

Handling an obstructionist

You know you've got a great team when employees act selflessly to make others look good. If they spread credit around and coach each other to improve, then it's clear they measure their success as a high-performing unit, not as lone wolves out to prove something.

But one obstructionist can ruin an otherwise great team. An individual who prefers to withhold information, hinder investigations or sabotage team projects can undermine any gains you've made in encouraging trust and collaboration.

Here are some techniques to turn an obstructionist into a positive contributor:

Promote reciprocity. Show employees how they must rely on each other to get ahead. Create mechanisms for mutual interdependence, such as pooling the diverse strengths of different employees so the team can produce better results.

"I don't give obstructionists a choice," says an office manager. "They have to train co-workers and rotate their shifts. If they must depend on others to get a raise, then they better open themselves up or they'll pay a price."

Explain the stakes. Don't assume an obstructionist realizes what he's doing. Some people naturally get in the habit of blocking teamwork or fighting against a host of perceived threats.

Level with these employees. Cite evidence of how their actions interfere with your unit's progress. Identify specific steps they can take to improve (such as sharing more of their research or showing more flexibility in responding to seasonal surges in activity). Also explain the consequences if they continue to set up barriers that impede your team's progress.

Create safe communication channels. Obstructionists often need to feel important or at least listened to. They may withhold or mislead to draw attention to themselves. Give them a way to express themselves that does the least harm. Example: Assign a "buddy" who serves as a nonjudgmental sounding board.