Employee undermining a manager? Tips to fix it

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An employee undermining a manager is the worst feeling a boss can get. No one takes you seriously. You have employees who think they are the boss - they’re running the show and getting away with, well, whatever they want. Your authority is nonexistent or severely compromised.

What’s next? You either fix it or you won’t be a boss much longer. Here are several tactics you can try to turn stop an employee undermining a manager.

Tell, don’t ask. Most of your directives should be commands, not questions. “Please have this back to me by noon tomorrow,” is more authoritative than “Does noonish tomorrow work for you?” The former is respectful, but forceful. The latter turns you into a doormat.

Play on two teams. Let your staff know that you’re not only the leader of their team, but you’re also a player on the larger team. You need to defend the policies and procedures of the organization. Failure to do so will show employees that you’re operating on your own, and upper management doesn’t have your back. This gives employees the green light to do an end run around you, effectively draining what little authority you thought you had.

Build a “firm phrase” arsenal. For the most part, your words should be considerate toward your staff. But from time to time you’ll need to show some bite, so you’ll need a few lines that have teeth. Examples: “Let me be clear about this.” “We don’t tolerate that here.” Or just add the word “now,” as in “I need to see you in my office. Now.” Overuse of your tough talk will turn staff against you, so use it judiciously.

When needed, be unpleasant. Your workers expect you to correct the flaws, inconsistencies and inefficiencies in the workplace. That means confronting slackers, saboteurs and rule-breakers. If your nature is perpetual joviality, shake it when you go into corrective mode. You need to reprimand, discipline, set an employee straight. Channel your inner bulldog. Employees do need to be reminded that there are consequences for crossing your clearly drawn lines.

Be friendly, but not friends. It’s all about compassion and camaraderie, not forging friendships. Once you’ve established yourself as a “buddy” to your subordinates, they will see you as a peer. The manipulators will manipulate, take advantage of the situation and irreparably undermine your authority. Show interest in their personal lives, but don’t wander into it.

Slam your door. A manager I knew believed in one certain tactic which—when used sparingly—helped him project an edge he never really had, or so he thought. “Sometimes,” he said, “you need to inject a little theater.” And what better way to get employees’ attention and wonder than the startling crash of the boss’s door? “Are you angry?” they think. “Did somebody do something wrong?”

Neither. You’re just in charge.