

Being a selfish jerk doesn't get you ahead, research finds

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The evidence is in: Nice guys and gals don't finish last, and being a selfish jerk doesn't get you ahead.

That's the clear conclusion from research that tracked disagreeable people from college or graduate school to where they landed in their

careers about 14 years later.

"I was surprised by the consistency of the findings. No matter the individual or the context, disagreeableness did not give people an advantage in the competition for [power](#)—even in more cutthroat, 'dog-eat-dog' organizational cultures," said Berkeley Haas Prof. Cameron Anderson, who co-authored the study with Berkeley Psychology Prof. Oliver P. John, doctoral student Daron L. Sharps, and Assoc. Prof. Christopher J. Soto of Colby College.

The paper was published August 31 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

The researchers conducted two studies of people who had completed [personality assessments](#) as undergraduates or MBA students at three universities. They surveyed the same people more than a decade later, asking about their power and rank in their workplaces, as well as the culture of their organizations. They also asked their co-workers to rate the study participants' rank and [workplace behavior](#). Across the board, they found those with selfish, deceitful, and aggressive personality traits were not more likely to have attained power than those who were generous, trustworthy, and generally nice.

That's not to say that jerks don't reach positions of power. It's just that they didn't get ahead faster than others, and being a jerk simply didn't help, Anderson said. That's because any power boost they get from being intimidating is offset by their poor interpersonal relationships, the researchers found. In contrast, the researchers found that extroverts were the most likely to have advanced in their organizations, based on their sociability, energy, and assertiveness—backing up prior research.

"The bad news here is that organizations do place disagreeable individuals in charge just as often as agreeable people," Anderson said.

"In other words, they allow jerks to gain power at the same rate as anyone else, even though jerks in power can do serious damage to the organization."

The age-old question of whether being aggressively Machiavellian helps people get ahead has long interested Anderson, who studies social status. It's a critical question for managers, because ample research has shown that jerks in positions of power are abusive, prioritize their own self-interest, create corrupt cultures, and ultimately cause their organizations to fail. They also serve as toxic role models for society at large.

For example, people who read former-Apple CEO Steve Jobs' biography might think, "Maybe if I become an even bigger asshole I'll be successful like Steve," the authors note in their paper. "My advice to managers would be to pay attention to agreeableness as an important qualification for positions of power and leadership," Anderson said. "Prior research is clear: agreeable people in power produce better outcomes."

While there's clearly no shortage of jerks in power, there's been little empirical research to settle the question of whether being disagreeable actually helped them get there, or is simply incidental to their success. Anderson and his co-authors set out to create a research design that would clear up the debate. (They pre-registered their analysis for both studies on aspredicted.org.)

What defines a jerk? The participants had all completed the Big Five Inventory (BFI), an assessment based on general consensus among psychologists of the five fundamental personality dimensions: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness. It was developed by Anderson's co-author John, who directs the Berkeley Personality Lab. In addition, some of the participants also completed a second personality assessment, the NEO Personality Inventory-Revised (NEO PI-R).

"Disagreeableness is a relatively stable aspect of personality that involves the tendency to behave in quarrelsome, cold, callous, and selfish ways," the researchers explained. "...Disagreeable people tend to be hostile and abusive to others, deceive and manipulate others for their own gain, and ignore others' concerns or welfare."

In the first study, which involved 457 participants, the researchers found no relationship between power and disagreeableness, no matter whether the person had scored high or low on those traits. That was true regardless of gender, race or ethnicity, industry, or the cultural norms in the organization.

The second study went deeper, looking at the four main ways people attain power: through dominant-aggressive [behavior](#), or using fear and intimidation; political behavior, or building alliances with influential people; communal behavior, or helping others; and competent behavior, or being good at one's job. They also asked the subjects' co-workers to rate their place in the hierarchy, as well as their workplace behavior (interestingly, the co-workers' ratings largely matched the subjects' self-assessments).

This allowed the researchers to better understand why disagreeable people do not get ahead faster than others. Even though jerks tend to engage in dominant behavior, their lack of communal behavior cancels out any advantage their aggressiveness gives them, they concluded.

Anderson noted that the findings don't directly speak to whether disagreeableness helps or hurts people attain power in the realm of electoral politics, where the power dynamics are different than in organizations. But there are some likely parallels. "Having a strong set of alliances is generally important to power in all areas of life," he said. "Disagreeable politicians might have more difficulty maintaining necessary alliances because of their toxic behavior."

More information: Cameron Anderson et al., "People with disagreeable personalities (selfish, combative, and manipulative) do not have an advantage in pursuing power at work," *PNAS* (2020).

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