

Get ahead, be an asshole

Martin Kihn got so sick of office jerks, he decided to become one

was the nicest guy in the world – and it was killing me.

Take my job. I was working in advertising after a miserable four-year tour of duty as a management consultant for the United States Department of Defense. There I was, trying to convince distinctly sub-prime men and women that the quickest way out of their misery was, well, a new credit card.

To make matters worse, I wasn't even good at it. My boss called me into her office one day and made it clear that if I did not – in her words – “grow a pair”, I'd be out of a job. I was at the stage in my career where I had to start bringing in business and taking on the competition, or move out of the way. That my colleagues liked me was irrelevant. I had to locate my mojo, like another guy in the office whom I came to think of as the Nemesis.

Oh, and I'd just passed one of those terrifying birthdays that ends with a zero. And it wasn't 20.

Something in me snapped. I decided that I would turn my life around by doing whatever it took to transform myself into a Grade A prick.

So I began a real-life experiment in which I tried to the best of my ability to put the Nice Marty firmly in the past. This experiment lasted almost a year and touched every aspect of my life, including my family, friendships, self-image, bank account, abdominal muscles and, um, physical performance.

I visited therapists and executive coaches, acting teachers and boxing trainers, Ayn Rand study groups and Al Pacino *Scarface* retrospectives. As I learned new techniques of assertiveness and Alpha Male behaviour, I tried them out, carefully at first, then with a kind of bridge-burning abandon, on my day-to-day experience. It was horrible, vaguely dangerous, and utterly amazing.

One method I found effective was to act ‘as if’. I learned this from my acting coach, a hard-bitten guy who didn't understand what I was trying to do, but was more than willing to let me pay him to help. Acting ‘as if’ is simple: you act ‘as if’ something is true, even though you know it isn't.

In my case, I acted as if I were an asshole. I created a character who was at once infinitely more confident, louder, angrier, bigger and richer than I was. That this asshole didn't

have to be Marty, per se, let me off the hook. I didn't have to approve of him, I just played him in real life.

My coach told me to build up a mental biography for my character, a sad story of childhood neglect and team sports, bad skin and death-metal worship. Then I studied role models, pulled from my life. You can start here, if you want what I have. Look around. Prickwits are everywhere, except where you most want them to be: in the mirror.

My role models taught me some of the critical secrets of assholeism, starting with a total lack of compassion. Also key were a noisy verbal style, a genetic inability to give credit or admit a mistake, a laser-like focus on the cash value of every conversation, and the most important three words in the dickwad's playbook: interrupt, interrupt, interrupt.

I won't claim that taking these rules to the streets was easy. In fact, it was not. To get me over a crippling case of self-consciousness, one coach had me go to the Rockefeller Center in Manhattan and offer to pay strangers one dollar to insult me. Kids were particularly cruel. So were the Europeans.

I now know how to say asshole in French.

After that, I honed my selfishness in ordinary daily situations that almost never went the way I'd scripted them. I descended on the hotdog carts in Central Park and cut in line, took a bite, spit the dog out, and demanded a refund. I did pretty much the same thing with a gently used CD by my least favourite artist, Josh Groban. Trouble was, some guy in what looked like a flak jacket didn't like me getting between him and his

“

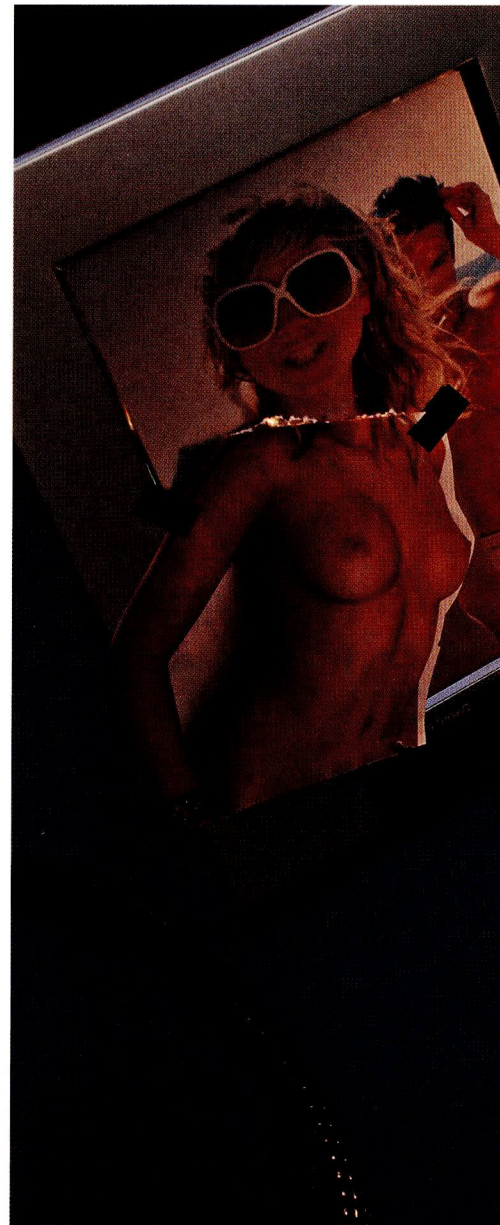
Never smile. It's weak. Stare directly at other men between the eyes. And thrust your pelvis out. I'm serious.

lunch. Not being armed myself, I backed down. And the record-store clerk hated Josh Groban even more than I did.

In public, people didn't seem all that shocked by my asshole behaviour. After what I thought was a brilliantly annoying fake rant on my cell phone in a crowded subway car, a guy tapped me on the shoulder.

I swung around, ready to tear him a new one. “Who's your provider?” he asked. “Cause I can't get reception down here.”

I had to remind myself that I do live in New



Prime material
A rare look at Gordon Brown's desktop explains a lot

York, after all. In some ways I was just training myself to fit in.

I learned that most communication isn't verbal. It's not about what we say, it's about who we are, a weird alchemy of our actions, the tone of our voice, how we dress. Psychologists told me that – contrary to what most of us assume – thoughts and feelings tend to follow actions, not the other way around. What this means is, if you act like an asshole, you'll start to feel like one.

So body language is critical. It's the step I'd suggest you take after studying your role