

Thought Leaders

Why Every Agency Should Apply the No Asshole Rule

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TrinityP3 global CEO Darren Woolley advocates for creating safe and respectful workplaces in the advertising industry, emphasising the importance of the 'No Asshole rule'



Darren Woolley is Global CEO of TrinityP3, a worldwide, independent marketing / pitch consultancy, well known to the advertising industry. Founded more than 20 years ago TrinityP3 has a significant presence in Australia, where it leads the pitch process for many of the country's leading advertising accounts as well as having offices in London, New York and Zurich.

Hopefully everyone agrees that workplaces should be physically and emotionally safe. And when those workplaces are places where people are expected to create new, challenging, and exciting ideas that sell, such as advertising agencies, this can only occur where those involved feel safe.

But in my own experience of the working agency-side, the reality was quite different. Having started my working career in medical research, the culture of an advertising agency was exciting, chaotic, and fun.

Except when it wasn't. There was also bullying, harassment, and emotional manipulation at almost all the agencies I worked.

Bullied to support positions I believed were not in the best interest of the client or the other employees of the agency. Harassed by clients who wanting to control and manipulate me and the agency. Pressured to work longer hours and even weekend at the expense of my physical and mental health and of my personal relationships.

Now yes, this all occurred in the last millennium. Yes, it was then considered just part and parcel of working in advertising. And yes, I am a privileged, white male. I am not looking for sympathy here. But I can only imagine how much worse it was and is for others who do not share my privilege.

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So, when I founded my own business, I made the decision to create a new future for myself and those that choose to work with me. Hopefully a kinder and more accepting way of working together.

Two books influenced the shape of that culture within my own business, Trinity P3. And I would recommend both to anyone starting their own business. The first is Maverick - The Success Story behind the World's Most Unusual Workplace by Ricardo Semler (published in 1993 and shared with me by my lawyer at the time). Ricardo completely redefines the relationship between employer and employee by illustrating the ludicrousness of hiring adults and treating them like children.

Demonstrated using the huge business he inherited from his father, it is a brilliant example of what is possible when you empower those on your team with transparency and knowledge and involve them in making the decisions for what is best for the business.

The second book started life as an essay, by Stanford professor Robert Sutton, for the Harvard Business Review and was published as a book in 2007. The full title is The No Asshole Rule: Building a Civilized Workplace and Surviving One That Isn't. Professor Sutton insisted upon use of the word asshole since other words such as bully or jerk "do not convey the same degree of awfulness".

The book highlights how workplace bullying decreases morale and productivity and that to screen out toxic staff, it suggests the "no asshole rule". I took the lessons from the book and applied them to my business. Not just to those working in the business, which of course includes me, but to everyone we do business with - clients, procurement, our suppliers and agencies.

The first obstacle was empowering those who work with me to keep me in check. But more importantly, I wanted to ensure my people were not bullied by our clients and others. Therefore, we developed a version of the 'no asshole rule' for Trinity P3. The first thing we did was to define what is an asshole.

Robert Sutton defines two tests to recognise an asshole: First, after encountering the person, do people feel oppressed, humiliated, or otherwise worse about themselves? And second, does the person target people who are less powerful?

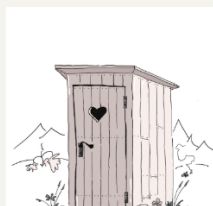
These are great, but we expanded on these to include, if you feel bullied, disrespected, harassed, demeaned, belittled or manipulated as guidelines. Then I needed to empower the team, based on the lesson of Maverick, knowing and treating them like the adults they are and not as children to be managed and controlled.

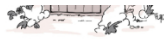
The standing agreement is if anyone encounters these behaviours in anyone we deal with, clients, procurement, agencies, suppliers or each other, they are to respectfully call attention to the behaviour, ask for acknowledgement or agreement that the behaviour is not acceptable, and receive an apology. If this is not achievable, they have the right to withdraw from the project on behalf of the company until such an acknowledgment and apology is forthcoming.

There is no need for them to check with me beforehand, it is completely their call. When the team inform me post taking action, we discuss the situation, and I will engage either with the person involved or their manager to discuss the way forward.

In all the time the rule has been in place we have withdrawn from engagements and project less than a handful, and in most cases the person being the asshole has seen their error and apologised.

Now, I know some agency owners will say this is not possible. But if you take responsibility for the safety of your team seriously, you need to seriously consider applying the "no asshole rule".





Even at a sh*t place you can find a heart

Image by Dennis Flad.

Dennis Flad is responsible for Trinity P3 EMEA and founder of t'charta, a management consultancy boutique for strategic product management, pricing and go-to-market based in Zurich, Switzerland. Dennis worked his entire life in marketing and advertising, which allows him to infuse his whimsical drawings with a realistic understanding of management practices and behaviours.

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