

## BOOK REVIEW

### ***Oops!* and Another Seemingly Four-Letter Word**

**Daniels, A. (2009).** *Oops! 13 Management Practices That Waste Time and Money (and What to Do Instead)*. Atlanta, GA: Performance Management Publications.

**Sutton, R. I. (2007).** *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't*. New York, NY: Hachette Book Group.

When a family member handed me the book entitled *The No Asshole Rule*, I have to admit I was fairly insulted. After seeing my reddening discomfiture, my brother-in-law quickly stammered, “Oh, this isn’t about you! I want you to read it to help me with a menace I have at my job!” Being enlightened enough not to judge a book by its cover, I riffled through the paperback pages before declaring aloud, “This will be fraught with antecedent interventions and totally lacking in consequential advice,” which is the kind of thing an asshole would say. I went on to say, “While I’m looking through this, I’ve got a really neat book for you to read. It’s called *Oops!* and I think it will really help your company.” It turns out that Sutton’s *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t* (2007) did have some consequential advice, but not nearly as much as *Oops! 13 Management Practices that Waste Time and Money (and What to Do Instead)* (2009), and Daniels’s publication is likely to go a longer way in diminishing unconstructive work practices than Sutton’s, but *The No Asshole Rule* does have merit.

The substantive material in Sutton’s book begins by defining the repertoire of an asshole (without the precision of a behavior analyst of course) by sticking mostly to the form of behaviors (i.e., insults, uninvited touching, dirty looks) seen on the job that are detrimental to work alliances, morale, and the company’s well being. He states, in difficult-to-measure terms, that after talking to someone demonstrating such a repertoire, “the ‘target’ feels

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oppressed, humiliated . . . [and] belittled” and that this response class is typically evoked by the presence of “people who are less powerful” (p. 9).

As often happens in popular business and psychology books, the definition lacks meaning and focuses on formal behavior without also looking at the function. A thorough conceptual definition of “acting like an asshole in the workplace” from a Wittgensteinian/Skinnerian functional analysis is beyond the scope of this review (and this author’s career). At the same time, “acting like an asshole” from a conceptual functional analysis suggests it is a response class:

1. Occasioned in the presence of other individuals who have historical and environmental obstacles for presenting:
  - a. punishers for such a response class and/ or
  - b. differential reinforcers for alternate behaviors;
2. Positively reinforced, in part, by the outcomes of presenting aversive stimuli to these other individuals:
  - a. who, in turn, have their behavior negatively reinforced by the removal of aversive stimuli;
  - b. positively reinforced by a relative increase in access to tangible and social reinforcers.

This repertoire is likely to be supported by contextual events and motivational operations, such as a history of being punished and thereby evoking a greater degree of aggressiveness, or having a boss who is also a villain and who sets the occasion for such menacing behavior.

Throughout the book Sutton (2007) presents several dozen examples about villains who seem to express this repertoire with a high rate, duration, and intensity. The stories are engaging and voyeuristic into the contemptible but current world of employment where Sutton reports that 27 to 36% of workers experience mistreatment and hostility during one year in the workplace (and that number climbs to 90% of nurses). The “mean-spirited people do massive damage to victims, bystanders . . . , organizational performance, and themselves” (p. 27), and Sutton explicates some of the research in psychology and management to illustrate his claims (but regrettably, the book has no reference section). Sutton’s book would be more helpful if he explained which environmental influences could be held responsible for this repertoire, rather than saying it has to do with being “mean-spirited.” Such information might lead to more workable solutions.

The book takes a moment to highlight Amy Edmondson’s research (1999) showing that groups of workers with the best leaders *report* making many more errors in the workplace than groups with the villainous leaders, and that the best leaders create “psychologically safe” environments where mistakes can be reported without fear of retribution, and therefore can be fixed and prevented in the future. This highlights another cost of villains:

the fear of retribution from a superior reduces communication and reporting of mistakes, which puts the company at risk of diminished productivity and severe problems. Agnew and Daniels (2010) suggest that “extremely valuable lessons can be learned from near-misses, incidents, accidents, and at risk [*sic*] behavior. Yet most organizations struggle to get workers to report near misses and worry about non-reporting [*sic*] of accidents” (p. 69). It stands to reason that removing or reforming a villain can assist in this struggle.

Sutton attempts to teach folks how to deal with such difficult individuals, and what to do you if you are one. As I feared, most of the interventions have to do with altering antecedent stimuli: have a rule, “make it public,” and weave it into hiring practices. Sutton (2007) laments that the rule is difficult to enforce when the villain is a high producer,<sup>1</sup> but offers little advice when it comes to providing contingency management for the villain. At best, he suggests, “Having a policy and some training isn’t enough to have effective interactions, you’ve got to focus on what is happening in every conversation and meeting you have, tweak what you and others do ‘in the moment,’ and constantly reflect about the little things” (p. 82). That appears to be the strongest functional analysis and in vivo intervention guidelines in the book.

In a chapter about the virtues of assholes, the author includes the idea that a “huge body of psychological research shows that rewards are more effective motivators than punishments... Yet there is also psychological research going back to famous psychologist B.F. Skinner that, although less effective than rewards, people will work to avoid punishment” (Sutton, 2007, pp. 161–162).

While it is nice that Skinner is being cited in a 21st-century *New York Times* bestseller, it is regrettable that it is in the latter part of the aforementioned sentence, where the punishment meted out by assholes is being justified, rather than the former section about improving performance with reinforcement. In the end, Sutton (2007) gives further vignettes about how there is “evidence for the long-term financial benefits of treating people with dignity and respect” (p. 170) and summarizes seven key lessons about The No Asshole Rule as a Way of Life. These lessons hint at examples of in vivo consequences that have worked to decelerate villainous behavior, but a codified action plan is lacking. The book is a quick and interesting read for laypersons, and lives up to its title of presenting a “rule,” which behavior analysts typically conceptualize as antecedent stimuli, but it falls short in presenting solid, measureable practices for “building a civilized workplace” (as the full book title states) or helping others survive one that isn’t. I believe a book with advice on consequential stimuli is more likely to correct the other holes in Sutton’s book, which is why I now turn to Aubrey Daniels’s

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, the villain might appear to be a high producer, but menacing behavior diminishes the performance of the people dealing with the villain, and the total negative effect of the problem behavior likely has a deleterious effect on the group’s achievement despite the villain’s production.

*Oops! 13 Management Practices that Waste Time and Money (and What to Do Instead)* (2009).

Although doubtful that Daniels (2009) wrote his book in the context of addressing Sutton's publication, Chapter 11 of *Oops!* gives the reader a similar examination of a menace's behavior and the impact of iniquitous behavior on the organization, while also clarifying the contingencies that evoke this repertoire. Daniels presents a Sutton-esque case study about a manager who was well mannered with his bosses and rude to his underlings; however, Daniels answers the question "Why would he be like that?" by stating, "The simple answer is that he had a long history of being reinforced for his negative behaviors at work" (p. 124). The direct reports work to avoid his wrath and fear of job loss, while the bosses "heavily reinforced" this repertoire "because he got results." Daniels continues,

It is a myth that tough managers are needed to bring out the best in employees. They never do. What keeps the myth alive is that negative reinforcement and punishment will improve performance in a poor performing organization. By being tough on poor performers (firing them), these managers send a message to the organization that you better do your job or else! This will typically lead to improved performance, at least temporarily. However, a negative reinforcement and punishment strategy only creates an organization that performs to stay out of trouble . . . An organization that performs to stay out of trouble will never excel. (p. 127)

Implicit in Daniels's (2009) explanation is a critique of the problem repertoire highlighted in Sutton's (2007) book, and also an antidote of learning how to properly reinforce productive behavior: "When comparing a tough manager with one who knows and follows the laws of behavior, the latter wins every time. Eventually, tough managers reach a plateau in performance because there is a limit to how much abuse people will take" (p. 129).

Thankfully, 10 of the middle 13 chapters<sup>2</sup> teach managers how to "win every time" by "following the laws of behavior." Each of the chapters describe unfruitful business practices and also include a "What to Do Instead" section. Daniels (2009) explains that employee performance is "due to the interface of behavior with . . . management processes, and practices approved" by leadership (p. 11) and provides suggestions that will alter the contingencies relevant to the aforementioned conceptual functional analysis of "acting like an asshole." In order to properly address this repertoire, it appears that the following measures can be made:

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<sup>2</sup> The three chapters on salary, budgeting, and M&A are solid, and leaders in companies that employ villains should read them, but they aren't directly relevant to changing menacing behavior.

1. Victims should be trained to put the problem behavior on extinction, and perhaps more likely, have a way of communicating just how badly the behavior is affecting performance, and then have consequence-based policy reflect the management of those contingencies.
2. Villains should be trained in the effects of appropriate OBM methods, increase their positive reinforcement of suitable coworker responses, and then reinforced for their new response class, and outcomes of their own increased performance.
3. Leadership should be taught contingency management so that the menacing behavior that diminishes worker productivity is not financially rewarded or socially lauded.

The aim of Daniels's (2009) book has nothing to do with addressing the first aspect of ameliorating this repertoire. Books on assertiveness training or *Don't Shoot the Dog!* (Pryor, 1999) might assist with that concern. However, Daniels makes solid suggestions to address the second and third aspects of this problem repertoire. In the first suggestion in the first chapter, Daniels states, "Create a positive reinforcement culture," which essentially sets the timbre for the rest of the book's baker's dozen of ideas. The author says, "Managers . . . should be teachers and coaches who do not sit in judgment of employees but as those who transfer their knowledge . . . in an efficient and positive manner. The evaluation of the manager should not be only on whether employees succeed but also on the manager behaviors used to help them achieve success" (p. 60).

The book takes aim at a number of routine business customs. For instance, Daniels criticizes the use of ranking and pitting workers against each other in rivalry, which is something tough managers sometimes make the mistake of doing. He promotes aiming for external benchmarks and reminds readers that competition is supposed to be against *other* business organizations. Relatedly, he warns against company downsizing and quotes *Lean Manufacturing That Works* (2005) author, Bill Carreira, by stating when good practices aim to "eliminate jobs, I didn't mean within your company, I meant that in the workplaces of your competition" (p. 143).

Daniels (2009) also teaches tough managers communication skills, how to pay a compliment, and how to give reinforcing feedback. In order to persuade the tough manager, Daniels presents research about timing the presentation of good news/ bad news, and advocates separating encouraging news from disapproving comments. The 4:1 rule about the ratio between reinforcing to punitive remarks is also discussed and supported with citations and a reference section.

The book reminds the reader, "It is the management's responsibility to create a workplace that causes employees to do their best every day" (Daniels, 2009, p. 54), which is a direct hit against the second and third

aspects of the problem repertoire. To assist with this aim, Daniels incorporates the Performance Matrix from *Bringing Out the Best in People* (2000) as a method for operationally defining and measuring behaviors and results, and gives the reader enough explanation on how to utilize this tool. The PIC/NIC Analysis seen in so many of his other publications only makes a cameo appearance in this book. *Oops!* is written in a colloquial style and apparently targeted for more mainstream readers, so perhaps it was judicious to only give passing mention to the PIC/NIC Analysis as an invitation to learn more technical ideas.

In summary, if an organization were to institute a “No Asshole Rule,” it simply presents antecedent verbal stimuli that specify negatively reinforcing contingencies. Ironically, the rule states that organizations should work to get rid of an aversive stimulus event: the asshole. But the rule doesn’t explain how to accelerate the performance of the organization or increase discretionary effort, which the villain is ineffectively trying to accomplish. Through applied behavior analysis, Daniels (2009) explicates an evidence-based foundation that can lead to these desired outcomes. He suggests leadership aim to develop “perfectly motivated employees” who he describes as “those who do more than they are paid to do” (p. 155). To that end, Daniels describes and exhorts against practices that waste time and money and demonstrates how personal, immediate, contingent, and frequent reinforcers can lead high producing workers. And it turns out, my brother-in-law got a great deal of use out of it.

As a parting comment, it was quite obvious that Daniels’s book was written by a southern gentleman. When Daniels had cause to quote a worker who used a vulgarity, the same vulgarity throughout Sutton’s book and title, Daniels chose to simply type “###.” He truly demonstrates the graciousness required for building a civilized publication.

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