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DON’T PUSH OR SHOVE

‘What you see on screen is me, there’s no question of that … It’s a one-way portrayal, not the whole of me.’

– Alan Sugar
As the hard-nosed taskmaster on *The Apprentice* Alan Sugar has a reputation for being gruff, tough and notoriously intolerant of fools. His no-nonsense approach has earned him admiration from his legions of followers, but also criticism from several quarters. It appears that Sugar’s style has the capacity to divide public opinion: there are those that love him for his forthrightness and ability to tell it like it is, versus others who feel his tough-talking approach falls into bullying territory. Then there are those who just find him plain scary.

Indeed, in a 2007 *Radio Times* poll consisting of 5000 people, Sugar was ranked seventh out of the Top 10 scariest TV celebrities in the UK, with Gordon Ramsay leading the pack. Although most viewers are aware that many of Sugar’s reprimands are meted out with a firm twinkle in his eye, his management style has caused controversy among other groups, some of whom have branded him a bully.

The late Sir John Harvey-Jones, former chairman of ICI and presenter of business shows such as *Troubleshooter*, spoke out publicly against Sugar’s fondness for plain-speaking. In an interview with *Management Today* in 2006, Harvey-Jones stated: ‘I watch his programme with horror. If I had behaved that way for one day at ICI, I’d have been hot-stuffed and rightly.’

Similarly, the charity Kidscape, set up to protect children from bullying and sexual abuse, believe that *The Apprentice* ‘contributes to the problem of bullying’. However, Sugar, himself, has also voiced his concerns about how he has been portrayed in *The Apprentice*:
‘It’s frustrating for people who really know me – friends and family – who know I’m not really like that. To keep a team of loyal staff like I have for 30 years you can’t go around being a bully.’

Surely Sugar has a point. Bullies alienate people; they don’t tend to attract a loyal following or feel motivated enough to provide help and support to others. Sugar did not build up his business empire all by himself, but created a vast network of advisers and friends, and has a list of business contacts that would make the eyes of any aspiring entrepreneur water. It is doubtful that so many people would have stood by him all these years if he was considered a bully, and he certainly would not have been chosen as a role model for youth enterprise by the government.

It is true that Sugar has a unique personality and unconventional business style that has come into conflict, more than once, with the more conservative City business types – who in the past have been quite vocal in their suspicions about the level of Sugar’s business acumen. However, his sharp business mind and uncanny ability to make good decisions has won the respect of his contemporaries (albeit sometimes grudgingly).

But just because he doesn’t pull any punches when it comes to his communication style, doesn’t mean he throws any, either. There is a major difference between bullying and assertiveness, and Sugar has the latter in spades.
SPEAK YOUR MIND

‘I try to leave out the parts that people skip.’

Elmore Leonard

In a world where some might say business jargon has gone completely out of control, Sugar’s direct style is definitely refreshing. His jargon-free approach has proved extremely popular to hundreds of thousands of viewers, and won the admiration of many top-level business executives who not only envy Sugar’s management style but the fact that he can get away with it, without fear of reprisal. Never one for couching his language in bland or difficult-to-understand phrases, Sugar’s work colleagues, employees and apprentices always know where they stand.

Sugar has always been an advocate of plain speaking and believes that communication should be clear, concise and well-defined, something that also extends to the written word. An anecdote from his Amstrad days illustrates Sugar’s impatience for unclear communication: when he read the complex instruction manual that was to accompany the new Amstrad computer, to be launched in 1985, the language that had been used outraged him. The manual was full of complicated jargon that Sugar knew his target audience would simply not understand. So he demanded they create a simpler version in more relatable language, as he knew that the complex manual would alienate a large proportion of his intended target market.

Language full of pretentious business jargon is misleading, confusing and can leave a new employee completely mystified. Using jargon is often a smoke and mirrors exercise intended to bewitch the audience into believing that the speaker knows what he is talking about (even when he has no idea himself).
When filing out of a meeting following a particularly harrowing jargon-stuffed session, it is not uncommon for a new employee to feel ‘out of the loop’ and completely baffled as to the nature of the ‘actionables’ imposed in the meeting. In fact, in the cut-throat world of business where being quick on the uptake is an absolute prerequisite, in some organizations, an unfamiliarity with corporate-speak can really hinder a career. One business analyst remembers his first few weeks in his new job at an investment bank and the confusion he experienced after every meeting:

‘When I first joined an investment bank, I used to go into meetings and come out none the wiser as to what exactly took place. I didn’t know any of the business jargon, and when I looked at my notes they made no sense at all. I just knew it was fundamentally important to think “outside the box”, but I had no idea what that meant. I am attracted to Sir Alan’s jargon-free approach as it is refreshing and cathartic. Cathartic, meaning that it is a relief to see a manager speaking like a human being rather than a badly-programmed automaton.’

Indeed, ‘thinking outside the box’, ‘singing from the same hymn sheet’, ‘touching base’ and ‘blue sky thinking’ are all phrases that have made it into the top ten most hated business phrases according to a survey carried out by the Internet Advertising Bureau in the UK (IAB UK). Even more dangerously, business jargon alienates people. A prospective client from outside the industry who is unfamiliar with the business buzzwords is more likely go in the opposite direction, and seek out the services of someone else that understands the value of plain speaking.

Alan Sugar has made a career out of speaking his mind. He admits that his abrupt manner has got him into hot water at times, but
all in all, his honesty and directness has worked for rather than against him – and staying true to himself has won him a whole host of admirers over the years.

**HAVE A TWINKLE IN YOUR EYE**

Every business or corporation has its own work culture, designed to get the best out of their employees. Amstrad was built around Sugar’s unique personality and direct approach, which obviously appealed to his legion of loyal supporters, many of whom worked for him for over 30 years. So why did they stick around for so long? Because behind his impatience and bluster is a very keen sense of humour that attracts people to the outwardly gruff business mogul.

Although Sugar may come across as somewhat crotchety in *The Apprentice*’s boardroom, it is important to note that he delivers criticism with a very bright twinkle in his eye. Far from being a one-dimensional character, Sugar has a great sense of humour that often has the viewers at home in stitches, and the apprentices themselves trying valiantly not to crack a smile.

It is not his brusque style that has made him a star, but his refreshing honesty, sincerity and humour. There are many TV personalities that have made a name for themselves through their honest, direct approach. Famously branded a bully by Hollie Steel, the 10-year-old former *Britain’s Got Talent* contestant, Simon Cowell is the most obvious bad boy of television, with his acerbic wit and ability to reduce his *X Factor* and *Britain’s Got Talent* hopefuls into pools of tears, but some would argue that he is in danger of becoming a caricature of himself. Gordon Ramsay is fond of cursing
and doesn’t make any allowances for his trembling protégés. Similarly, Peter Jones from *Dragon’s Den* has become a little harsher on aspiring entrepreneurs over the last few years, but cannot quite seem to pull off his new direct stance.

However, Sugar manages to articulate in a style that is sensible, logical and constructive, relaying each message with a splash of humour and buckets of wit. Far from reducing his apprentices to tears, he manages to instil in them a sense of understanding, explaining exactly where they are going wrong and how they can learn from their mistakes. This is a management style that is almost impossible to emulate and it takes a certain type of personality to pull it off. Sugar sums it up well when he says to his apprentices, ‘Don’t start telling me that you’re just like me, because no-one’s like me; I’m unique.’

**ASSERTIVENESS RULES!**

There is a vast difference between aggressive and bullying behaviour, and being assertive. Indeed, assertive communication is the most effective approach when we are dealing with others in a business environment. Poor communication, whether passive or aggressive, can cause divisions within teams and tension in relationships. Being assertive requires confidence and a healthy respect for others; it is about taking charge and getting the message across in a clear and defined manner, so that nobody is left in any doubt as to where they stand or the action they need to take.

Sugar has always been an advocate of plain speaking and believes that communication should be clear, concise and well-defined.
Assertiveness comes from years of experience and being sufficiently self-aware to know how to communicate to others in such a way that the job gets done as quickly and as smoothly as possible. It is a real skill to master assertiveness without coming across as aggressive or offensive. Many people in the workplace fear that if they try to be assertive, they will end up crossing the line into aggression.

It is clear that Alan Sugar is a man who gets things done, and his management style is very much based on his skills as an assertive communicator. He makes no pretence about his firm approach, and it is his honesty and strength of character that has won him countless business deals over the last few decades. From experience, he knows that asking direct questions, using plain and simple language, will generate the answers he wants.

Dr Michael Sinclair is a Consultant Psychologist and Managing and Clinical Director of City Psychology Group (CPG) based in the City of London, and regularly treats business executives. Dr Sinclair believes that:

‘Assertive people are very popular and attractive to be around because they exude an air of certainty. Despite the fact that they may not tell us exactly what we want to hear, we always know where we stand with them. Assertive people lay down boundaries and set limits which gives us a sense of reassurance and stability, because we know how far we can push them – and when to stop. Sir Alan Sugar
is a typical example of an assertive person. He is confident, self-assured, focused and driven towards success, as well as being a clear communicator, a good speaker and a good listener.’

Tim Campbell, winner of the very first series of The Apprentice, also valued Alan Sugar’s assertive approach: ‘I come from a world where everything is politically correct. Being in a situation where things are actually expressed was quite refreshing. It may seem brutal, but for me it was always fair.’

Treating people fairly is key to Sugar’s communication technique. He may tell it like it is but he does not set out to humiliate or denigrate others. His main aim is to get the message across so he can provide them with some constructive criticism that will help them learn from their mistakes and do better in the future.

Certainly, he is competitive and driven, and his assertiveness shines through whenever he wants to get the best out of people or when he is in the depths of negotiation.

Sugar also has an inclusive style which means that everybody is involved in the communication and is clear about what is happening, the reasons behind it, who will be responsible for actioning the event, and what the outcome will be. He is a great believer in personal contact and prefers to talk face to face rather than over the phone or by email. Alan Sugar may be considered tough, scary even, but he is fair and makes sure that loyalty and hard work are always rewarded.
GIVE BULLIES SHORT SHRIFT

Throughout *The Apprentice*, Sugar has always maintained a tough stance against bullying and argumentative behaviour amongst the contestants, particularly when they are carrying out tasks.

Even so, there has been the odd public backlash as a result of heated arguments between the contestants; for example, in Series 4 of *The Apprentice*, caustic former sales manager, Jenny Celerier, appeared to pick on the rather eccentric Lucinda Ledgerwood, almost reducing her to tears. However, Sugar was quick to put a stop to the arguing in the boardroom and made it very clear that he would not tolerate argumentative and bullying behaviour: ‘I am sick and tired of listening to you. Arguing is not constructive. Instead of arguing you should be drumming up business.’

Similarly, Sugar took action over the behaviour of self-confessed ‘ruthless alpha female’, Katie Hopkins, during Series 3. Hopkins appeared to continually pass judgement on her fellow contestants, proclaiming on the show that rival Kristina Grimes was ‘too orange to be taken seriously’ and that Adam Hosker was rather too fond of wine, stating, ‘when your best friends are Mr. Pinot and Mr. Grigio, you want to watch it’.

Although Hopkins made it to the final three, Sugar claims he had no intention of making her his next apprentice, as he didn’t believe she was in the show for the right reasons. In one of *The*
Apprentice’s most memorable moments, Hopkins stepped down from the competition, citing her family as the main reason for resigning from the show. So although Hopkins escaped being officially fired, Sugar made it very clear that her barbed attitude would simply not be tolerated in the business world and he would have fired her if she hadn’t stepped down: ‘She was never ever, ever going to win. Never in a million years. It sounds contradictory and it takes someone with big balls to see through it, but she was there for all the wrong reasons.’

Alan Sugar expressed his outrage at her behaviour on The Apprentice: You’re Fired, the after show hosted by Adrian Chiles, by saying, ‘There’s no way I could see how anyone could employ someone like that. There’s something very sad there.’

So it is clear that Alan Sugar is not a man that will put up with aggressive and offensive behaviour either in the business world, or within The Apprentice teams, and is not shy about setting them straight about it.

DON’T BE A FUDDY-DUDDY

Sugar’s style and unique personality transcends generations. Although he is in his sixties he is able to reach a younger audience, as well as an older one – truly a unique gift. In fact, Sugar’s influence has spread across three generations: the Alan Sugar of the Amstrad years, his time at Tottenham Hotspur, and now The Apprentice years. Clearly the show’s producers at Talkback Thames also have faith in his ability to attract a more youthful audience when it was announced in 2009 that he would host a younger version of The Apprentice.
In *Junior Apprentice*, which is to be launched in 2010, Sugar will be putting ten ambitious teenagers aged 16 and 17 through their paces over a five-part series. The winner will receive prize money of £25,000, which will go towards setting them up in their chosen career.

Love him or hate him, it is clear that the boy from east London must be doing something right.

Sugar has long been a champion of the next generation and has given countless speeches at universities all over the country, inspiring young minds to make their mark in the business world. He has always attracted a younger following and has become increasingly popular with the teenage audience. In fact, The Youth of Today survey commissioned in 2009 by the Prince’s Trust revealed that teenagers rated Alan Sugar among the world’s greatest leaders, including Barack Obama, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Sugar has as much belief in young people as they do in him, telling *The Guardian*, ‘It is my long-held belief that we should be doing more to promote enterprise among young people, as the future of our economy relies on them.’ As enterprise czar, Sugar is also fronting a government campaign called Apprenticeships Make Things Happen, designed to encourage businesses to award apprenticeships to young people.

TV broadcaster and former *Smash Hits* editor Emma Jones explains why Sugar appeals to the younger generation:

‘Because he comes from nothing, he gives young people the ideal to aim for; he inspires people. He has created a
level playing field where anyone can be successful. When you’re young and idealistic, that kind of goal can be irresistible. He’s an authority figure, sort of like the strictest kind of school-teacher who you might be a bit scared of but for whom you have total respect. Indeed, Apprentice contestants strive to win his respect and approval as much as the prize. When young people are starting out in the workplace, they need a mentor to guide them. Alan Sugar has become everybody’s mentor. To be liked by him is a real mark of respect and a badge of honour. He is truly a champion of young people.’

For a man that was voted the most inspiring business figure in the UK by the business social networking site BT Tradespace, love him or hate him, it is clear that the boy from east London must be doing something right.
DON’T PUSH OR SHOVE

Alan Sugar may be famous for his gruff manner and no-nonsense attitude, but he is no bully. His assertiveness and honesty has won him many a business deal, and the admiration of millions of people, inside and outside the business world.

- **Speak your mind.** Sugar’s jargon-free approach allows him to communicate clearly and concisely, and leaves his listeners in no doubt as to where they stand and what they must do next.

- **Have a twinkle in your eye.** For all his bluntness and self-confessed belligerence, Sugar puts his point across with wit, humour and charisma, which have helped him to seal many a business deal, and win the loyalty of his employees and clients.

- **Assertiveness rules!** Part of being assertive is staying true to yourself. Nobody can pretend to be assertive, it is a skill that takes years of experience to refine. Sugar is naturally assertive. He manages to get his message across, using plain and simple language, a technique that always gets him the right answers.

- **Give bullies short shrift.** Time and again, Sugar has reprimanded his apprentices for arguing and back-stabbing. He was particularly outraged by Katie Hopkins’ behaviour towards her fellow contestants and made sure that she was aware of his disapproval.

- **Don’t be a fuddy-duddy.** Sugar has a style and personality that transcends generations. Teens aspire to follow in his footsteps and adults admire his sharp mind and keen business sense. Sugar has not let his age slow him down and shows no sign of retiring any time soon.