

**NO**

**ASSHOLES**

**ALLOWED**

BY ANDREA OZIAS, WORLDATEWORK

Maybe they didn't get  
hugged enough when they were  
children. Or perhaps their parents  
didn't teach them any better. Whatever  
the cause, we've all experienced those  
people in the workplace, and we all  
refer to them in any number of ways:

Bullies. Mercenaries. Jerks.

And, yes, **assholes**.

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**P**aul Purcell has worked in the financial services industry for nearly 50 years and currently serves as chairman at Baird, a Milwaukee-based financial services firm with 3,500 employees in 100 offices worldwide. Nearly 20 years ago, after working a fair amount of time with difficult people, he joined Baird with two unbendable tenets: He wouldn't tolerate anyone who put themselves ahead of clients or the business, and he wouldn't work with any clients he didn't trust. On his first day at Baird, he introduced a new rule: No assholes allowed.

"Paul feels very strongly that if we had people like that in the organization, we would fail," said Leslie Dixon, Baird's chief human resources officer. "He's come from organizations where there were assholes, and that's why he left. He's very protective about us being focused on the right things and what it takes to be a success."

### Why It Matters

Toxic employees increase stress, according to employee respondents of a survey conducted by leadership development firm Fierce Inc. Next in line to take a hit? Job satisfaction. Employer respondents to the survey reported believing that toxic employees decrease morale, productivity and quality of the overall work product.

"Assholes affect the bottom dollar, morale and whether projects are completed," said Piyush Patel, speaker and author of *Lead Your Tribe, Love Your Work: An Entrepreneur's Guide to Creating a Culture That Matters*. "If your momentum in revenue, customer acquisition and market share stops, then what you're seeing is the byproduct of people's actions and behaviors. When customers stop coming and buying from you, they're voting with their dollars. When your employees leave the organization, they're also voting — with their feet."

50% of company presidents and 35% of employees who responded to the Fierce Inc. survey said they believe a negative attitude is the most detrimental trait

an employee can have. And it doesn't matter at what level that jerk works: 54% of respondents said they believe that, among a negative peer, manager or company leader, all are equally detrimental. But none of this is news to Purcell.

"When you're happy, you're more productive," Purcell said. "When you don't feel good, you don't get as much done. It all goes to human psyche to being respected, trusted and valued."

### Identifying the Perpetrators

It's not hard to identify an asshole, Purcell said, adding that it's all about behavior: "That name applies to those who you don't view as high-integrity people."

Delta Emerson, chief people and strategy officer at BullseyeEngagement and chair of WorldatWork's

Work-Life Advisory Council, pointed to Merriam-Webster's definition of a jerk as "an irritating or contemptible person."

"We all pretty much know who we perceive those to be," she said. "They're people who are disrespectful. They're frequently so self-absorbed, they don't think of anyone but themselves. They're often narcissistic."

Dixon acknowledged that defining an asshole can be challenging, and said that there are good conversations at Baird about the differences between simply being a pain in the ass (e.g., someone who sets high expectations for

results) versus being an asshole (e.g., someone who is rude or disrespectful).

"The things we say are unacceptable are things like being out for No. 1," she said. "At the end of the day, we have to talk about different perceptions. It's not so much about 'assholes' as it is about perceptions about things that have happened and what we do with it. It could be personal insults or poor language. It could be acting threatening or intimidating, either verbally or nonverbally. It's being arrogant or disrespectful. It's not being truthful — that goes against integrity and value. Really, it's just not valuing people who are different. That's not who we are."

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## BAIRD'S SIX CORE VALUES

Rather than focusing too much on what people should not be doing, Baird leadership focuses on trying to teach people to be good listeners and to give and receive honest feedback. "We ask, 'How would a great place to work respond in this situation?'" Dixon said. "That's the everyday language we try to bring into the workplace."

### Setting the Stage with Culture

Baird's rule stems from the company's core values that were articulated and defined nearly 30 years ago — before Purcell's time. All new associates are trained on these core values, and that's when the no-asshole rule is discussed in depth.

"We talk about above-the-line and below-the-line behavior and what each looks like," Dixon said. "We get the associates to talk about the gray and how below-the-line behavior is not acceptable at Baird. And then we talk about that above-the-line behavior, and how it's about respect, being a team player and those kinds of things."

And those values are what drive the organization's culture — something that isn't easy to change in any organization.

"It takes decades to change the basic culture of a firm because it gets embedded. You have to lay off a lot of people and replace a lot of people, and it takes a lot of time to fix it," Purcell said.

He tried changing the culture at his prior employer, which he described as cutthroat and mercenary, but he couldn't make it happen. Baird's culture was a key tipping point for Purcell when he decided to join the company.

"I went to Baird not because of what it was, but because it was client-oriented and honest," he said. "If the culture hadn't been strong to begin with, it wouldn't have worked for me."

Regardless of what type of culture an organization has, it must be driven from the top. And when leadership puts its foot down about what constitutes unacceptable behaviors, it sends a shockwave through the organization, according to Patel.

"If you give me money and time, I can re-create any product or service. But I can't re-create a culture," he said. "And even though culture is a competitive advantage, for many organizations it's on the backburner. It's the 20<sup>th</sup> thing on the list of things to do ... but there's a real dollar value to it."

Patel started Digital Tutors, an Oklahoma City-based company, with \$54 in 2000 and led the organization for 14 years before selling it — for \$45 million in cash.



Clients come first.



Integrity is irreplaceable  
(this is where the  
no-asshole rule fits).



Quality is our measure  
of success.



The best financial advice  
is the result of expertise  
and teamwork.



How we succeed is as  
important as if we succeed.



We seek personal balance  
in home, work and community  
involvement.

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When he started the company, he quickly learned that he didn't just want to make money.

"I decided, if this is what I'm going to spend my life doing, I want to do it with really cool people. I didn't care how big of an earner a person was; if he or she was an asshole, they had to go," he said.

Emerson added that cultures organically invent themselves if they are not established top-down. It's not just one person who creates it; rather, it takes the people who own it to set the tone.

"The hardest part, I promise you, is when that 'shiny' new person shows up and they've got that awesome idea and they're so good that you just can't resist them. And leaders sometimes can't resist," she said. "They get seduced, and they say, 'it'll be fine, it'll work out.' But if you've got these big red flags in front of you, recognize it and think about whether you value your culture equally

with what you want to accomplish as a business, or if you're willing to put people second."

## Getting It Right, from the Start

Onboarding sessions at Baird aren't the first place where new employees hear about the no-asshole rule. "It's all part of the vetting process in the interview, which all comes back to those six values," Dixon said.

"When we interview, we really put people through the ringer," Purcell said. "And the more senior the position, the deeper the checking. We have people who ask us, 'How do I get through all of this?' But they do. Do we make mistakes? Of course. But when we make them, we fix them."

Dixon added, "If you're interviewing someone and they're using language like 'I this' and 'I that' instead of 'we,' that's a sign of a difference in values. You can get signs of where there might be an issue. And we really do have a lot of our interview questions and performance competencies around our values."

Emerson agreed that it's important to balance the ability to do the job with character.

"Competence is being really good at whatever you've chosen to do for a living. You want a competent person," she said. "But, on top of that, if you want a culture that's 'no jerks,' then you need to look at character. And that's based on the values that people hold. You've got to figure out how to assess character."

It's also critical, Emerson said, that organizations clearly understand their goals and align their values and culture accordingly.

"It's a reality check that a company has to do," she said. "If it's a dog-eat-dog startup or only about pulling in money, then be honest with yourself and make sure you're not sending a mixed message to those you hire. In the interview process, share your values clearly, just as you do in the job description. Include code of conduct expectations in the employment agreement if you have one, and in your policy handbook, and have team members sign on the dotted line."

## What to Do with Assholes

Baird equips employees to address any toxic behaviors that may arise by providing training — and communicating about its availability — from day one on the job.

"We have opportunities around giving and receiving feedback and a strong leadership curriculum that laces in concepts around being a good listener and knowing

### EMPLOYEE REACTION TO BAIRD'S NO-ASSHOLE RULE

The word "asshole" isn't the worst word in modern vocabulary, but it's also not one commonly heard in a professional work environment. Purcell acknowledged that the term does offend a small percentage of employees, "but everyone has a view of what an asshole is. They know it in their gut, and they don't want any part of them."

Dixon agreed that there are some employees who are more conservative and have been "somewhat horrified," but they appreciate the concept. During the interview and onboarding process, Dixon and her team use the word point-blank to be clear with candidates about the company's culture and expectations.

"There's a fair amount of people that just can't say it because they feel like they shouldn't," she said. "In their own way, people appreciate it, but most are hesitant to talk about it too much. But when they hear leaders talk about it, there's a certain level of excitement."

Interestingly, with offices in Europe, the United Kingdom, Frankfurt and China, the term "asshole" translates across borders, too. "It's one of those words that people just get," Dixon said. "It's kind of funny. You get a similar reaction in all of those places."

how to both give and receive honest feedback,” Dixon said. “We recently kicked off a new program that dives into things like unconscious bias, and we try to help leaders and associates understand what that is.”

But no hiring process is perfect and, as Purcell noted, sometimes hiring mistakes are made. But they do get addressed. First, there is the performance management process. Baird has a strong focus on 360-degree feedback processes to get a complete view of employees, ensuring input is gathered from all levels in the organization.

“We certainly have encountered situations where we’ve had to point out the behavior that’s unacceptable — and people choose if they can adjust or not,” Dixon said. And if they don’t adjust? “It would be what we call a ‘fit’ issue. Someone who’s really self-centered could be fabulous in another company, but it just doesn’t work for us.”

She went on to tell the story of an employee who was a significant producer at Baird — one who other employees considered to be untouchable. In this situation, Dixon said Purcell supported HR in its practice to say, “Look, if you don’t shift this, you will lose your job.” In the end, Purcell also supported HR’s decision to fire the employee.

“To the average employee, they didn’t think it would really happen,” Dixon said. “When they see the commitment from the top, that we mean what we say, I think it helps us gain credibility. I think those have been some of the strongest statements we’ve made — when we’ve taken someone who others feel are untouchable and made it known that they’re not.”

Author Patel cited high-profile sexual harassment accusations that have made headlines in recent months as another example of untouchables.

“These guys were getting a pass because they’re high earners or perceived as powerful in the organization,” he said. “You hear it all the time: ‘Oh gosh, I’ve got this amazing sales guy and I’ve got to fire him,

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Your failure to hold other people accountable adds to the disrespect. It becomes a double-dose of disrespect when the boss knows about it and doesn’t do anything.”

She went on to emphasize that if poor behavior is repeated, employers need to deal with it.

“When a company values competency over character, they’re sending a very clear signal that what’s important here is what you can do for us, and inappropriate behavior will be tolerated as long as you can do something for us,” Emerson said. “Over time, it creates a conflicted, dysfunctional culture. Whatever values you have hanging on the wall, you need to model and honor by holding everyone accountable. So, either adjust the values on the wall, or adjust your leadership team.”

Again, it all boils down to top-down commitment to live the organization’s values.

“It takes a ton of focus,” Purcell said. “Our no-asshole rule is really simple in concept, but it’s really hard to have this rule. It’s very simple, but powerful, and it all comes down to respect for the individual, and that respect builds trust. When you’re in an environment where you don’t trust the people who you work with or the clients who you work with, you’re always looking over your shoulder. It impacts your level of engagement, trust and productivity.” **ws**

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but he does such good work.’ In the end, though, you’re actually losing money. If your core values are around trust and respect, and this guy doesn’t trust and respect, then you have a problem.”

The age-old adage of “hire slow, fire fast” is one to stick with, according to Emerson, who’s worked for organizations with rules similar to Baird’s.

“If you end up with someone who you didn’t detect would have issues and then encounter problems, you have to get them out,” she said. “Don’t let them self-select their way out. There’s collateral damage.