

How to Deal With a Jerk Without Being a Jerk

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A couple of years ago I was discussing a study of the habits of great musical composers when an audience member interrupted.

“That’s not true!” he shouted. “You’re totally ignorant — you don’t know what you’re talking about!”

Early in my career, I had let nasty people walk all over me. When a client berated me for my predecessor’s error on an ad, I gave in and offered him a full refund. When a boss threatened to fire me for defending a colleague who was treated poorly, I said nothing. But this time, I was prepared: I had trained as a conflict mediator, worked as a negotiator and become an organizational psychologist.

At some point in your work life, you’ve probably had to interact with a jerk. They’re the people who demean and disrespect you. They might steal credit for your successes, blame you for their failures, invade your privacy or break their promises, or bad-mouth you, scream at you and belittle you. As the organizational psychologist Bob Sutton [puts it](#), they treat you like dirt, and either they don’t know it or they don’t care.

The natural response is to get defensive, but that only escalates the cycle of aggression. Take a classic [study](#) in which researchers recorded negotiators with different levels of skill. Average bargainers ended up in three times as many defend-attack spirals as expert negotiators. The experts escaped the heat of the moment and cooled the other person down, too. They calmly commented on their reactions to the other person’s behavior and tested their understanding of what the person was trying to convey.