

Office jerks beware—your good ideas may not always be welcomed by colleagues

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You don't have to be a jerk to come up with fresh and original ideas, but sometimes being disagreeable is just what's needed to sell your brainchild successfully to others. However, difficult or irritating people should be aware of the social context in which they are presenting their ideas. A pushy strategy will not always be equally successful, warn Samuel Hunter of Pennsylvania State University and Lily Cushenbery of Stony Brook University in the US, in an article in Springer's *Journal of Business and Psychology*.

People are often labelled as jerks if they are disagreeable by nature, overly confident, dominant, argumentative, egotistic, headstrong or sometimes even hostile. It's widely touted in the popular press that being so direct and forceful was what made innovators such as Steve Jobs and Thomas Edison successful.

Hunter and Cushenbery wanted to test whether people with disagreeable personalities are more innovative, and if it helps them down the line to get their fresh [ideas](#) accepted and used. In their first study, 201 students from a large Northeastern university in the US completed personality tests before strategizing together in groups of three to develop a marketing campaign. In the second study, involving 291 people, Hunter and Cushenbery used an online chat environment to investigate how being in the presence of other creative and supportive colleagues helped people to share their ideas more freely.

The first study showed that people do not need to be jerks to have fresh

ideas. However, such an attitude helps when you want to steamroll your ideas so that others will accept them. Findings from the second study highlighted how important the [social context](#) is in which [new ideas](#) are being shared. Hunter and Cushenbery established that being disagreeable helps when you want to push your new ideas ahead or when you find yourself in a situation that is not necessarily open to original thoughts or changes. This obnoxious attitude can, however, backfire if you are working within a supportive, creative group in which ideas are shared freely.

"It seems that being a 'jerk' may not be directly linked to who generates original ideas, but such qualities may be useful if the situation dictates that a bit of a fight is needed to get those original ideas heard and used by others," says Hunter in summarizing the results.

"Disagreeable personalities may be helpful in combating the challenges faced in the innovation process, but social context is also critical," elaborates Cushenbery. "In particular, an environment supportive of original thinking may negate the utility of disagreeableness and, in fact, disagreeableness may hamper the originality of ideas shared."

More information: Hunter, S.T. & Cushenbery, L. (2014). Is being a jerk necessary for originality? Examining the role of disagreeableness in the sharing and utilization of original ideas, *Journal of Business and Psychology*. [DOI: 10.1007/s10869-014-9386-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-014-9386-1)

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