

Robert Sutton BigSpeak Podcast Interview

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Mark: Welcome back to the show. I am thrilled to be talking with Robert, let's call you Bob Sutton. Bob, how are you? Welcome to the show.

Bob Sutton: Good morning, Mark. It's great to talk to you.

Mark: When I saw we were going to get to have this conversation, and you're the author of the book, the famous book, "The No Asshole Rule." I got very excited, because we have that book, and we have that rule in our life. How long ago was that, that you and the other professors figured that out?

Bob Sutton: As you implied, I wrote the book called, "The No Asshole Rule," but I was a member of an academic department, which I started in 1983 at Stanford, and I was in this small group. Probably by 1986 people were having conversations about if we're going to hire people, and in academia they get tenure, you're stuck with them.

Mark: Right.

Bob Sutton: It's amazing how many of them get tenure too, and this happens. A member of our department, I think his name was Bob [Carlson 00:01:55], who passed away a few years ago. He said, "I don't want to have any assholes. I don't care if they won the Nobel Prize, I don't want to have to deal with people like that every day." I kind of got interested in that, and my dad also used to tell me that you should avoid assholes.

Then on the other side of the ledger, at that time my wife was managing partner of a large law firm. She had as many as 1000, if you will, lawyers and other employees to tend to. I don't mean to put this indelicately, but asshole management was a big part of her job. I think this is true, not just for lawyers, I don't want to bash lawyers, I think if you run a large organization and you're in the leadership position, you spend a disproportionate amount of your time dealing with the difficult people. That's kind of how that started.

I did not mean to become the asshole guy [crosstalk 00:02:54] and 80%-90% of the work I do is still without swearing, and I would describe it as a more serious topics. Although, when you've got one of these jerks in your life it's pretty difficult.

Mark: That book led to a whole career for you, but it really wasn't tangential to what you study and what you teach, and your passion, right? I'm curious, when was the first ... Now

you're a professor so you stand in front of people all the time, but when was that first time you stood in front of a paying audience, and what was that like?

Bob Sutton: Oh, my goodness, I actually even remember it. When I was hired by Stanford, I was determined I was going to be a pure scholar. Anybody who, shall we say, stooped to serving the practical needs of managers was beneath me. I was a scholar, and I ended [inaudible 00:03:57] than I wrote. I think my incomprehensible papers are less incomprehensible than other people's [crosstalk 00:04:01], but they're still incomprehensible.

Then this weird things happened. I became this full professor, which means that you kind of can't go any higher in whatever the chain is, probably about 36 or 37 years old, and somebody, this guy Jim Adams wrote a famous book called, "Conceptual blockbusting." He asked me to give a talk, and I said, "I'll give a talk, but I'm going to give a talk about weird ideas, and I'm going to challenge the audience." Things like hire people you don't like. Hire people who make you squirm. Find some happy people and get them to fight.

I was in there and I just assumed I was going to vomit, it was going to be terrible. It went great. I had so much fun it was ridiculous, and thus my road to ruin began. Since then I have, I think that's probably 23-24 years ago, I have evolved to trying to strike this middle ground between doing things that, it isn't leading organizations, but doing things that are both useful and practical and aren't boring.

A lot of speakers try to do that, but I literally went in with a screw you attitude, Jim Adams, I'm going to do a speech and offend them and you will never invite me again. Then it still might be the best received speech I've ever given, because I had such attitude.

Mark: It feels like you're a contrarian, you're this academic, you stayed trite and true to this very, very specific path, but then you went out and said, nope, I'm going to turn the whole thing up on end, and you got a lot of pleasure from that.

Bob Sutton: Yeah, I will say that there is a difference. I think that's a good observation, but I think that there is also a difference between things that are destructive and turn things upside down. I have some colleagues, who shall go unnamed, who they're more upset and unhappy people are when they leave the room the happier they are.

Mark: Oh, those are fun guys to be around.

Bob Sutton: It's like candy to them, it's like oh! My goal is, whatever I'm talking about is to get people to the edge where they're just a little bit uncomfortable, but they're still with me. That's a fine line. Certainly I've had speeches where people are overly uncomfortable, and I've had speeches where it's a little bit too much comfort. I think a lot of the key to it.

We can talk about even a project I'm working on now is this tension between humanity and the irrationality of it all, and the objective needs that people have to make their organization perform, to advance their careers. I think striking the tension between two of those things I'm always thinking about. Yeah, being a little bit of a contrarian is good, or even a lot, but I don't want to hurt people or organizations, I want to help them and make them feel as if they can make progress.

Mark: When you are in the middle of that talk and you know, you can sense you're making them, they're feeling uncomfortable, they're [squidgeting 00:07:20], or whatever it is that they're doing. How attuned have you gotten at being able to read the audience, and then to be flexible with how you're delivering the message to the audience?

Bob Sutton: Well, that's an interesting question. I don't think anybody has ever ... I just gave a talk last week actually. Just to go back, and what I was doing, this is a good example of this actually. It was in an auditorium, there was about 150 people, and this is classic, the people who run the company were in the front row, and I was asking people to talk about, to volunteer things that clueless bosses do. I was watching the senior management sort of slump and squirm, so what I did was I just sort of looked at them and I said-

Mark: I'm going there.

Bob Sutton: The company's best place work list is like number nine or number 10, and I looked at them and I said, "They still all love you, but none of us are perfect." Then everybody laughed and it was okay. It was one of those things that you could just ... I was watching their body language and they were squirming. They were getting lower and lower until [inaudible 00:08:41], and then they laughed. Then actually they started, and I called on them the last, because you don't call the senior executives first, I call them last. Then they started about clueless things that had happened, or that bosses do.

That was sort of interesting, because I realized I literally have never seen the body language. It was like all of them together, it was like that collective emotion. That would be an example of it, and people love to talk about lousy bosses and clueless bosses they've had, but when the boss is in the room potentially it's a little more difficult. That's kind of interesting.

Mark: Especially when they're sitting in the front row. You create a space where you can have these tough conversations. It sounds, though, to me like your humor and your zest for life helps make these really tough topics palatable. I have this sense that you really want to help make transformational change.

Bob Sutton: Yeah, and most of my teaching and my speaking is not about assholes, even though it's fun to write the books. I've had a couple books in this area, but my focus is on what leaders and their teams can do to make things better. The project I'm working on right now with my coauthor Huggy Rao, he wrote a book, "Scaling up Excellence," and one of the things we've learned is organizations are successful at getting bigger. It starts getting

harder and harder to do things that used to be easy, and people start going crazy. We're doing this thing called, "The Friction Project."

The Friction Project, the focus of it, we're doing case studies, we're working with an industry group to try to have friction fighting Olympics. We're doing all this crazy stuff, and doing case studies and all this, but one of the things that really struck us is just the amount of emotion and frustration that people have. For us, that's the kind of thing we try to do, especially we both try to acknowledge their pain and to come up with more rational solutions.

I think Huggy has a great line, because we keep talking to executives about organizational friction and what drives you crazy. Huggy looks at me, he's really got this devilish, really, really smart Indian guy and he said, "Here's what we're doing, we're doing half organizational design, and half therapy." I was like oh, that's back to this tension between the rational and the emotional. I thought that was a pretty good line, and that is what we're trying to accomplish as we do this thing called, "The Friction Project."

Mark: I love this idea of friction and removing friction. I think about that a lot, actually, as it turns out.

Bob Sutton: Really?

Mark: Yeah, I produce a TEDx event, and one of the things I'm looking for is how do we create this ideal environment where the audience is primed for this idea, and they want to lean in? The speaker is so attuned to their idea worth spreading that's so a part of who they are, that when they lean in and step into the red circle everything conspires to give that idea lift off into the atmosphere. I think if there is any friction anywhere along the line, the registration process, the coffee wasn't good, or I don't like my seat, they're not 100% present. I call that friction.

Bob Sutton: I love that image, because what you're doing is you're imaging the audience member's journey, to the point where the talk starts, and that's one of the kinds of things, one of the many things we're doing with our student in the companies we work with is what's the journey like for customers? What's it feel like?

One of the things with teaching senior executives we get the most emotion out of, and it's the same concept, it's tell us about your first week on your job. What annoyed you? What was easy to do? Pretty soon we've got half the organizational design, and half therapy going, because to the point, how they got the computer, where their desk was. One guy he described to me he spent 20 minutes trying to find the bathroom on his first day at work. I'm just imaging the people at your event, they can't find the bathroom, this was a source of stress.

Mark: To that point, we make big signs so they can find them. You're exactly right. You mentioned something about onboarding, and I know that you talk about onboarding

because that's a big part if you're building culture and you're getting your organization going, yet, ironically, a lot of businesses don't pay attention to onboarding, why is that?

Bob Sutton: That's really interesting, and that's a great question. Who pays a lot of attention to onboarding? The US Military, Mackenzie would both have equally strong cultures, just as an example. A lot of this interest came from the research that my colleague, Huggy Rao and I did for our book, "Scaling of Excellence," 2014 book, and we were looking at the difference between cultures in organizations that scaled fast and were sort of in control, and those that weren't, and one thing that really struck us, one of the companies we followed most closely was Facebook and the other one was Google.

Facebook is really, or was really interesting. They've got some kind of political problems now, but one of the things that they had a philosophy, and we visited them and I actually did a little consulting for them, and they visited our class. They had this philosophy, which was when you brought in engineers, and they are hiring engineers at an incredible rate. The faster that they scaled their engineering organization, the more important it was to focus on the onboarding and getting them all on the same cultural page. They would still do a full six weeks of working on different projects, they call it bootcamp, orientation day.

In terms of making things easy, I mean, they get you your laptop and some of your listeners may know, they actually have vending that if you need computer parts you swipe your employee badge and it just comes out. You need a mouse, or you need a drive. It's kind of staggering, talk about lack of friction. You compare that to other organizations.

One I hear that's been having a lot of trouble is Uber, we can blame the very controversial the ex-CEO Travis and so on, but one of the challenges they've had is that they've hired so fast, but they didn't take the time to onboard people, and to orient them to the company as a whole, and how what they do fits into it. Now they're trying to go back and fix that.

To me it's really important. It's also, everything we know about human experiences is that even Danny Kahneman, the Nobel Prize Winner, has this thing that essentially the beginning, the end, and the best, and the worst parts are what we remember best from an experience, so onboarding is very important. Also, early interactions.

Mark: This wealth of knowledge you have from all of these case studies and working with people and seeing it, I love the way you put it that it's half organizational design and development and therapy. Did you ever think you were going to be a corporate therapist?

Bob Sutton: No, it's kind of funny. It's a funny question. All of my degrees are in psychology.

Mark: Oh, they are?

Bob Sutton: Yeah.

Mark: Okay. Okay.

Bob Sutton: I'm a tenured engineering professor, and I'm a psychologist, I'm an organizational psychologist. I, on purpose, decided that I wouldn't be a clinical psychologist because I did some early work, and sort drop in houses, I'm an old hippy, there was this stuff going on in the '60s and '70s in the San Francisco Bay area. I dealt with a lot of kind of crazy people for a couple of years, but many of them had drug overdoses and the like and other kinds of paranoia.

I didn't want to be a therapist, but then I ended up doing all this stuff on emotion in organizations, I did a lot of research on emotion. My dissertation was on organizational depth, the process by which after you announced that you were going to close a plant, the process by which you unwind it. For my dissertation I talked to a lot of people who were crying. I went to funerals for dying organizations.

Mark: Oh, no.

Bob Sutton: Then it was nice to move to Silicon Valley and study things like innovation and growth and scaling. I've done both ends of the life cycle, the organizational death and the birth and scaling. I'll tell you, the scaling is more fun than the organizational death. Some of those plant close things, and other store closing in Michigan, where I did my dissertation, just so painful.

Mark: You're just surrounded by, the atmosphere of that just must be awful. I want to ask you about, when you give a talk, by the way, what's your ideal length for a talk? Which is the one you like giving the most?

Bob Sutton: The bigger the audience the shorter it should be, but I either like-

Mark: Is that Sutton's law?

Bob Sutton: One of Sutton's, I don't know. I think I stole, this is an old [inaudible 00:18:38] 45 minutes to an hour for a big audience. If it's a smaller interactive group then two hours, maybe a little bit longer, but kind of the basic rule is if I talk more than 45 minutes or an hour to a big audience it's a problem, but the same amount of time, if I spend two hours with an executive team, or something like that, then I should be talking about half the time and they should be talking about the half the time. The bigger it gets, the less interactive it should be.

Although, as I was going to say, sometimes I'll do interaction with an audience of 150 people to get them to talk to each other. Sometimes that is a little bit spiked. Talking to your neighbor for a few minutes in the middle of a speech can really kind of help bring energy in the room.

Mark: Again, that's one of your being able to sense the vibe of the room, and we're going to need this. There were too many carbs at lunch and you come on at 2:00, it's like what are we going to do?

Bob Sutton: One other thing.

Mark: Yes.

Bob Sutton: Now that you said that, I have a different model for after dinner speeches.

Mark: Oh.

Bob Sutton: After dinner speeches, so my philosophy is they should never been longer than 30 minutes total, say 20 minutes of talk and 10 minutes of questions. Everybody is tired, often they're drinking, so an after dinner speech is a whole different deal to me. Half an hour maximum from start to finish, and probably no more than 20 or 25 minutes of talking, because everybody wants to get back to what they're doing, so an after dinner speech is a different animal. I've given ones that are 10 minutes and are perfect, so that's a different animal.

Mark: What's the role of story play in your talks?

Bob Sutton: Now that's a good question. The role that story plays, so stories are both wonderful and dangerous. There is very good evidence. There is from the Chip and Dan Heath wrote a wonderful book called, "Made to Stick," which is really a great book for any of your listeners who don't know about it. In fact, by the way, Chip is the one who suggested that I check out Big Speaks. One of the reasons I'm here is because of him, I just made that connection. Anyway, Chip and Dan have this finding, which is essentially people remember stories not statistics.

Mark: Correct.

Bob Sutton: Sometimes they'll joke statistics show people remember stories not statistics. The danger is, because I do try to do stuff that's evidence-based and fact-based I can tell stories to illustrate something that is completely wrong and not evidence based, or I can tell stories to both [inaudible 00:21:39]. What I try to do is tell a story that backs up the evidence.

Just to give you a quick example, there is very good research that one of the best ways to mobilize and energize a team or an organization is to create both collective pride and collective anger. Very good research. I say that, and I sort of cite the research from social movements and what moves people. Then one of my favorite stories I like to tell was told to me by a guy named Tom Porter, and I have written about it. People describe the nasty side of Steve Jobs, but Tom Porter was, he still works at Pixar-

Mark: I know Tom.

Bob Sutton: Many of your listeners may remember Monsters, Inc. Tom was actually in charge of the team that did the fur of Sully.

Mark: That's right, yep.

Bob Sutton: He spent three years of his life trying to make that fur right. He said every time he saw Steve Jobs, almost 20 years ago, Steve was CEO at the time, Steve would say, "Tom, for the rest of your life when you look back on Sully's fur what you're going to say is look how great it looks in the rain, in the wind, when he moves, and you're going to say that's our fur! Didn't we do a great job?" I talk to Tom now, and Tom's got an executive position there and he said, "Now I look back at that fur and I'm proud, we did such a great job."

That's sort of story illustrates the point, but it's also backed up by a huge body of research on the power of effective pride, not that sort of greedy, I'm better than you, we're doing something great together. There is a story there, but if I told the story that was contrary to the academic research then I could get in trouble, and by the way, it could be just as emotionally compelling.

That's one of the problems we have I would say with politics, and also management thinkers who sell false goods, they tell stories that are just as compelling as the Steve Jobs story I just told. What I try to do, and I'm sure I have failed at times, is to give my audience a sense of the academic research, but not so much. I know how quickly it can get boring, not so much that they're bored and then I get to the story to back it up.

Mark: Is the way that you address your class similar, or in what ways are the way that you deal with students similar to the way you deal with a group of civilians?

Bob Sutton: The worst thing about class is we've got to give them the damn grades. Honest, that's the great thing. Ironically, if you look at my Stanford evaluations over the year, I think I do pretty well, but I'm still not great at evaluation. I am not wild about evaluating people. It's kind of ironic.

Anyway, the way in which it's similar is that it's a longer term relationship. There are, honestly, some authority issues, when they're late you've got to say stuff. One of the things I do, and I do this more with my audience, is I don't let them look at their phones, or use any technology. I tried to be more soft with it, but I can't quite do that to an audience in the same way-

Mark: It's hard, yeah.

Bob Sutton: It's better when they don't. In terms of the basic, I think the basics are, the classes I teach are between six and about 80 students. The smaller the class the more interaction there is. Even a class of 60 or 70 if I go more than seven or eight minutes without having some break, showing a little film, asking them what they think, calling on somebody, doing a cold call on someone. That idea about keeping their attention remains the general principle of what does it take to keep a human being actually interested in what they're listening to so they don't tune out.

Mark: Last question on this speaking, because I'm just fascinated by that. When you show up do you show up as professor, or do you show up as Bob?

Bob Sutton: That's interesting. I think I show up as Professor Bob. One of my favorite things that yes/and thing.

Mark: That was, you just yes/anded me perfectly, nice job.

Bob Sutton: Yeah. The reason I say that is that I do believe that I was well-trained by mentors, I was involved and am involved with a large body of peer reviewed research, and I do believe that using, "Scientific approach," but being skeptical of it at the same time. That's what I kind of do, so that's the Professor Bob part, but I also I want to have fun. I like people, like my audience. I guess that it's kind of both of that. That's an interesting question and I guess I ducked it to some degree.

Mark: Nice job, nice job. Tell me, I want to finish up on this is the Big Speak podcast, and it gives us a chance to talk to speakers in a way we wouldn't normally, because we're not trying to sell each other anything here, we're just getting to know one another. You told me how you got on Big Speaks radar, what's it been like working with them?

Bob Sutton: Oh, well, I'm new. I've only been, I've officially signed up since January 1st, or something. So far it has been great. They're incredibly responsive, and I also have a little bit of, and I met with Barret, the president, we had a lovely conversation. I just loved his attitude about how we're going to approach the industry and we're going to, I'll collaborate everyone, I love that. He was like compete by being the most collaborative guy on earth, I love that part. Then on top of that, I have a little secret weapon. One of my former students works at Big Speak. [Daria 00:28:12] is her name. I actually even had a little bit of a connection, so that was good.

Mark: Oh, nice. Have you been represented in the past, or is this the first time?

Bob Sutton: I have been represented in the past, and I've been represented well. I've always been treated well by everybody who has represented me. I just thought it was time to try, honestly, a more modern, collaborative approach. I really think that Big Speak has this model of collaborating with agencies, being collaborative, and also being really simple and consistent and transparent. I've been very happy with what I've experienced thus far.

Mark: That's great. Bob, I really enjoyed this chance to get to know you, I would have loved to have had you as one of my professors, and I'm sure the students ... By the way, you've been doing this, what did you say? 25-30-ish years?

Bob Sutton: [inaudible 00:29:05] in 1983 as a bewildered 29-year-old. A long time, and I'm an organizational psychologist living in the engineering school. They have been so nice to me, I'm still confused about how nice they are to me.

Mark: Bob, with that, I just want to say thank you very much and good luck, and good luck to you and your whole speaking career.

Bob Sutton: Thank you so much, and thanks Mark, it's a delight to talk to you. You're a charming interviewer.

Mark: Thank you, bye-bye.

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