



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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by Sarah Cliffe

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-

Sarah Cliffe is an executive editor at HBR.

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).

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

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COMMENTARY FOR HBR CASE STUDY

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Four commentators offer expert advice.

What a Star—What a Jerk

by Sarah Cliffe

Case Commentary

by Mary Rowe

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

I'm going to approach this problem as if I were TechniCo's organizational ombudsperson—which means that I'm a confidential neutral. I'm an informal coach and shuttle diplomat within the company, looking into problems and working toward systemic changes.

Jane should prepare for this challenge as she would for a project launch. She needs to quickly collect a lot of information. And she must protect everyone's privacy—including Andy's—along the way.

She should start by gathering information about the people involved and the context of the organizational setting. Does the company have policies about mean behavior—perhaps a “core values” statement about “dignity and respect at TechniCo”? Official statements like this—and good training programs—can offer managers much-needed help and support. Other questions to ask: Would her bosses want to know about the problems with Andy? Is he following the tone set by TechniCo's top executives, or would they want to see Andy's behavior change? Is there a person from HR who could be helpful? And how is the company doing? What are Jane's team's interests? What are the technical and interpersonal skills of the other team members?

Next, Jane should analyze her own interests and power, as well as Andy's. Does she have strong power to reward and sanction? Does she have moral authority, derived from company policy or her own character? What's her technical expertise? Does she have a fall-back position if this situation goes bad? As for Andy's interests and sources of power: Does he want a new assignment? Is he indispensable? Does he have other offers? Finally, she should consider the various kinds of power each team member wields: Do any of them have other offers? Might a desperate Caroline complain about Andy to her old friend the CEO?

If, after analyzing the situation and considering the interests and power of all parties, Jane decides to work directly with Andy, she'll

need to get his attention. She might suggest that he watch the movie *What Women Want* or that he take the quiz in Harry Levinson's 1978 HBR article, “The Abrasive Personality.” Alternatively, a tough order from Jane's boss, transmitted through her, might capture Andy's attention, if that option is appropriate. Notice that I didn't suggest that she directly confront him. She should ask him to work *with* her to develop an elegant solution—one that satisfies all the interests at stake.

In general, the worst thing a supervisor can do is to sometimes reward and sometimes punish unacceptable behavior. This is even worse than simply rewarding harsh behavior, since the cycle of reward and punishment may make a person immune to rebuke, counseling, and discipline. Ignoring unacceptable behavior is only marginally better than rewarding it, but neither method changes behavior. Jane may punish Andy, but it probably won't change him. Rewarding Andy for excellent behavior may be more effective, especially if the specific behavior of Andy that is rewarded blocks the behavior Jane wants to change.

For example, Andy might be rewarded for mentoring that results in sensational performance by coworkers. In parallel, Andy might be shown that his mean behavior doesn't improve the performance of teammates—that he should affirm their good performance, instead. The best solution will be one that Andy helps to design, so long as it's fair to the rest of the team, even if it is just that Andy becomes an individual contributor.

Whatever happens, Jane needs to keep careful records and follow up. If it turns out that Andy should be fired, she needs backup plans. On the other hand, if Andy succeeds wonderfully, she should think about ways to reward his turnaround.

Mary Rowe teaches negotiations and conflict management at the Sloan School of Management at MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is an MIT ombudsperson.

Case Commentary

by Chuck McKenzie

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

I know Andy pretty well. Everywhere I've worked, we've always had Andys. And we survived them. In some ways, we thrived because of them. But you can't just let the Andys of this world run wild—adjustments on all sides have to be made.

Jane's facing a classic situation: the rainmaker who drives everyone around him crazy. She can't get rid of him, but she can't let him destroy the team, either. The group's morale and its business performance are inextricably entwined. If Andy seriously damages morale—and productivity along with it—he will damage the bottom line. There's even a business case to be made against Andy: It can cost up to ten times as much to bring in new business as it does to hold onto existing business. So no matter how big a rainmaker Andy is, if his actions endanger existing business—perhaps because turnover rates start to skyrocket—that's a serious, bottom-line problem.

But it would probably be foolish to fire Andy. He generates more revenue than anyone else, he has great ideas, and he's extremely smart. In my experience, many outstanding performers are difficult and abrasive. If Jane and her group can cope with true diversity—the diversity that comes with clashing personalities—they'll be a stronger and more creative group.

Jane also needs to define success for her group. If her definition optimizes a range of measures—including new sales, existing-business retention, employee retention, morale, and productivity—she should be able to get everyone rowing in the same direction.

Once Jane has thought through these issues, she needs to make changes in four areas.

Organizational Structure. If the Andys I've worked with are any indication, this Andy isn't going to change much. (I had to laugh when Jane thought one extremely indirect conversation was going to change this guy.) Rather than wasting time on that hopeless strategy, carve out a role that lets him focus on what he's best

at: developing sales plans and selling. Give him his own AA (he is the rainmaker, after all) and let them work as a sales team. Meet with Andy regularly one on one, and separate him from the rest of the group as much as possible. That may require redrawing the org chart.

Attitude. Jane needs to adjust her own attitude. She wants to be a leader—somebody above the fray who sets direction and thinks about strategy—not a manager. But in this case, she's going to have to address the messy, everyday stuff before she gets a chance to lead.

Roles. The roles in Jane's group are poorly defined: Caroline is playing full-time counselor to the group, and Andy is micromanaging everyone and everything. The team members are bound to be confused as a result, and productivity is sure to go down. Jane needs to clarify each person's responsibilities. (If she starts to fulfill her own responsibilities, and clearly defines Andy's, the rest may take care of itself.)

Culture. Jane has noted that TechniCo is too tolerant of barely average performers. If she can change that cultural norm within her own group, she'll improve the group's performance and productivity, as well as her own career prospects. It would probably appeal to Andy, too. (I'm not deluding myself—people like Andy always think that they're better than everyone else. But at least he'd have fewer legitimate reasons for his blowups.)

Managing an Andy isn't easy. Some managers think people like him should be nurtured, promoted, and fawned over. Doing that creates too many problems for the rest of the organization, in my opinion. But it's also not possible to take the high road and say, "We won't tolerate unpleasant behavior." In the real world, managers need to carve out places for unpleasant, highly productive people—places that keep them from poisoning everyone else's working environment. It isn't easy, but it can be done.

Chuck McKenzie is a senior vice president and managing director at Oppenheimer Funds. He is based in New York.

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Case Commentary

by Kathy Jordan

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

Jane's biggest problem right now isn't actually Andy Zimmerman. It's learning to be a manager. Jane seems to think that people issues are distracting her from her "real" job. ("I imagined focusing on numbers, products, customers...instead, I feel as if...stupid little blow-ups...take up most of my time.") She needs to realize that managing people is her real job.

It's fine to watch a new group for a while, analyzing behavior patterns before jumping to action. Nevertheless, Jane seems too passive. She is spending too much time observing garden-variety interpersonal dynamics that demand a response. When Andy eviscerated Jack's ideas during an early meeting, for example, Jane should have interrupted, reminded the team that they were in brainstorming mode, and suggested getting everyone's ideas on the table before evaluating anything in detail. She needs to give Andy more than "stone cold" looks when he has been rude and dismissive.

As a manager, Jane's most pressing task is to develop a high-performing team. Luckily, she has inherited a reasonably strong group with a typical cast of characters, representing no unusual managerial challenges. Even Andy, her problem employee, is a common type who has held the team, and perhaps TechniCo, hostage to his bad behavior because he delivers the numbers.

First, Jane must be clear with Andy about her expectations. He needs to understand that good numbers are not enough and that his job depends on his ability to manage relationships with colleagues professionally. Instead of allowing herself to be seduced by Andy's insight, Jane needs to bite the bullet and insist on positive behavior as a condition of employment. A potential obstacle might be TechniCo's cultural willingness to accept bad behavior in service to the bottom line. Jane will need to influence opinion leaders by making the case that more collaborative and collegial behavior will improve the financial performance of the team as a whole.

Second, Jane should coach her team mem-

bers on developing assertiveness and conflict management strategies. Since some of Andy's negative behavior happens in meetings, the entire team would probably benefit from training in how to conduct effective meetings. Andy is currently incapable of chairing a productive meeting, and the rest of the team has no idea how to get a meeting back on track after Andy has derailed it. Creating a team that's able to handle its own work relationships would allow Jane to avoid the trap of becoming a "kindergarten teacher," a trap that's inevitable if she replaces Caroline as Andy's handler.

Finally, Jane has to stop sending e-mail to Rick Lazarus. Because they worked together recently in the same company, he's probably just reinforcing her managerial blind spots. She should find a trustworthy coach who is a seasoned manager at TechniCo. A good internal coach can help in several ways. He or she can give Jane a crash course on corporate culture and help her figure out what kind of leverage she has with Andy. A coach can also help Jane identify who needs to be consulted, or at least kept in the loop, about how she is managing Andy. (A rainmaker like Andy probably has the protection of important senior managers, whose support she will need if she is to influence Andy or, if necessary, to clear the way for his departure.) A coach would also let Jane vet her ideas for deploying staff and managing the business. A good coach might have questioned the wisdom of asking Caroline to defer a much-needed personal leave, for example.

Honeymoons are stunningly short in today's corporate environments, and Jane has only a few months to demonstrate that she understands TechniCo's culture well enough to lead her team into the future. If she takes action now, she might be able to prove her mettle.

Kathy Jordan, a psychologist, is an executive coach with KRW International, a global executive-development consulting firm. She is based in Boston.

Jane seems to think that people issues are distracting her from her "real" job... She needs to realize that managing people is her real job.

Case Commentary

by James Waldroop

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

One of the best managers I ever worked with had what he called a “no creeps” hiring policy. “I don’t care how much money somebody could make us, or how smart they are; it’s not worth it if they disrupt the entire group,” he’d say. Jane may eventually come to see the wisdom of that policy. But let’s assume for the time being that she wants to hold on to Andy.

Andy is extremely narcissistic: It’s all about *him*—whether he looks good, no matter what. (Even when Caroline is on the ropes, he’ll let her have it if she makes him look bad.) His narcissism has another component: It’s all about him, *now*. He doesn’t take the time to think about how his actions at this moment are going to affect even his own ability to perform over the long term, never mind how they affect other people.

Andy’s colleagues have been accommodating his behavior for so long that he has come to see it as all right. When an exasperated Jane compared her job to that of a kindergarten teacher, she wasn’t far off. Kids need—and want—limits. Some adults need them, too, and Andy is one of those adults. It’s time for Jane to stop accommodating Andy (or “enabling” him, as the drug treatment folks would say) and start setting clear limits.

As his manager, I would alternately stroke his ego (“You’re so bright and you really know your stuff”) and hammer him hard—hard enough to really rattle him (“But you know, Andy, if you were dying of thirst, I doubt that anyone you work with would toss you a bottle of water”). I’d appeal to his grandiosity (“If you could learn to control your temper and your ego, you could be great, really great...”) and at the same time, I would raise his anxiety and insecurity levels (“...but I’m afraid we’re wasting our time talking about this, because you don’t seem to want to change”). And when I say “alternately,” I don’t mean from one meeting to the next, I mean from one *minute* to the next. To get through Andy’s defenses, Jane will have to jam his radar and scramble his internal radio signals.

“I’d love to keep you here, Andy, but you’re one expensive piece of equipment—you cause a lot of damage as you do your job. And the bottom line is [here comes the limit setting—delivered with a steely gaze, if possible] your behavior is totally unprofessional. I know that you mean to do your best for the organization [letting him save a little face here], but you’re not even doing that. Being ‘right’ and being ‘effective’ aren’t even close to synonymous. And although you may be right a lot of the time, you’re not nearly as effective as you could be.” All this is to set him up for the real choice:

“So, Andy, you need to decide very soon whether you want to work here. Your behavior is out of bounds, and I won’t have it. If you decide you want to stay, I’ll support you, and I’ll do my best to help you to rein in your outbursts. I’d love to see you learn to be more effective. But, to be very clear [steely gaze again], if you fall back into bullying people, I’ll initiate action to get you out of here. So go mull this over, and let’s talk again.”

Now that I’ve stirred him up, I want him to have to sit with it, so I’d try to have this meeting on a Friday afternoon and arrange the second talk for Monday. That way, he’ll be forced to think about it all weekend.

With Andy, Jane has to put a dramatic end to business as usual. She has to hit him hard enough to really get him to listen, she has to set firm limits, and she has to stroke his underlying insecurity enough that he doesn’t just walk away. Will it work? I don’t know, but it’s the best shot she’s got.

James Waldroop, a psychologist, is a principal at Peregrine Partners, a consulting firm in Brookline, Massachusetts, that specializes in executive development and employee retention.

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