

In contrast, I'll give an example of Netflix as a firm where women -- although it's a really hard-ass place, it has a good reputation for women to work out. This is just stuff that just comes through gossip networks.

**JORDAN:** Yeah, interesting. So you heard, even before, "Just beware. The guy is an egomaniac," or --

**ROBERT:** It's a bad place for women, in general. There's other companies that I'm not going to say that I'm hearing that about right now. But people make decisions on the basis of that, as they should.

**JORDAN:** So, you're just warming up your article for when each of these companies -- yeah, you're just touching it up. "Well, it's only a matter of time until this one implodes."

**ROBERT:** Get better. And even in the case of Uber, all the signs that I'm hearing and the new CEO, he sounds like he's doing a pretty good job. So, you've got to keep your ear to the ground because things do change.

**JORDAN:** Are there ways we can lessen the impact of an asshole on ourselves? "Okay, we already worked there. People aren't really going to rally around us because they're also scared or they don't care or this guy has just got it out for us, because you

tripped him in elementary school and he never forgot about it.”  
Are there ways we can sort of steel ourselves to this assholery?

**JASON:** Yeah, producers like me want to know.

**ROBERT:** So, I call these reframing or mind tricks to protect your soul. And essentially, this comes from research on cognitive behavioral therapy. Some of your listeners will have heard of cognitive behavioral therapy. And essentially, there are ways to redefine a situation so it doesn't hurt so much, is essentially what it is. So, one way to do it is to kind of laugh in the face of your asshole, to just see them as a joke.

I've got a friend, her name is [Becky Margiotta](#), total hero. So, Becky, later on in life led something called the [100,000 Homes Campaign](#), which found homes for 100,000 homeless Americans. She's just an astounding person. And when she was 18 she was a West Point Cadet. Somebody kind of gets an inch from your nose and screams at you every day, that's your life, right? So you're just knee-deep in assholes.

And Becky said the first couple of weeks -- she said, "I was kind of getting upset by this, but then I started seeing the upper class cadets who were screaming at me as the world's greatest comedians. I just see them as just being so funny and I'd admire their antics and cleverness so much." It enabled her to both see it as a joke -- and in some ways, she said it's an emotional distancing strategy, where when you do that, you're kind of looking at yourself as a character in a movie. It doesn't even feel that personal. So, stuff you can do to redefine the situation so it doesn't hurt so much. Some of the other strategies that also, actually, are pretty evidence based, in addition to humor, are if you can see yourself as better than the asshole, being above them, a better person -- Michelle Obama, "When they go low, we go high," sort of strategy.

So, one of the organizations we did interviews for, for the book, is called [Philz Coffee](#). Philz Coffee is a local chain, some of you may have heard of it. About 35 stores, they have now. And they



really pride themselves -- when we talked to [Jacob Jaber](#), the CEO -- really pride themselves of, if you will, showing love to customers. Serving cups of love.

And their motto was, essentially when a customer treats them like dirt, to not sink to their level and to show that you're better than them and to shower them with love. Kill them with kindness. And it really does help the baristas cope with nasty customers, because they see themselves as better and really being proud of staying cool in the light of somebody who's throwing dirt at them.

I've got a colleague at Stanford -- this guy is so funny. I never could understand that when we're in a meeting with one of the biggest jerks you've ever met, he just is calm and cool, and just looks sort of studious. And finally, I said one day, "So, how do you do it? I study assholes and I'm ready to go crazy and you're so calm."

And he said, "What I do is I imagine I'm a doctor who specializes in assholeism and I say to myself, 'I'm so lucky to have a specimen of this incredible asshole behavior right in front of me,' sort of taking bugs and putting them in the collecting jar." And I really like that, even though I can't do it myself, even though I guess I am somebody who studies assholeism, anything you can do to create some emotional distance between you and the person who's treating you like dirt, can be very helpful. In some ways they're all sort of similar, because what you're doing is you're creating a way to have emotional detachment.

**JORDAN:**

Right, emotional detachment. That definitely makes a lot of sense and I can understand the baristas needing to do that because people are always in a hurry and you see jerks in line, and things like that. Although, whenever I walk into Philz, I feel like they're all stoned, and I think, maybe they misunderstood the old, "When they go low, we go high," advice.

**ROBERT:** That's really funny. Yeah, I don't know whether they're stoned but, you know, since pot is more or less legal in San Francisco, they may well be stoned.

**JORDAN:** You say it's contagious but you're one of the nicest guys we've had in a long time, so you must have a lot of emotional detachment in some other way.

**ROBERT:** When people treat me like dirt, I'm capable of being an asshole and I can be one. So, I might be a nice guy now, but put me in a hurry, put me under stress, put me around a bunch of assholes, a little sleep deprivation, I'm just a human being, I'll turn into a flaming asshole myself. Luckily I'm well-rested and talking to nice people today.

**JORDAN:** Sure, all right. Okay, fighting back. How do we decide to confront or change the tormentors? I know you mentioned a posse, that's not bad. That's a good idea. When do we have a gentle, private conversation? Or is that a sucker strategy?

**ROBERT:** Actually, that's really a great point. And this has to be with the difficulty of understanding how we are making other people feel in our life, is really difficult. I think the first assumption when somebody is leaving you feeling bad or is doing something that's objectively nasty, to make the assumption that they don't understand the damage that they're causing. You assume that they're a clueless, not a strategic asshole, if you will. We teach at Stanford -- we teach these executive education classes where you get executives from all over the world.

I've seen this group exercise where one of the things that was going on was that the students were recording interruptions in this group dynamics exercise that I do. So, this woman comes up to me afterwards. She tells me this great story, she says, "Okay, I'm a senior vice president. I'm on a team with six people and a CEO. Our CEO had some problems with being a clueless, sexist pig, he was constantly interrupting us -- the two women -- and not interrupting the four men." And by the way, just for

**your listeners, the evidence that women get interrupted more than men is unbelievable.**

**A new study shows that female Supreme Court justices in our Supreme Court get interrupted three times more than the male justices. This is a universal problem. Anyway, what she said was, "Our CEO who really prides himself in being a feminist and everything, we pulled him aside after a particularly nasty meeting and we showed him the numbers. He had interrupted us -- the two women -- 20 times. He never interrupted one of the guys once." He felt terrible, he apologized, and he asked us to keep track of it from then forward."**

**So, to me, that's nearly a perfect example of when you've got somebody who is kind of a clueless but well-meaning asshole, that having the private conversation can sometimes be constructive. And gee, by the way, sometimes if you have a safe conversation, that person may tell you that they're just throwing it back so you might learn it's partly your fault, too.**

**JORDAN:** Oh, interesting. I like that. I think whenever we have long standing assholery, especially outside the workplace, I find that there's usually two people involved, and you've studied this, so I don't know if that's accurate.

**ROBERT:** Absolutely. It's the classic [Hatfield and McCoy](#) problem. Sometimes psychologists call this revenge cycle, that, I throw the mud, you throw the mud, I throw the mud, to the extent that you can have empathy for the other person and you can have somebody come in who understands both sides and to mediate it can be very powerful. The other thing is, if you can get rid of them, that's the other thing too, to get them the hell out of your life. That's why divorce happens sometimes, as well. But yes, when there's ongoing, long-standing conflict, usually both parties are partly to blame. That said, there are flaming assholes who treat everybody like dirt. You mentioned Harvey Weinstein, I think that's a guy who might have deserved the certified asshole label.

**JORDAN:** What are some things that we can do practically to deal with this in real time? One of the things that stood out in the book that was a practical was the temporal distancing. And I really like this because it can be done without any fancy techniques and probably not a lot of practice, either.

**ROBERT:** So, what [temporal distancing](#) is, it especially comes from a series of studies done at the University of California, Berkeley. And what they showed Berkeley students who had problems like breaking up in a relationship or doing badly on the exam, the ones who would think about how they were going to feel about it a month or two weeks later and they literally looked back from the future, would have less anxiety and depression than the ones who just focused on how they felt right now. So, the basic mind trick is to imagine you're in the future looking back on it, and it doesn't hurt so much.

So, I got this great note from this guy who wrote -- he said, "So, when I was a first year cadet, they'd be just hazing at me and screaming at me an inch from my nose," he said, "I'd do two things." The first one is actually kind of funny. He said, "I'd look at the guy's eyebrow rather than in the eye, so I didn't get his full facial affect, and the other thing I would do is I would imagine it was three years later and I was flying my plane and I was looking back to my first year as a cadet, and it was really a small price to pay just for being yelled at, kind of once a day, by somebody who's sort of young and crazy." And I really liked that because he was able to get out of the moment and look back from the future. And he said it worked, he said, "I got less upset and I got to fly my plane."

**JORDAN:** Wow, so that was like an out of body experience.

**ROBERT:** Yeah.

**JORDAN:** Right?

**ROBERT:** Imagine you're in time travel.

**JORDAN:** You're deucing it.

**ROBERT:** Yeah.

**JORDAN:** It seems sad that we have to do this. If it works, and maybe it's only a little bit at a time. Because you don't want to quit your job if your boss' boss' boss that you see three, four times a year is an asshole.

**ROBERT:** And there are just some things in life, honestly, we just have to get through. Some of our students will have bad internships. Recently I flew from Chicago to San Francisco, and I got the middle seat in the very back row, and I sat between two guys who were even bigger than I am. So, what do you do? You shut your eyes and imagine you're already there and wait for it to be over. You sometimes just got to get through it.

**JORDAN:** One of the practicals that I really loved was figuring out what triggers our own assholery. I think this is important and I find myself doing this with my wife. Noticing, "Oh, I'm tired. Oh, this is what triggers me here. This is what triggers her there," and paying attention. And that's actually helped me avoid triggering certain crappy moods that would turn me into an asshole, or helping me help others, for example my wife, avoid situations that would trigger her because I can handle it more easily, for example.

**ROBERT:** I like the direction we're going here because to me, to sort of figure out, if you will, diagnosing when you're going to be an asshole, I guess sort of three things. One, you need that person in your life -- I like that you're talking about your wife because spouses are really good at telling you the truth. Second, to teenage children. So you've got to have somebody in your life to tell you the truth.

The second thing is just generally knowing what triggers nasty behavior in people and then knowing your quirks. So, in terms of what triggers nasty behavior in people, it's actually pretty clear evidence that you've sort of laid out. Being tired, sleep

deprived, is a great way to make people grumpy. Putting people in a hurry -- there's all sorts of evidence. You start rushing, people get nastier and less polite. The other one is power. If you have power over people, be very careful about how you behave, or maybe you don't care. And then finally, being around other assholes, as we've discussed in other ways, one of the most reliable ways to turn into an asshole. If you've been around a bunch of grumpy people, beware. And then finally, there's just things that set you off because I think that all of us who know each other well -- got my own little peeves of things that drive me crazy. So, a long, boring meeting -- the best way to turn me into an asshole is to try to talk to me minute 75 into a really bad, boring meeting. That's when I'm most dangerous.

**JORDAN:** Yeah, Jason gets grumpy.

**JASON:** I've got a podcast called [Grumpy Old Geeks](#), so it's in the title. As they say in Britain, it's written on the tin. So you get what you get. That's how it works.

**JORDAN:** You have this mantra: Be slow to label others as assholes and be quick to label yourself as one. What do we mean by that?

**ROBERT:** So, if listeners come away with one thing, this is it. The research we have on self-awareness indicates that just about all of us human beings, we're going to be quick to blame others for our problems, and we're going to be slow to see our flaws. We can avoid creating all sorts of problems by, well when somebody's being nasty, giving them the benefit of the doubt, not blaming them, and perhaps thinking, "Well what might I have done to trigger that person?" and that offsets a whole bunch of cognitive biases.

Because if you look at research, for example, on the percentage of Americans who say that they engage enduring bullying in the workplace, it's one out of 200, and if you ask the national survey of Americans, "Have you been the direct victim or observed first hand workplace bullying, ongoing bullying, it's 50 percent. It's one out of two. So something is wrong with those

numbers and so just as a little bit of an offset, if you can be, if you will, slow to label other people and to be quick to label yourself -- because you might be part of the problem -- I think it's one of the most important things. And God, I wish our politicians would do it, but I don't see much of that going on right now.

**JORDAN:** Yeah, good luck.

**ROBERT:** Yeah.

**JORDAN:** Those guys, we need to mail a whole crate of your book over there to Washington.

**ROBERT:** To both sides of the aisle, by the way.

**JORDAN:** Yeah. Oh, absolutely. I'm not even --

**ROBERT:** Bipartisan, in this case.

**JORDAN:** Absolutely, bipartisan effort to get this stuff handled. Absolutely. Thank you so much. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you want to make sure you deliver?

**ROBERT:** If we're going to -- we as a society, us in our organization, us in our relationships -- are going to do something about this problem, it isn't just a matter of us surviving the assholes in our midst and not being jerks ourselves, there's a third category, what I call toxic enablers. So, these are people -- and there's lots of people who do this in life who aren't assholes themselves, but they sort of clear the way for assholes to be effective. If you want to be a successful asshole, get somebody to clean up your mess.

And if you're somebody who does this, who after your boss has a temper tantrum, you go from office to office and you say, "Really, he or she wasn't that bad. It's not as bad as you think," and then you go into your boss' office and perhaps you say to her when she says, "Was I nasty?" you say, "No, no, you weren't

really that bad." There's a lot of people in the world who actually get rewarded for that sort of stuff.

There's at least two or three famous Silicon Valley CEO assholes that I know in history who have gotten ahead by having these toxic enabler folks, but they're actually doing a lot of damage when they clean up after people and make excuses for them. You were talking about the Harvey Weinstein case, it's the enablers and bystanders that are more interesting than what he happened to do because a lot of people let him run nasty for a long time. If somebody had done more of an intervention with him and called him out earlier, it wouldn't have gone on for so long.

**JORDAN:** I love the idea of the toxic enabler. They sort of are not assholes directly. The toxic enabler could be us, as well, right? We're the person who doesn't report the sexual harassment for the 87th time because, "That's Harvey," or, "Yeah, I know that this boss is a total jerk and I'm his secretary but I don't want to say anything because even though he might listen to me, he might also just get mad at me instead," that kind of thing.

**ROBERT:** In addition to that, there's people who get paid for this. There's lawyers who get paid for this, as I say two or three COOs who have turned into multi-billionaires by just sort of covering up. It's like the parade comes through and the clean up crew cleans up the poop. It's sort of like a job for some people but it sure does a lot of damage, because it makes it possible for them to both sort of cool out the victims, and at the same time, to sort of kiss up to the boss or other nasty person to keep doing the dirty work. Also, [Lance Armstrong](#). You look at the people around Lance Armstrong, many of whom now feel terrible for the toxic enabling that they did, either wittingly or unwittingly, it's another example.

**JORDAN:** A lot of people have what you would call, actually, asshole blindness, which is that they feel they can't leave. They feel trapped where they are. There's a habituation that takes place, being around it where you think, "Well, this is just what it's like



working at a company or this company, or even in this department. This is just what I have to deal with," and this takes such an emotional toll, that we now know takes a physical toll on our health. And additionally, there's one other thing which is, staying in a job where you're dealing with assholes longer than you need to, actually will often limit options you had earlier.

I think people don't really understand that. They don't realize, "Yeah I have to stay here even though I don't want to." No, you can get good references from earlier jobs, but if you're there for three-and-a-half years, you're going to have to explain this gap on your resume, and we've all heard, "Oh, well my old boss was an asshole," and we just go, "Uh-huh, sure he was."

**ROBERT:** This guy wrote me. He worked for a horrible boss for eight years. Eight years. Finally he got out. He said he could have gotten good references the first three or four years, by year six or seven, he was sort of in a trapped situation. And it's the classic -- some of the rationalizations that we use. "It's going to get better. I'll do something about it next week," and all of a sudden, you've been in the job, in this guy's case, for eight years.

So yeah, that's why I say, if you possibly can get out earlier rather than later, because things are not likely to get better. They might get better and you should do your homework. Sometimes the grass is browner, but just over the years -- and this one of the great things about the emails people send me. They'll send me a note and they'll say, "I actually moved to another place and now I'm in a place where people treat me with respect and they're civilized and my relationship with my spouse is much better because I finally have gotten out." So, sometimes it does get better, especially if you're in a bad context.

**JORDAN:** Well Bob, thank you so much. Great show, really fun, funny -- clearly, you're taking your own advice here.

**ROBERT:** Well, you guys are really fun to talk to. It's been a pleasure.



