

Issue 072: Assholes

Adrian Kosmaczewski

September 2nd, 2024



Welcome to the 72nd issue of *De Programmatica Ipsum*, about *Assholes*.

In this edition:

- We enumerate the various ways in which assholes are thriving¹.
- In the Library section², we review a hallmark business book by Robert Sutton³ with the word “assholes” in the title.
- In our Vidéothèque section⁴, we learn from Donnie Berkholz⁵ how assholes almost drove the Gentoo project to the ground.

We would like to thank our patrons who generously contribute every month (or have contributed in the past) to our work and help us run this magazine. Thank you so much! In alphabetical order: Adam Guest, Adrian Tineo Cabello, Benjamin Sheldon, Christopher Nascone, Colin Powell, Franz Lucien Moersdorf, Guillermo Ramos Álvarez, Jean-Paul de Vooght, Dr. Juande Santander-Vela, Patryk Matuszewski, Paul Hudson, Quico Moya, Roger Turner, Szymon Licau, and countless more leaving anonymous tips every month.

Enjoy this issue! Please subscribe to our free newsletter⁶ to stay updated about new releases, share the articles on social media, or contribute⁷ if you would like to support our work with a donation via Liberapay⁸.

¹<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/the-insane-cult-of-the-asshole/>

²<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/category/library/>

³<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/robert-sutton/>

⁴<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/category/videotheque/>

⁵<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/donnie-berkholz/>

⁶<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/newsletter/>

⁷<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/contribute/>

⁸<https://liberapay.com/>

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⁹https://unsplash.com/@mxhpics?utm_content=creditCopyText&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=unsplash

¹⁰https://unsplash.com/photos/a-neon-sign-that-reads-holy-shit-Rh__4ly3uyU?utm_content=creditCopyText&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=unsplash

The Insane Cult Of The Asshole

Adrian Kosmaczewski

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If we had to choose just one profession that falls into the cult of the asshole, software craftsmanship (call it engineering or development) would certainly come to mind. Writing code is ripe to endless, serial, toxic demonstrations of manhood, bundled together with an endless admiration for those historical figures (usually referred to as “pundits” or “moguls”) who show certain supposedly manly traits.

Let us elaborate on the various ways assholes enhance and enliven the lives of software developer teams worldwide (I hope your irony radar is not broken).

If you are tasked with the ungrateful job of writing code for a living, you may have noticed that it is, indeed, a very typically masculine activity—and if you have not yet, just look around your open office space and count the proportion of colleagues identifying themselves as something else than white cis males between 25 and 35 years old. If that number is above 10%, you are really in a special workplace (where special is oxymoron for weird or unusual).

The industry (for various reasons) perpetuates this state of things, keeping itself in a state of blissful ignorance, hubris, and high-hormone idiocy. Software is important, we hear every day, so clearly those who are writing it must be hailed as the holders of some occult knowledge and the purveyors of infinite wisdom. Through bribery, hubris, or ill luck, some of those same assholes find themselves years later in management positions, and continue the tradition by hiring more people like themselves, because that is what humans do unless you stop them.

One of the major fallacies that these testosterone bags tell themselves is that “A-players only hire A-players”, an atrocity they most probably learned via TikTok because, let us be honest, most of them have not looked at a book from the distance since primary school, and might

as well be convinced that the Second World War happened during the Renaissance. Needless to say, these are the kind of idiots that still require candidates to reverse a linked list on a whiteboard, even when (and especially when) such knowledge is of utter uselessness in the day-to-day work of their company.

In between sprint reviews, daily scrums, and protein shakes, assholes brag of the amounts of code they have rewritten over the weekend in C++, Rust, or other languages favored by those manly enough to face the wrath of the compiler, test suites and teamwork be damned. They will also routinely flex¹ (both offline and online) on programmers using any other technology than theirs (it does not matter which one, really) as lesser engineers. They have been called by the technology God to bring knowledge and wisdom to otherwise ignorant immortals. Lucky us.

Of course, their SLOCs are above the clouds, which means that in those environments where particularly ignorant non-technical business managers abound, they will be heralded as the mythical “10x engineers” or “rock stars” they claim to be in their résumé. It does not matter that they increase employee turnover, that their code breaks all the pipelines on Earth and cannot be maintained by any intelligent being on this galaxy because it is an architectural mess² that does not translate into any tangible increment to the bottom line of the business. These are programming Gurus, or Gods, and should be hailed, venerated, promoted, and rewarded as such.

These assholes also spend an inordinate amount of time worshipping various figures³ (always masculine, of course) such as Larry Ellison (a particularly popular figure among assholes during the 1980s), Bill Gates (same, but during the 1990s), or Steve Jobs (whose peak of popularity was in January 2007). Since the mid 2010s, this role is best served by the master billionaire asshole of the tech industry, the savior who will bring mankind to a brighter future of electric cars and holiday trips to Mars, the visionary who deserved a biography by Walter Isaacson while still alive, the one and only Elon Musk.

The reasoning is simple. If these people are all billionaires, and they are all assholes, clearly we all need to be assholes to become billionaires. The human species naturally follows hierarchies and alchemy, so what is above is below, and as Scott Galloway said⁴,

It appears our idolatry of innovators has seeped into the minds of the uber-wealthy, sickening them with an uncontrollable tendency to fellate the cool kid for a chance to sit at his table in the cafeteria.

Ouch. Scott has written some more about the hubris of the tech industry⁵, and it is definitely worth reading. But I digress.

(OK, credit where due: the transformation of Twitter after Elon Musk transformed it into “X”, a certified cesspit of first-class hatred and bigotry, is *precisely* the best example we have at the moment about the negative effects of assholes in a human group. So, thanks Elon for that, I guess?)

Other critical characteristics⁶ of asshole software engineers are that they would not talk to any customer ever (“not my job” is a fallacy, remember), they will not write a single line of

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r6tH55syq0o>

²<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/goodness-gracious-great-balls-of-mud/>

³<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/linus-torvalds/>

⁴<https://profgalloway.com/text-ure/>

⁵<https://www.profgalloway.com/hubris/>

⁶<https://mastodon.online/@akosma/113043963522694446>

documentation, they will endlessly complain about how everything “kills their flow”, block all dialogue⁷ with members of the business team “because they are idiots”, will refuse to analyze a problem in detail (let alone write a specification) because “it’s not agile”⁸, and other niceties of the kind.

And then there are the extreme cases, which unfortunately also exist in our industry, even if most of them will dismiss those reports online with laconic comments such as “what are your sources”. As a rule of thumb, assholes will, if left unchecked (and if motivated to continue in these ways by their peers and management), migrate from a mere anecdotal mansplainer into an insufferable bigot, and later into a bully, a harasser, and then worse.

Yes, worse⁹, because as Hannah Arendt¹⁰ explained, our world is filled with Little Eichmanns¹¹ all over the place.

We all witness unruly (I am being polite here) behavior in the software development teams we inhabit, every day. Only a few of those teams, thankfully, have management members that actively target and disarm such individuals. Unfortunately this is not always the case, and more often than not, assholes flourish in small and big companies alike. As an industry, we need to be aware of the toxic tendency of our field to produce such individuals. It is a natural outcome, just like weeds appear in a wheat field.

In other words, the question you should be asking yourself is (in particular if you are a team manager, but not only), what are you doing to block assholes from killing your project, your morale, and your team?

If your answer to the question above was “I don’t have assholes in my team”, you might want to stop for a minute and reflect. They are everywhere. And you, your organization, and its policies are most probably hiring, enabling, and empowering them. Also, despite what the press would like you to believe, D&I policies¹² are not enough. We have to do more than that.

Our world does not need more people who are able to write code; now that ChatGPT is taking that task into their (in)capable hands, what we need is to (finally!) start building teams that work with higher values in mind, such as compassion, solidarity, and respect¹³.

Cover photo by Marek Studzinski¹⁴ on Unsplash¹⁵.

⁷<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/the-impossible-dialogue/>

⁸<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/you-are-doing-it-wrong/>

⁹<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/mar-hicks/>

¹⁰https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hannah_Arendt

¹¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Little_Eichmanns

¹²<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/issue/issue-006-diversity--inclusion/>

¹³<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/primum-non-nocere/>

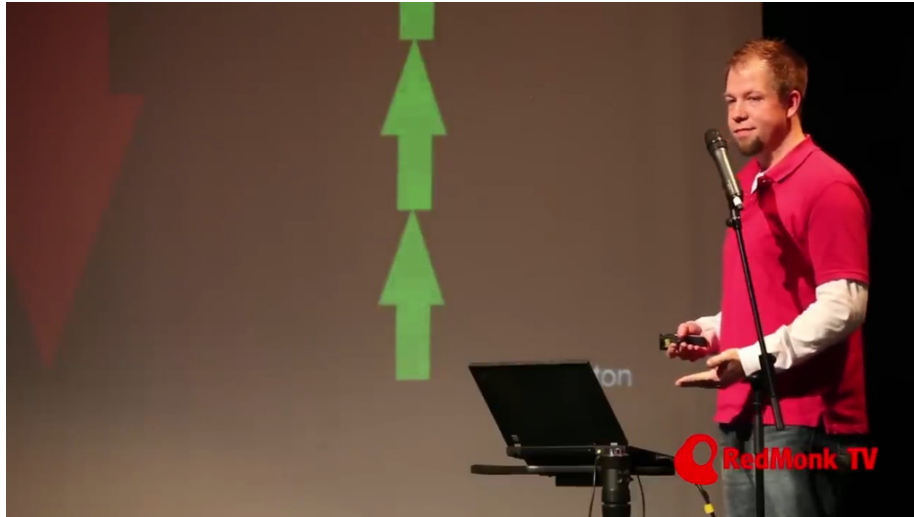
¹⁴https://unsplash.com/@jccards?utm_content=creditCopyText&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=unsplash

¹⁵https://unsplash.com/photos/a-close-up-of-a-bunch-of-bullet-shells-b27vyOyFGSs?utm_content=creditCopyText&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=unsplash

Donnie Berkholz

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Let us see a practical (and sad) example of how assholes can bring a software development project to its knees, in this case, Gentoo Linux, a very popular distribution during the pre-Ubuntu years from 2002 to 2006, at which point the project lost almost 20% of their developers in the space of a few years. Why did this happen?

This month's Vidéothèque edition is a recording¹ (with a surprisingly low number of views at the time of this publication) of a 2012 talk called "Assholes are Stealing your Beer" by Donnie Berkholz². Donnie was at the time analyst at RedMonk³, a company of programming language ranking fame⁴. Today, Donnie is the founder and chief analyst of Platify Insights⁵. A decade before the talk, Donnie was a Gentoo Linux⁶ distribution contributor, leading a team of more than 250 developers in the project.

Starting in 2006, the behavior of a few members of the project drove almost 20% of the developers out of the project, leaving the project with the reputation of a "community with issues" for years after.

Donnie explains at the beginning of the talk that an open source community works as a virtuous (or vicious) circle where the skills and attitudes of developers leads to their contributions, which in turn leads to results, which drive up (or down) the reputation of the project. The ability to get results is, then, a direct function of the quality of your community. Hence, in the words of Donnie, the key issue in open source projects (people) becomes a dichotomy: rock stars, or death stars?

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZSli7QW4rg>

²<https://dberkholz.com/about/>

³<https://redmonk.com/>

⁴<https://redmonk.com/sogrady/2024/03/08/language-rankings-1-24/>

⁵<https://platifyinsights.com/>

⁶https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gentoo_Linux

Fortunately, and following a normal Gauss curve, most contributors are “normal” in the sense that they are not either assholes nor geniuses; in the case of Gentoo, just 3 people out of 300 members had a disproportionately negative impact in the whole community! To make things worse, research shows it takes 5 good interactions to cancel a single bad one.

Five to one. Let those numbers sink in.

The end result of masses of “assholish” attitudes was that, from 2006 on, the number of contributors to the project dropped and then flattened substantially; and no, the popularity of Ubuntu was not the primary factor that drove this trend.

Even worse,

“People still think of Gentoo as a community that has issues”

(Minute 4:43)⁷

How can you identify assholes to avoid such a situation? The first reaction would be to think that conflicting people are the problem, but this is not the case; conflicts are a healthy thing, if you can keep your emotions out of the loop and focus on the problem instead of the person itself.

To figure out assholes in a group, the best strategy is to identify patterns of repeating negative behavior in the group. You need to keep metrics, yes, but not overly complex ones: the rate of complaints, for example, is a simple one, and can be used to provide justification when taking action against certain individuals.

In minute 10:37⁸ Donnie quoted Robert Sutton (whose hallmark book is discussed in this month’s Library article⁹) enumerating some of the problems assholes can cause in organizations:

- Reduced innovation and creativity;
- Less cooperation and cohesion;
- Impaired ability to attract the best & brightest;
- And the worse of them all: the recruiting of more assholes.

Another interesting insight by Donnie is that in technical people, social and technical abilities are orthogonal. One does not cancel or preclude the other in any way.

So, knowing all this, how can you prevent assholes from joining your project? *Ex ante*, by setting clear expectations to newcomers about what kind of behavior is and is not tolerated in a community. *Ex post*, by promoting social interactions in person (remote interactions are fertile ground for assholes), and taking action when receiving complaints; do not just let them rot in your inbox. Do something about them.

And, if all else fails, remember that your community must build a product or a service, and not fix a person; if needed, let the asshole go, and keep your community safe and sound.

Watch this month’s Vidéotheque movie “Assholes are Stealing your Beer” by Donnie Berkholz on YouTube¹⁰, and start driving assholes out of your projects, products, and communities.

Cover snapshot chosen by the author.

⁷<https://youtu.be/-ZSli7QW4rg?t=283>

⁸<https://youtu.be/-ZSli7QW4rg?t=637>

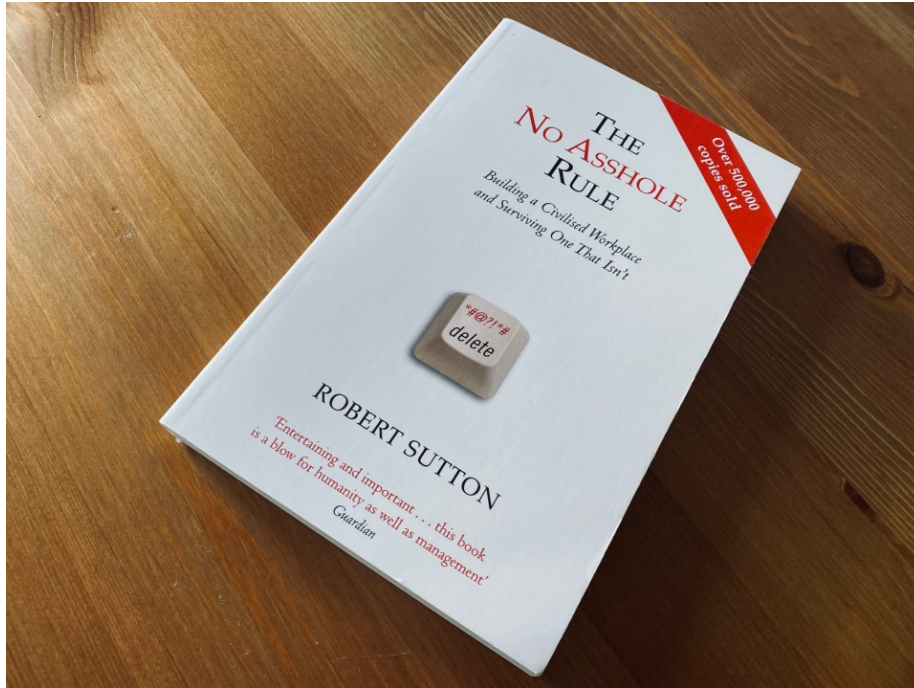
⁹<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/robert-sutton/>

¹⁰<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZSli7QW4rg>

Robert Sutton

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Every so often this magazine drifts away from the coverage of classic programming titles because its main objective is to stretch the brains of software practitioners towards other areas of knowledge, such as design¹, sociology², or science³. Business books are one such area, and we should be covering more of those. But today we will talk about one that could rightfully be called the most important business book of the 21st century so far.

This is the story of “The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn’t”⁴, a 2007 book by Robert Sutton⁵, professor of management science at the Stanford University School of Engineering.

This book is an extension of some ideas Professor Sutton wrote as part of a Harvard Business Review article called “Breakthrough Ideas for 2004”⁶; it turns out that getting rid of assholes was a, indeed, a breakthrough idea, and not just for 2004.

The book (which received backlash, and I kid you not, because of the use of the “asshole” word on the title, no comments) deals with the actual cost of such personalities in the world of business.

¹<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/andy-clarke/>

²<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/janet-abbate/>

³<https://deprogrammaticaipsum.com/carl-sagan/>

⁴<https://www.gsb.stanford.edu/faculty-research/books/no-asshole-rule-building-civilized-workplace-surviving-one-isnt>

⁵https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_I._Sutton

⁶<https://hbr.org/2004/02/breakthrough-ideas-for-2004>

Professor Sutton uses the terminology of business language to describe the impact of assholes, going as far as coining the term “TCA” for “Total Cost of Assholes” for organizations. This concept is, needless to say, very complicated to calculate or estimate, but there are some simple metrics that can provide useful results, even in the most complex of corporations.

A Harvard Business Review reader wrote me a lovely note suggesting that more companies would be convinced to enforce the rule if they estimated the “total cost of assholes,” or their “TCA.” As he put it “The organizational impact, in terms of both retention and recruitment, lost clients, [and] excess organizational calories being expended on the wrong things could provide some very interesting insights.”

The very existence of assholes, according to Sutton, should be taken in consideration from the very beginning (that is, hiring) and throughout the work relationship, to spot (and hopefully, potentially remove) the bad apples that could rot your culture. Lots of examples provide enough arguments for any manager to start actively measuring the asshole rate in their teams.

Just like many other business books, “The No Asshole Rule” is important to software developers for a single reason: most of them program computers for a salary, which means that they are part of a business. Hence, knowing how to deal (or at least, how their management deals or not) with assholes is a precious, yet underrated skill.

There is also a big pile of scholarly research that reaches much the same conclusion without using the term “asshole.” It is conducted under banners including bullying, interpersonal aggression, emotional abuse, abusive supervision, petty tyranny, and incivility in the workplace. These studies show that many workplaces are plagued by “interpersonal moves” that leave people feeling threatened and demeaned, which are often directed by more powerful people at less powerful people.

Guess what: knowing about computers is power, and software workers can become assholes through the use of, precisely, their power. Professor Sutton has a word for all of us in the software industry:

I also want to put in a good word for socially awkward people, some of whom—through no fault of their own—are so socially insensitive that they accidentally act like assholes at times.

Some soul-searching might help us spot our own assholeish behavior patterns, and better yet, to correct them before it is too late. (Because, let us be honest: we are all assholes at some point in our lives. Such is the condition of being human.)

Cover photo by Sarah H. Gordon⁷, because I had the bad idea of lending my own copy to a person who never gave it back. Asshole.

⁷<https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/book-review-asshole-rule-sarah-h-gordon/>