



Stanford eCorner

Pruning the Rotten Apples

Bob Sutton, *Stanford University*

November 10, 2010

Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2571/Pruning-the-Rotten-Apples>

A successful personal relationship must follow the 5:1 rule: for every unpleasant interaction, at least five positive interactions are needed to offset the negative one, says Stanford Professor and author Bob Sutton. Research in the workplace also shows that just one rotten apple - or someone who repeatedly proves to be selfish - can be contagion that severely reduces overall team performance. These contagions must be removed for the health and longevity of the team.



Transcript

This brings us to rotten apples. I'm going to talk about rotten apples and how important it is to get rid of them. This slide is maybe the second-most or maybe the most important slide in the talk because it has to do with personal relationships. I'll back up. You should all know research on 'the 5 to 1 rule'. What essentially this research shows is if you are in a personal relationship with someone and you go below 5 to 1 where for every bad interaction there aren't at least five good interactions, you are in trouble. The relationships, dating relationships, marriages, they tend to fall apart. And so I tell myself--I've been married forever. I've been living with the same woman since she was 19 and I was 21. I don't know how she's put up with me.

But one thing that has helped recently is that when I'm bad, and sometimes I'm bad, I tell myself I have to be good at least five times in a row. So that's the basic, that's the most important thing you'll probably hear in this lecture. Related to that is research that shows that in the workplace, when you have a bad encounter, an unpleasant encounter with someone, it packs five times the wallop on your emotion than a positive encounter. So that's one part of it. And then there's this research on rotten apples--and by the way, there's a great "This American Life" episode if you want to hear it. There's also the academic article I recommend in this "This American Life" episode if you want to hear it. And essentially what this research shows is that when teams have one rotten apple, somebody who I would call an asshole, somebody who is lazy, somebody who is depressive, it knocks down the team performance by 30% or 40%. The reason this appears to happen is that when you've got one of these bad apples on your team, first of all, it's contagious. One of the things that's very well-documented is when you work with jerks, you start acting like them. So there's the contagion problem.

And then the other problem is just attention. When you've got somebody who is a difficult performance problem, who's sort of a high-maintenance person, you spend more time trying to deal with that person's quirks and less time actually doing the job. So, one thing I guess that I should say and that I should emphasize--oh, I forgot my apple--is that there's a lot of evidence that human beings can be reformed if you believe they can get better. That through coaching, a lot of times they can get better. There's one company I worked with told me a whole story about how the guy who is now CEO was sort of incompetent and mean but actually through years of coaching has become both a compassionate leader and a competent one. So it does change. Nonetheless, there becomes a point where you've got to get rid of people. And my favorite story since I wrote "The No Asshole Rule" is--this was about two years ago. I was reading Fortune magazine and I was looking at "The Best Places to Work" list, and at Number 39 was a financial services firm called Baird. And all it said was, "Baird.

Number 39. They tout their no-asshole rule". So I got very excited and I sent an email to head of HR. And within about two or three days I was on the phone with the CEO, Paul Purcell, and I asked him about his no-asshole rule. And by the way, they got through the meltdown quite well very successfully, and I think they're Number 11 or something in the Best Places to Work

list and they still tout their no-asshole rule. And I asked him how he enforced the no-asshole rule. He had this great quote which was, "During the interview, I tell them that if I discover they're an asshole, I'm going to fire them." That was the quote. And then he said something which I thought was quite related to this definition of the superstar I had. I said, "What do you mean by somebody being an asshole?" and he said, "It's somebody who consistently puts their own need ahead of their peers, customers, or the company." And so that gets to this idea of the sort of selfishness.