

Managing the subversive subordinate

Sometimes the most seemingly harmless, pliant employees can surprise you. You may think you can rely on them to mean what they say. Then you get burned.

Subversive subordinates operate in three ways. They speak ill of you behind your back, misrepresent your comments to others (thus causing costly misunderstandings) and feed you incorrect or distorted facts so you draw the wrong conclusions.

Withstand their subtle attacks by taking these preventive steps:

Anticipate and disarm. Meet a subversive employee head-on to root out the problem. In a private discussion, come right out and say, "It's my goal to _____. How can you help me?" Don't assume the individual is an enemy, and don't recite examples of instances where you think the individual has worked against you in the past. Let him answer your question and propose specific ways to produce results.

Fight paranoia. Beware of rounding up employees one by one and asking, "Are you with me or against me?" Many managers try to root out subversive employees using McCarthy-like tactics to trick workers into turning in their peers.

A wiser strategy is to meet with employees privately and ask for their impressions of your unit. Invite honest feedback in a supportive, nonthreatening tone. Don't put them on the spot by mentioning "suspects" by name and saying, "Tell me what this person has said about me."

Launch a charm offensive. If you sense that you're managing someone who abuses your trust and repeatedly operates behind your back, you might be tempted to keep your distance from that employee and his co-workers. But that's the worst possible response.

Instead, spend more time working alongside this individual and his peers. Treat him in a cordial, genuinely friendly manner. Share meals with him and solicit his input on key projects. Praise his fine efforts. If you disagree with something he says, do so firmly but diplomatically. By showing that you're a straight-shooter who listens and treats others with respect, you can contain the damage of a subversive plotter.