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The Humble Leader: Why Humility Trumps Arrogance in the Workplace

Raise your hand if you have ever worked with an arrogant person. When organizational and industrial psychologist Stan Silverman asks audiences to do this, almost every hand goes up.

Arrogant behavior in the workplace can damage morale and productivity, says Silverman, associate provost and dean at the University of Akron Summit College. In an educational or hospital setting, arrogant behavior can make life miserable for colleagues and subordinates while it often escapes the notice of superiors.

“Arrogant people are more than willing to take credit for their successes, but not their failures,” Silverman notes. “They get angry when their ideas are criticized, and they tend to put their personal agendas ahead of organizational objectives.”

But getting an arrogant person to change is hard to do, especially if they’re in a senior, tenured position.

Quantifying arrogance

Defining and measuring arrogant behavior and its negative impact in the work-



place is the first step in curtailing it, Silverman reports. “Behaviors differ from personality traits in that they can be changed. Yet one of the markers of the arrogant person is an unwillingness to accept feedback. So we saw that we needed to come up with a measurement to quantify arrogance.”

For one portion of their study “Arrogance: A Formula for Failure,” Silverman and co-authors used a 360-degree performance feedback survey to show that arrogance was negatively related to performance and cognitive ability.

The Workplace Arrogance Scale (WARS) Silverman and colleagues developed helps organizations obtain empirical data. Using the scale, the researchers have been able to show that the more arrogant a person is, the more self-centered and less agreeable they are likely to be.

“Until now there wasn’t a

mechanism in place to start the discussion,” says Silverman. “But when you can measure arrogance (and at the other end of the spectrum, humility), you have a starting point for changing behavior.”

The data also shows that the higher the level of arrogance, the lower the job performance. That correlation goes against the stereotype of the brilliant-but-arrogant individual whose behavior is tolerated because he or she is thought to be a star performer.

These measurements, linked with performance feedback, can help organizations begin to address the harmful effects of arrogance, and answer the question “why should I change my behavior?” with hard evidence.

Different from self-confidence

Arrogance differs from self-confidence, Silverman notes. “We all want to work with people who are self-confident. Nurses, residents and patients can respect

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Stan Silverman
Associate provost and dean
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Arrogance: A Competence and Leadership Issue

Continued from page 1

physicians who are confident, and they have no problem following them.”

But when a physician or other leader crosses the line from self-confidence into arrogance, there’s a different set of perceptions, Silverman explains. “People have far less respect for an arrogant person. They don’t like working with them. They may not want them to get ahead. And they may even do things to help them fail.”

Humility for better leadership

Successful organizations are beginning to see bottom-line benefits when they build in accountability for values and behaviors that impact others, and not just results.

“Our study results show

that there may be advantages for organizations that encourage positive behaviors such as humility,” says Silverman.

“Humility can be the antidote to arrogance. Humble individuals have a different personal orientation. They don’t act as if they are superior to others. They’re willing to see themselves accurately, and they want to know what their weaknesses are. Showing humility is not a sign of weakness—it’s a trait we want our leaders to have. Humility prevents excessive self-focus, and allows a leader to develop better relationships with employees.”

One way faculty can model humility is by giving credit to assistants who contribute to research, says Silverman. “When you give credit where it’s due, the people who work for you

see your humble side, and they’ll walk through walls for you.” Silverman himself does this by making sure research assistants are named in the research he publishes.

Stuck working with an arrogant person?

If you have a peer with arrogant behavior, Silverman suggests a discussion that begins: “I want us to have a good working relationship. Let’s talk about some ideas that will help us work better together.”

When you are working with a difficult individual in a superior position, remember that this person isn’t receptive to feedback, Silverman says. “The best thing you can do is make sure your role is very clear. Emphasize the importance of the team and the organization’s objectives.”

Humility can be the antidote to arrogance.



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Top Ten Arrogant Behaviors

1. Believes that he/she knows better than everyone else in any given situation
2. Makes decisions that impact others without listening to their input
3. Uses non-verbal behaviors like glaring or staring to make people uncomfortable
4. Criticizes others
5. Belittles his/her employees publicly
6. Asserts authority in situations when he/she does not have the required information
7. Discredits others’ ideas during meetings and often makes those individuals look bad
8. Shoots down other people’s ideas in public
9. Exhibits different behaviors with subordinates than with supervisors
10. Makes unrealistic time demands on others

Excerpted with permission from “Workplace Arrogance Scale” Russell E. Johnson, Stanley B. Silverman, Aarti Shyamsunder, Hsien-Yao Swee, O. Burcu Rodopman, Eunae Cho & Jeremy Bauer (2010): Acting Superior But Actually Inferior?: Correlates and Consequences of Workplace Arrogance, Human Performance, 23:5, 403-427 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08959285.2010.515279>

Growth Mindset or Fixed Mindset?

The growth mindset is that of a learner. Even in a learning environment, you’ll still come across people with a fixed mindset who may be limiting their own and others’ achieve-

ments. In *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (Random House, 2006), Stanford University psychologist Carol S. Dweck reports that teaching a growth mindset creates moti-

vation and productivity in the worlds of business, education and sports.

Test your mindset online:
<http://www.mindsetonline.com/testyourmindset/step1.php>