

What is and isn't employee insubordination

Of all the problems you deal with, employee insubordination is probably the one that galls you the most. It's a direct affront to your authority. It's an ice cream cone slapped out of your hand. A handful of snow stuffed down the back of your shirt. It sounds like this:

You: Paul, give Liz a hand with those invoices. She's swamped.

Paul: That ain't happenin'.

You have every right to pull the plug on Paul as long as such behavior—in this case, a nose-thumbing at a superior's direct order—is tagged as a firing offense in the employee handbook. It's always best not to fire in haste, but to cool down and discuss the behavior with HR. But first, Paul needs to explain his response, and you need to document the whole thing.

Here are the shades of insubordination, which is a willful display of disobedience or disrespect directed at, well, you.

Refusing a boss's direct order.

Be careful with this one. The refusal isn't often communicated as bluntly as Paul did. Normally it's through non-performance, underperformance or it comes with a "I can't because..." An employee may be turning down a direct order because he doesn't have the required skills to do it safely or he may not have the physical ability to properly execute the task. Or he is simply just too overwhelmed with other work to add the fresh duty you're piling on.

The employee possibly may be perceiving the assignment as being potentially illegal or unethical. Note: If an employee complains that he has been asked to violate a public safety or health law, that complaint must be investigated by your company's attorney. Particularly with technical questions -- top management and HR pros may not know the safety and health codes.

Always find out why an employee is refusing to follow an order. Other than a brash "no" or a recalcitrant challenge to your order, his behavior may not rise to the level of a fireable offense.

Also, the way you phrase your directive makes a difference. "I want you to unload the truck" is a direct order. "Can you unload the truck?" leaves the employee thinking there's an option. There's a subtlety at play, but a directive posed as a question technically would not be insubordination if the worker thought he had a choice.

Blatant disrespect for authority.

Disrespect certainly is in the eye of the beholder. Some managers (you may be one of them) have caught employees rolling their eyes during a staff meeting; or gave a heavy sigh or chuckle at the manager's directive, proposal or idea. Other bosses caught wind of being mocked and debased by their employees (yes, workers rat out one another on occasion). Although such behavior is disrespectful and should be addressed, it likely doesn't cross the line of fireable insubordination. You can call this mild insubordination, but don't let such insolence

slide: put the rude employee on your progressive discipline program and document everything.

Sometimes bosses have disagreements with employees and it can get heated. An angry exchange does not necessarily mean the employee was insubordinate. You'll need to look at the context of the dispute. Did the employee stand there and repeatedly call you an a**hole in front of the whole staff? That's insubordination. Did he vehemently shout "That won't work!" to your decision? That's likely not insubordination. Did he throw an object? Was it slammed into a trash bin? Hurlled at the wall? At you?

Never tolerate any violence that is directed at you, other workers or customers.

Insubordination can be complex and should be determined on a case-by-case basis, best refereed by HR.

Negativity is at the root of insubordination

Want to prevent insubordination? Then stamp out employee negativity.

Here are some strategies you can use:

1. Acknowledge that negativity exists. That is the first step in working toward changing it. Once you identify it, you can determine the best ways to combat it.
2. Set an example by keeping your communications positive. Don't give employees either a reason or an excuse to act negatively. Counter negative statements by pointing out a positive, changing the subject, or turning it into a problem-solving discussion. Whatever you do, do not stay silent because it can signify acceptance of a negative notion.
3. Expect positive actions from employees. Otherwise, they might complete your self-fulfilling prophecy. When employees complain, get them to take action instead, by asking them what they are going to do about it.
4. Give positive recognition often. Feedback should not be mostly critical; accolades are equally important. Constant criticism and negative feedback breed negativity. Therefore, it is important that you remind employees that their contributions make a difference in the company's success.
5. Get direct feedback from employees on how to make the workplace more enjoyable, less tense, etc., by using a satisfaction survey (see below). By providing whatever raises employees' job satisfaction, you may be able to turn their negative feelings about their jobs into positive ones.
6. Give employees more decision-making power. Employees' negativity may stem from feeling no control over their work. Give employees a voice when it comes to workplace decisions that involve them and their work.
7. Provide encouragement for your employees when you see them struggling. Arm them with the tools and skills they need to be successful on the job.

Let's get positive

Just as negativity can be contagious, so, too, can optimism. Instead of focusing on and talking in terms of "negatives," here are some pointers for firing up the optimism in employees.

- Sing employees' praises, reward a job well done, and get down in the trenches and show employees that you're willing to roll up your sleeves and pitch in when needed.
- Always ask employees for their suggestions before making major decisions that will affect them. Even if you don't implement them, show your appreciation for any suggestions employees make.
- Encourage employees to learn new skills by getting additional training. Challenge employees to accomplish new, better goals.