5 ways to handle the suck-up on your team

As flattering or convenient as it might be for a manager to have a sycophant on staff, the presence of such a person typically does more damage than good.

"A 'yes-man' who agrees with everything a manager says can be just as destructive as a disengaged employee who doesn't say anything at all. Withholding information and saying exactly what a person wants to hear can do the same level of harm as neither get to the truth of the matter," says Shane Metcalf, chief culture officer for 15Five.

Besides the employee failing to provide honest, useful feedback and unique ideas that help the company grow and prosper, the behavior can produce a toxic workplace. A staff gossiping about the "brown-noser" and evaluating how management reacts to "kissing up" isn't focused on productivity and greater company issues. Colleagues may dismiss or question anything the person says and avoid collaboration, leading to a divisive team with sagging morale.

And a suck-up puts a manager in an awkward position. Constant compliments in front of others can be embarrassing, especially when praise comes with questionable motives behind it. Furthermore, if the employee does end up getting a deserved promotion or a choice assignment, others may cry favoritism or wonder if they too should start brown-nosing because it seems like an effective way to get ahead.

Or, heaven forbid, you do consciously or unconsciously give the yes-person brownie points.

"The rest of the team becomes insecure," says Siddhartha Gupta, CEO of Mercer-Mettl. "If you are too partial to a sycophantic person just because they say yes to every viewpoint of yours, you will lose your credibility and trust the team places in you."

So how can managers put an end to the behavior? Try these strategies:

Ignore it

Make every effort to ignore attention seeking. This response shows others you have no interest in such games and that sucking up doesn't play well in this workplace.

Address the person directly

If someone fails to get the hint, consider a private conversation.

"Take a tactful approach to de-escalate the situation. I say de-escalate because this person may or may not have some emotional reason for approaching you in this way," says Yaniv Masjedi, CMO at Nextiva. "Take some time to sit them down, and get to know them. What's going on in their personal lives? Do they just need a friend? If so, can you be that person for them? Or, do you need to direct them to somewhere/someone that has the resources and time to provide the support they need?"

If, however, you're sure someone is absolutely just flattering you for personal gain, your tone will need to be less empathetic.

"Remain professional, of course, but make it clear that you see what is going on, and you do not appreciate the effect it is having on your team," Masjedi says.

Watch your own actions

How do you behave around those in higher positions? When staff members hear you lavishing false praise or agreeing with something they know you don't endorse, it gives the impression that dishonesty and blind following are tolerated or even necessary for advancement.

Create a safe environment

"Leaders need to explicitly tell people that they invite the truth and no one will be punished for sharing it," Metcalf says. "They need to communicate why it is important for people to not always agree with each other. Instead of berating or talking back when people disagree, leaders need to engage with the feedback that is directed to them in a productive and meaningful way."

Withhold your own opinion

Finally, suck-ups will have a hard time knowing what to agree with when your position isn't in front of them.

"Ask their opinions first without divulging your own to get the true picture," Gupta says. "Probe questions, give them alternatives to choose from, ask them why they suggested what they did, and then tell them what you were thinking. If you see them quickly change sides, you have to deal directly with the matter and have a healthy conversation with them. Tell them you don't appreciate such behavior and don't expect to see it in the future as well. Make them understand why it's important to have their own points to validate or disregard something."