

# Creating a Jerk-Free Zone

*Celeste Blackman*



*Celeste Blackman is a Human Element Trainer for Business Consultants, Inc.*

**Defensive behaviors  
are unconscious,  
fear-based  
and contagious.  
They are like blood  
in the water  
to a shark.**

Creating a jerk-free zone means getting rid of the obnoxious behaviors that demean others, destroy trust and alienate people from one another. Smart-ass remarks, whining, denying, always having the last word, yelling, or flooding with information are just a few of these behaviors. Over time, these behaviors not only destroy trust and erode relationships; they lower productivity in the workplace. They are what we don't like about each other and are blocks to career and personal success.

It may surprise you to know that most people don't get up in the morning with the intention of being jerks. They don't jump out of bed and start planning how they can piss you off. In most cases people are doing the best they know how. Their intention is to be collaborative, do their best work and get along well with others, and then it happens: someone or something pushes their buttons and they get defensive. They become jerks!

The transformation from a good intentioned and well-meaning person to a jerk can happen quickly and unexpectedly. When we get emotionally triggered we go into a stimulus-response mode and act out, withdraw, or blame others. These defensive behaviors do not actually protect us from others, though it usually feels that way. Instead, they protect us from our own uncomfortable feelings and thoughts.

When people get defensive their thinking and behavior becomes rigid and they become lousy problem solvers. This leads to negative judgments which tend to alienate people from one another. Defensive behaviors are unconscious, fear-based and contagious: they are like blood in the water to a shark. Defensiveness invites defensiveness and pretty soon everyone in the vicinity gets rigid and ineffective. When the room is filled with defensive, rigid-thinking, ineffective problem-solvers the results are disastrous and expensive.

The cost of defensive behavior to an organization is huge. When people get defensive productive work slows or stops completely. People become more focused on defending their positions, winning, defeating others and being right instead of solving problems. In short, they act like jerks! Shared visions, goals and values go out the window as self-preservation takes over. In these environments teams do not thrive and people do not get excited about their work. This makes organizations less productive, often a lot less productive.

To build jerk-free zones it is important to support increased self-awareness so that individuals can close the gap between their intentions and their behaviors. When people are more aware they can replace their defensive behaviors with productive, collaborative and trust-building behaviors.

Increase your awareness of defensive behaviors by turning to the next page and reviewing the Signs of Defensiveness Survey. See if you can identify your favorite defense mechanisms and how they get in the way of your own success. Ask us how you can transform them from workplace saboteurs into early warning systems for greater productivity.

*continued*





# Signs of Defensiveness Survey

Check all behaviors that you find yourself using from time to time.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Loss of humor   | <input type="checkbox"/> Eccentricity   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Taking offense  | <input type="checkbox"/> Being too nice   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> High charge or energy in the body                           | <input type="checkbox"/> Selective deafness   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sudden drop in I.Q.   | <input type="checkbox"/> Attack – the best defense is a good offense  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wanting to be right – “No question about it.”               | <input type="checkbox"/> Holding a grudge   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Wanting the last word, often with a rise in volume of voice | <input type="checkbox"/> Trivializing with humor  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Flooding with information to prove a point                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Inappropriate laughter or giggling   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Endless explaining and rationalizing                        | <input type="checkbox"/> Sour grapes!   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Playing “poor me”   | <input type="checkbox"/> I am aware of that; leave me alone – defense of awareness                                |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Teaching or preaching                                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Obsessive thinking   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Rigidity  | <input type="checkbox"/> Personalizing everything   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Denial  | <input type="checkbox"/> All-or-nothing thinking  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawal into deadly silence                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Catastrophizing  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Cynicism – being a victim                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> Fast breathing/heartbeat   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sarcasm   | <input type="checkbox"/> Cold, clammy skin  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Making fun of others – being highly critical                | <input type="checkbox"/> Hot, sweaty skin   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Terminal uniqueness   | <input type="checkbox"/> “It is just my personality; it is just how I am.”  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Refusal to negotiate  | <input type="checkbox"/> Magnifying everything  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Blaming   | <input type="checkbox"/> Minimizing everything  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sudden onset of illness or accident                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Emotional rigidity – “If I feel it, it must be true”                                     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Confusion   | <input type="checkbox"/> Tight stomach  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Suddenly tired or sleepy                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> Speaking too fast  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Intellectualizing   | <input type="checkbox"/> Becoming physically immobile   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Acting crazy – the temporary insanity defense               | <input type="checkbox"/> Addicted to alcohol, drugs, sex, shopping, working, gambling, chocolate, workshops, etc. |

When you are finished, circle the three behaviors you use most often.

## Jerk-Free Zone

### No Jerks: It's a Bottom Line Issue

Jerks are costly. In his book, *The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One*, Stanford Professor Robert Sutton describes the financial implications of jerks in the workplace. He describes one employer of a highly compensated salesman in Silicon Valley who decided to quantify the costs of his star employee's jerky behaviors. The employer estimated that the cost to the business for one year was \$160,000. This included anger-management training, overtime costs associated with last-minute demands, and time spent by HR professionals to mitigate his disasters. "In an organization of 1,000 people, the total annual cost of office jerks (TCJ = Total Cost of Jerks) is estimated at \$750,000," says Sutton.

Estimate the costs associated with a Jerk during a one-month period:	Hours	Dollars
<b>Wasted time</b> <i>Salary/benefits per hour</i>		
<b>Reduced productivity</b> <i>Lower motivation, ineffective decisions, email, telephone and hall way conversations</i>		
<b>Employee turnover and discipline</b> <i>Replacement cost of unfilled positions</i>		
<b>Time spent on complaints, mediation</b> <i>HR interventions</i>		
<b>Sabotage/theft/damage</b> <i>To equipment, work processes, reputations</i>		
<b>Sick days</b> <i>Number of days lost</i>		
<b>Lost opportunities</b> <i>Dissatisfied customers, lost partnerships or alliances</i>		
	<b>Total Cost</b>	

The high cost of jerks shows up in many ways including:

- lost productivity when people talk about the latest incident rather than working
- absences due to stress and illness
- overt and/or covert sabotaging of systems, processes and strategies
- turnover resulting in the need to hire, train and recapture lost knowledge
- difficulty recruiting internal candidates because a manager has a bad reputation
- time spent on complaints and mediation involving HR or the jerk's manager
- less collaboration and cooperation because people don't want to work with a jerk or help a jerk

The bottom line is that these behaviors are very expensive. 

