

## The Impact of a ‘Jerked’ Apple

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7 Steps Ahead

For a routine team meeting, the tension in the room was palpable. A careful observer might have noticed the quick, side-long glances the first two speakers directed at Jim. Jim just sat there quietly, apparently not paying attention to them. Rob, the new guy, started to speak. Older team members exchanged worried glances.

It’s not clear what Rob said that set Jim off, but set Jim off he did. Jim launched a verbal attack. Afterward, one of the older team members explained to Rob that, “Jim’s a top player, so we cut him some slack. We try to avoid issues that he feels strongly about.”

At another company, members of the engineering team carefully avoided any discussion on coding styles or standards lest they set off Jason. Jason wasn’t nasty in the same way that Jim was, but when coding styles came up, Jason wouldn’t shut up. He would continue to argue his point until everyone gave in. Eventually, they learned to just not go there unless they wanted meetings to drag on for hours. Jason, like Jim, was viewed as a top performer. At one point, the VP of Engineering commented that, “I know he’s hard to get on with, but he’s really skilled.”

In both cases, their performance came at a high price: other employees were afraid to disagree with them, limiting the flow of ideas and preventing effective error correction. Even worse, as employees observed the behaviors that were being rewarded, more and more of them adopted similar techniques. Offices rapidly became extremely unpleasant places to work. Senior management, however, did not want to fire or even reprimand Jim or Jason because they were perceived as high performers, despite being “bad apples.” In fact, they achieved their apparently high performance by bringing everyone else down.

At one firm, the top salesman was also a serious bad apple. No one at the company approached his level of sales. Eventually, though, his behavior became so egregious that he was fired. Rather than seeing sales decline with the loss of their top salesman, overall sales shot up over twenty percent.

The biggest problem with bad apples is that their bad behavior is contagious. Nastiness, subtle insults, and other inappropriate social interactions, if not halted, are imitated by others. Sometimes this is because, as mentioned above, the behaviors come to be seen as the path to success in the office. Other times, employees adopt the inappropriate behaviors as a form of self-defense: if she knows I’ll bite back, then maybe she’ll pick on someone else. If nothing else, constantly dealing with a bad apple leaves people edgy and irritable, more likely to engage in inappropriate behavior and less likely to speak out and share what they are thinking. Whatever the reason, the

spread of bad behavior means that instead of one Jerk in the office, you have an office full of Jerks. This destroys morale, productivity, and trust.

While it can be hard to identify the Jerk once conditions spiral out of control, in most of the cases I've dealt with, finding the Jerk was easy. Pretty much everyone knew.

The real question, though, is why Jerks are allowed to thrive despite the damage they can do. Why do so many managers refuse to take action?

The first reason is the belief that it's okay for a top performer to be "just difficult to get on with." After all, these are adults. Can't they take a little obnoxiousness or whatever? Yes, they are adults; as adults, they probably have little interest in working in an environment with the ambiance of middle school. No one likes being insulted, and allowing it only guarantees poor performance all around.

Reason number two is the belief that the Jerk is simply such a top performer that the company simply cannot afford to get rid of them. As we saw with the salesman example, Jerks are top performers mainly because they drag everyone else down. They make others unwilling to volunteer, which enables the Jerk to take his pick of the tasks, and then constantly complain that no one else is doing their part. They will often play hero by jumping into other people's projects, all the while complaining that, "I don't have the time to deal with this, but you've made it necessary." The more they convince others to disengage, the better they look: The apple may look good from the outside, but there's a worm inside. If you do it right, when you remove the Jerk, performance will skyrocket.

Finally, managers or even other employees are unwilling to get rid of the Jerk because they feel guilty. Refrains I often hear include, "Oh, but he's done so much for the company," or "She's so dedicated, we need to figure out a way to keep her," or "That would be such an awful way to reward someone who sacrifices so much for the business," or "I'm sure he'll change eventually," etc.

Successful Jerks are very good at playing on the feelings of those around them: if they weren't so good at it, they wouldn't have lasted so long in the job. They don't change because, quite simply, they keep being rewarded for their bad behavior. The temptation is often to put them on a behavior plan or hire a coach for them. Behavior plans are effective only when you are dealing with someone both willing and able to change. Before you implement a behavior plan, ask yourself if this person has ever made a lasting change in response to feedback. Too often with Jerks, you are just delaying the inevitable. As far as coaching, focus your coaching on the people who really are your best performers. Otherwise, you're just paying for a short-term improvement that will swiftly disappear once the coach is gone.

Getting rid of a Jerk can feel awful, right up to the point when they are gone. At that point, suddenly the atmosphere, and your team's performance, improves to such an extent that you are left wondering what took you so long.