



Managing a Brilliant Jerk



Can difficult leaders change, or will they remain their ornery, over-the-top, demanding selves for the rest of their lives — and thereby continue to make everyone's life miserable?

There's good news. Brilliant jerks can change ... but not alone.

First, it's important to know what characteristics define a difficult or abrasive leader, whom I prefer to call a brilliant jerk. They have a bevy of behaviors that are quite unappealing. Among them:

- They're prone to unpredictable outbursts and are verbally abusive .
- They're extremely talented and intelligent, charismatic and persuasive, but they're never pleased with results, driven to gain recognition, and blind to the costs of their behavior
- They cause workplace friction and conflict, spread rumors, and sabotage others.
- They engage in psychological bullying and sometimes are physically threatening.
- They show callousness and a lack of empathy.
- They have a grandiose sense of self-worth.
- They fail to accept responsibility for their actions.
- They show favoritism or treat some workers differently than others.

Who would want to work for someone like that? Many, of course, do work for someone like that. And besides changing jobs when you've

had enough, your best hope is that the brilliant jerk changes.

Many brilliant jerks also have a high IQ but low EQ (emotional intelligence). These jerks are brilliant because their quick analytical mind and expertise can turn around ailing departments, companies, hospitals, or nonprofits.

But at what costs? When you work with a jerk, you suffer at work. When you work with a great leader, you are inspired to be a great achiever. So how do you transform brilliant jerks into inspiring leaders?

Step 1: Evaluating the Work Environment

Is it a toxic environment in which bad behavior by leadership is tolerated in the process of achieving great results?

First you must evaluate whether the organization is the birthplace of brilliant jerks. Ask these questions: Do the results justify the means? Are brilliant jerks emerging throughout the organization? Is uncivil behavior perceived as necessary to skyrocket up the corporate ranks?

Step 2: Educating About Self-Awareness

A coach can enhance their self-awareness to have more empathy and understanding of themselves. How do they make decisions, what are their triggers, what are their limiting mindsets, and what seeds are these leaders sowing that will lead to their future derailment?

Brilliant jerks have an expertise that is highly valued by the organization. The problem is that they are emotionally blind to anyone else's feelings. And if they are aware, they don't think considering people's feelings is part of their job. That is HR's concern, not theirs.



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The role of the coach in transforming the brilliant jerk is to identify the difficult leader's desired outcome, and then show them that the missing piece to their goals is related to their interpersonal shortcomings.

What is stopping the brilliant jerk from seeing that their toxic behavior is counterproductive? It's their underlying fear, which triggers them into the fight mode when faced with a threat. It's a threat to their insatiable need for status and recognition. The coach's role is to provide insights that widen the brilliant jerk's array of behavioral responses to any perceived threat.

Step 3: Empathizing About Boss Awareness

Now that the bright but difficult leader has gained new insight into their behaviors and what triggers them, it is time to educate them to better understand someone that they consider important. Usually it is their boss.

The problem is the brilliant jerk might see what the boss wants but often does not see how it should be done for the betterment of the overall institution, for the development of employees and for the boss' professional goals. Brilliant jerks are focused on themselves and their outcomes, and others are an instrument to getting what they want.

Since the boss can potentially give the brilliant jerk what they want, the brilliant jerk is motivated to understand the boss' desires, shortcomings, and fears. The coach's role here is to show the brilliant jerk what they can learn from their

boss and what they can contribute strategically to their boss' success.

Brilliant jerks understand that to obtain the good graces of their bosses, they need to have a deeper understanding of how they function. The by-product of this process starts to develop the brilliant jerk's understanding of and empathy for others. However, just because brilliant jerks begin to understand their bosses better does not mean they now can adapt their leadership appropriately to the many different stakeholders. For that, the brilliant jerk needs to evolve to the next level of complexity, which brings us to the next step.

Step 4: Expanding Their Stakeholder Awareness

Until now, brilliant jerks simply react to their own triggers, ambitions, and fears and do not have the empathy to care about others. A crucial part of developing stakeholder awareness is getting more feedback from their co-workers.

The research, with ample data, will appeal to the brilliant jerk's IQ. It has to provide extensive and detailed information about what would make their relationships with stakeholders more productive in very specific terms while protecting the anonymity of the participants.

To not have the process perceived by their stakeholders as remedial, the question asked is, "What would make the relationship more productive between you and the brilliant jerk?" This way the responsibility to improve the relationship is on both parties. What is communicated to the stakeholders is that the brilliant jerk is undergoing a leadership development program.

This coaching process should not be hidden. The coach's interview process helps stakeholders understand that the brilliant jerks are working on their leadership and not to perceive the brilliant jerk's initial awkward changes in behavior to be suspicious or manipulative, but rather as an intense effort to improve their leadership. Stakeholders will appreciate their efforts and often contribute to the process of change.

This serves to encourage, or at least does not discourage, brilliant jerks' efforts to change. That brilliant jerks are undergoing a leadership developmental process also sends a very strong positive message throughout the company that the brilliant jerks are working on themselves and stakeholders should do so, as well.

The feedback from interviews to the leader is anonymous, specific, and includes the leader's non-verbal communication. For example, a client of mine that I shall call Mary walked three steps ahead of her Asian direct reports. She looked up at the sky, rolled her eyes and sighed, annoyed each time they asked a question. She was brilliant and processed information at an accelerated speed, so she was aggravated by what she considered to be "stupid." She was totally unaware of her non-verbal behavior. Now she knew exactly what she needed to work on.

Detailed interview data allows brilliant jerks to see the complex needs of their stakeholders and how their leadership agility is requested to motivate different types of stakeholders. I brought back my client, Mary, a report that indicated exactly how she was perceived and what would make her relationship with each different stakeholder more productive.

The feedback for the client is a painful process. They learn what it is they do that causes toxicity but do not know how to change their ways more productively. For example, my client, Cedric, had received irrefutable data that his behavior was destructive for five consecutive years, but he had no idea how to change his ways.

Step 5: Engaging Stakeholders by Practicing New Behaviors

The next step is important for Cedric and Mary to learn how to engage people, practice new behaviors, and re-channel their triggers into more constructive behavior. The risk is that under pressure, Cedric and Mary revert back to their previous destructive behaviors.

The coach is there to create further insights and to support the leader to

practice new behaviors. The objective is to increase the leaders' array of choices in the way they react — that is, to develop leadership agility for the best outcome of all involved. Once the leader develops an array of behaviors to different stakeholders, then it is time to take the next step and inspire and engage a group of people.

Step 6: Enlightening Them on How to Inspire

Now the challenge for Mary and Cedric is to persuade by creating a vision and mission for people to enact the desired change. This takes integrating everything the leader has learned to craft an enticing vision that compels people to make the changes, but is ingrained in reality so as not to cause cynicism.

The objective is that the leader no longer competes to reign, but rather sees their success as the overall achievement of the division and of the company.

You see, even brilliant jerks can change. However, deeply ingrained behavior cannot change without support. An extensive leadership coaching process, once it is mastered, can open doors the leaders never thought possible. It fast-tracks the leader to their next leadership level by having a better understanding of themselves and of others.

By transforming the brilliant jerk into an inspiring leader, it not only affects the leader but the whole organization. It reduces suffering in the workplace and entices stakeholders to make the organization a better place.

*Managing Brilliant Jerks:
How Organizations and
Coaches Can Transform
Difficult Leaders into
Powerful Visionaries.*

