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Dr. Katrina Burrus, MCC

## Are You Working for a “Brilliant Jerk”?

– These Red Flags Tell the Tale

Yes, the Kitchen Table Economist is a personal finance channel – no doubt about it.

That said, who you work for, and how it impacts your career path and household income matters in the household finance realm.

That’s why I find this data set from Dr. Katrina Burrus, a workplace expert, so fascinating.

Burrus is the author of the book *Managing Brilliant Jerks: How Organizations and Coaches Can Transform Difficult Leaders into Powerful Visionaries*.

In it, Burrus says a boss who is both bright and abrasive has many characteristics, and the draining combination of them can lead to running more people off the job than running a long-term successful business.

“A brilliant but abrasive leader is extremely talented but is driven to gain recognition above all else,” Dr. Burrus says. “They are exceptionally intelligent, but they use that intelligence for their own professional benefit rather than in the best interest of the company.

“Moreover, they are blinded to the costs their behavior has for individuals, teams, and the organization as a whole. They can destroy people’s self-confidence and inflict serious, lasting damage to their company. This toxic environment erodes morale and causes turnover to spike.”

To clarify those points and give it a real world view, Dr. Burrus points out five characteristics of a bright but abrasive leader:

**They lack empathy.** “These leaders have a blind spot – their understanding

of other people’s emotions,” Dr. Burrus says. “Leaders of this type are not naturally tuned in to what others are thinking and feeling. Their focus is on goals and outcomes rather than on people.”

**They are volatile and manipulative.** Nobody is comfortable with a leader who could explode at any second or sabotages them. “They are verbally abusive, flying into screaming rages and even physically threatening coworkers,” Dr. Burrus says.

“Their underlying anxiety often translates into explosive and uncontrolled emotional outbursts. They micromanage an employee to an extent that makes work impossible. More subtly, abrasive leaders undermine employees by creating conflict, withholding critical resources, and waging a kind of psychological warfare against those they perceive as a threat.”

**Many are perfectionists.** While being a driven leader is an admirable quality, some go too far when rarely taking the foot off the accelerator and running over employees in the process. This often comes in the form of setting unrealistic standards and changing deadlines without much notice or reason.

“They’re never satisfied with their own work and continually push themselves to work harder,” Dr. Burrus says. “Abrasive leaders are intensely motivated to gain recognition through outstanding results, and they expect no less of the people around them. They can be very hard on their employees. They put constant pressure on their direct reports and offer little to no recognition.”

**Struggle to maintain good relationships.** “Not good at reading others’ emotions, abrasive leaders find it hard to maintain positive interpersonal relationships,” Dr. Burrus says. “They hurt people without intending to do so. Some abrasive leaders are good at identifying people’s weaknesses, but they use this skill to satisfy their drive toward perfectionism and, by doing so, harm people. They place enormous focus on results, but they fail to see that to increase results, they need to engage autonomous, thinking, creative people who are not submissive to their leader’s every request.”

**Have a fear of failure.** “Abrasive leaders are often defensive and on high alert for challenges to their leadership,” Dr. Burrus says. “They feel personally threatened by their direct reports’ failures. To protect themselves, they feel a strong need to control their environment. A perceived threat to their professional reputation or self-image will send brilliant but abrasive jerks into attack mode immediately.”

“Abrasive leaders can be incredibly charismatic, especially to clients,” Dr. Burrus says. “Due to their razor-sharp intelligence, they have strong powers of persuasion. But they also create a culture of fear that robs employees of their voice and deadens creativity.”

Good stuff, right? In my mind, it’s the “power of fear” that curtails a career professional’s job performance, which leads to more toxic performance reviews and a potentially lower salary and bonus, among other negative “on the job” financial factors.

Thus, avoid the brilliant jerk - as smart as he or she is - if you can. Your personal finances may depend on it.