

HBR CASE STUDY

What should Jane do about her top performer's mean streak?

What a Star—What a Jerk

by Sarah Cliffe

Sometimes an employee can be nasty, bullying, or simply hard-hearted. What should you do, though, when that person also happens to be a top performer?

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*From: Jane Epstein
To: Rick Lazarus
Sent: 5/14/01
Subject: settling in*

Hi Rick. I'm starting to get settled in at TechniCo—I miss you and the rest of the gang, and the adrenaline of working with clients when I'm *on,* but I'm thrilled not to be living in airports anymore. Hope Mary and the kids are well.

I've inherited a good team here. They're all strong performers, and most of them are nice, too. I'm sure they're still wondering about me—but so far, so good. Partial cast: Caroline's been here longest; she seems pragmatic, very good with people. Juggling work-family issues and a recent divorce—but she pulls her weight and then some. She's universally trusted (I think). Tom's the joker. A natural sales guy—a bouncy golden retriever personality that cloaks real drive, know what I mean? You never really

get inside, but there don't seem to be many internal climate changes anyway. Jack's intense, maybe an intellectual—I haven't quite figured him out. I think he may be shy (?). Anyhow, then there's Andy Zimmerman, who's got me slightly worried—maybe because he intimidates me just a bit. He's very bright, but he's aggressive—doesn't suffer fools gladly. He'll bear watching, I think.

Better run. By the way, I love being back in Minneapolis. And, glory be, the hometown team is making us proud.

*From: Rick Lazarus
To: Jane Epstein
Sent: 5/14/01
Subject: Hey stranger*

Good to hear from you, Jane. The Twins have got people talking, all right. Though of course they'll fold when the Yankees hit their stride.;

HBR's cases, which are fictional, present common managerial dilemmas and offer concrete solutions from experts.

What's got you nervous about this Zimmerman guy?—R

Sent: 5/15/01

Subject: re: Hey stranger

Nothing I can put my finger on. Here's a little incident. My AA, Maureen, flubbed a meeting time—scheduled over something else—and he really lit into her. Not the end of the world—she had made a mistake, and he had to rearrange an appointment—but he could have gotten the point across more tactfully. And she is *my* AA. (And I am *his* boss, and he did it in front of me.)—Jane

Sent: 5/15/01

Subject: don't be a softie

J—The guy doesn't necessarily sound like a problem to me. I hate it when people screw up scheduling, and you've always been too patient with that kind of thing. Clearly you have to establish your own authority with him, though, or he'll step all over you.

What's the place like in general? Are the folks there patient with incompetence? Or is it crisp and cruel, like here? ;) By the by, Mary sends her love.—R

Sent: 5/16/01

Subject: tougher than you think

Funny you should ask. It's hardly crisp and cruel. In fact, it's probably a little too nice—nice. Support staff's not up to the same standards (not paid as well, either). And there's a little more coasting among professional staff here. (Culling out the bottom 20% of performers every year sure keeps people on their toes!) Senior managers talk a lot about lack of hierarchy, which seems to translate into tolerating barely average performance if the people are well liked. (Then again, this could be all wrong: I'm describing a place I've only been part of for a few weeks.)—Jane

Sent: 5/22/01

Subject: FW: good for a laugh...

You have just received the Amish virus. Since we have no electricity or computers, you are on the honor system. Please delete all of your files on your hard drive. Then forward this message to everyone in your address book.

Thank thee.

Sent: 5/22/01

Subject: ha!

Speaking of honor (not), here's another anecdote in the the continuing "Who is Andy Zimmerman" saga. Yesterday we were doing some strategizing as a group. (We need to be more aggressive about growth, and this was a pretty open-ended meeting to think about new markets.) Jack (the intense, possibly shy one that I haven't figured out yet) was going on a bit too long about a pet idea of his. I was about to redirect the conversation when Andy cut him off: "What you're proposing makes no sense, and here's why." Then he laid out all the flaws in poor Jack's thinking, one by one—really made him squirm. The thing is, he was right. On the other hand, it was a preliminary, semi-brainstorming kind of meeting, so his tirade stopped the free flow of ideas in its tracks.

Later, I heard him *reaming* out the group's other AA, Danielle: "This is an important customer. He's called three times—WHY CAN'T YOU GET IT RIGHT!?!?" Once again, he was right. But that kind of tongue-lashing *causes* people to make mistakes.—Jane

Sent: 5/22/01

Subject: bottom line?

Ignoring his niceness quotient for a moment, how's the guy's performance?—Rick

Sent: 5/22/01

Subject: re: bottom line?

I don't think he'd have gotten away with his nastiness for so long if his performance weren't topflight. As another group leader said to me over coffee, "The guy won't win any personality contests, but you'll love his numbers." He brings home the bacon: He's smart, efficient—the best we've got (in terms of pure performance). I'd have to be crazy not to want him in my group.—J

Sent: 5/22/01

Subject: re: re: bottom line?

Well, then, I don't see the problem. I think you're overreacting.—R

Sent: 5/23/01

Subject: re: re: re: bottom line?

That's what I like about you, Rick—never one to sugarcoat...

Sent: 5/30/01

Subject: Holy jelly, Batman...we're in a jam!

Can I bore you again with Andy, my low-

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likability, high-performance guy? Until now, I'd thought he was just nasty to lower-level people (which I quietly asked him to tone down, btw, after the incidents with the AAs) but at least grudgingly civil to colleagues. But he's gone and alienated Caroline, the one who's going through the divorce. Background: She has huge social capital built up here; she's the one everyone turns to with their problems, either professional or personal. She's a good egg, but she isn't at her best right now (a custody issue got messy and her mother's sick). She probably should have taken some time off, but it's a bad time of year—so I asked her to hold off. Okay, so here she is, this normally centered person who's hanging on by a thread, and Andy got under her skin. She forwarded me this e-mail he'd sent her, and when I went to talk to her about it, she cried. It was a **horrible** scene. Anyhow, take a look:

Caroline, you screwed up big time. We had a meeting with people I'd been trying to cultivate for eight months, set up well in advance, and you blew it off at the last minute, which embarrassed me and endangered the business. I can just hear you whining, "Things are a mess at home right now"—but you know what? Tough. Everybody's got problems, and they should stay out of the office. If I don't land this business, it will be because of your incompetence, and you can bet that Epstein and everyone else who counts will hear about it.

After she was done crying—which embarrassed us both a lot—she expressed remorse for making the mistake. Then we talked...she explained how she has sort of "handled" Zimmerman until recently (which is why she felt betrayed by his accusations). Evidently, he'd often vent to her about what he saw as all-around stupidity. She'd listen, calm him down, and occasionally chide him extremely gently for being out of line. And other people would come to her and complain when he'd said something nasty, and she'd calm **them** down (explaining the pressure he was under, whatever). Since he exempted her from his nastiness, she was shocked when he turned on her. Anyhow, she wasn't trying to blow the whistle on him—not really—but I could see that she was fed up with the smoothing-over role. (I gather that my predecessor completely ignored the whole situation—in part because Caroline kept it under control. Sure wish I could do that.)

Obviously, I have to have a chat with the big bad wolf. You know, when I left BCP to take a job with a real company, I imagined focusing on numbers, products, customers—on **building** something. Instead, I feel as if people issues—stupid little blowups like this—take up most of my time. Sheesh. These are all highly paid people, mostly with advanced degrees... Why do I feel like a kindergarten teacher?

Sent: 5/30/01

Subject: could be worse...

J—In some ways, he sounds like your bad cop: He keeps laggards in line, you get to be the nice guy. I could imagine worse set-ups.

I'm surprised she showed you that memo, since it makes her look bad. I know you're going to tell me it's abusive, but is it, really?

Sent: 5/30/01

Subject: re: could be worse...

Abusive? I don't know. But it is threatening. And it makes someone who's good, and who's defended him in the past, feel like garbage... Oh, I don't know what I think.—J

Sent: 5/31/01

Subject: whew

Okay, so Andy and I had a long talk. I think it went reasonably well. With Caroline's permission, I told him about the leave she should be on. And he said he had to admit that he'd never seen anything like that from her before. Looked very slightly ashamed (but maybe I imagined that part).

I wanted to establish some kind of rapport, as well as call him on inappropriate behavior, so I got him talking about his own role in the group and how he sees the work developing over the next several months. And—surprise, surprise—we had a good conversation. He's got great insights, energy, and smarts. We talked for quite some time, in a way that was, to be honest, more productive and visionary and (simultaneously) down-to-earth than would have happened had the whole group been present. We were sort of firing off each other in the same way you and I used to—it was fun.:

Of course, I went back to the question of how he acts in the group. I said, basically, "Look, you're talented and quick and impatient, and you just have to slow down and

bite your tongue and be a little nicer to people.” (Since we’d been having a really good conversation—with the temporary intimacy that creates—it was easy to say.) He was somewhat dismissive but, when I pushed it, he agreed to try to listen better in meetings and stop reaming out the AAs.

Sent: 5/31/01

Subject: words to live by..

I always said you’d make a great kindergarten teacher <ducks>. So problem boy is tamed?

If perchance he isn’t, just remember what Groucho Marx said: “Time wounds all heels.”—R

Sent: 6/01/01

Subject: re: words to live by..

Groucho didn’t say that, Jane Sherwood Ace did.:) And yes, let’s decide problem boy is tamed, and forget about it.—Jane

Sent: 6/12/01

Subject: too good to be true

Hey Rick, how was Hawaii? Bet the kids loved the beach—I’m jealous. I could use a little time off myself.

Of course it was too good to be true—problem boy being reformed (sigh). Yesterday I came into a meeting I’d asked him to chair until I could get there. I slipped in quietly—not wanting to disturb things—and the way the

room was set up, he didn’t see me at first. Every person in that room looked cowed: eyes down, hunched over—slightly squelched in this rather sad way. And it’s a good group, really! He was responding to something Tom had said, and his ugly side was out in full force. He sneered, used dismissive language—even rolled his eyes when Tom tried to break in with a counterargument. And this was **after** I’d slipped into his range of vision—who knows what terrors he was up to before I got there? It suddenly became clear to me: This guy’s a bully.

Afterwards, I saw Caroline and Tom talking—about Andy, I’m sure. Meanwhile, when I walked into Andy’s office a few minutes after the meeting—and looked at him, stone cold—he just shrugged and shook his head.

Damn. He ain’t changin’. And this isn’t kindergarten—it’s a business. I feel like I’m between a rock (the lousy effect he has on the group) and a hard place (his stellar performance).

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