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How to Tell If Your Coworker is Undermining You — and How to Handle It with Grace

Skills and Professional Development

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Most of us have been in a situation where we suspect that we are being undermined by a coworker. Personally, I prefer outright hostility to undermining because at least it's overt and, thus, easier to address. Undermining, on the other hand, is subtle. It is not readily apparent like bullying or harassment. Because of the subversive nature of undermining, it is harder to spot and more difficult to report.

Being sabotaged in this way may make you question if you're just being too sensitive or if you're imagining things. That is the evil genius of one who undermines: The situation can be tricky to identify and tough to deal with. So, how do you tell if your colleague is trying to undermine you, and what can you do about it? This month's column will help answer those questions, starting with how to spot people who undermine you.

14 signs of undermining coworkers

They gossip

Someone who is trying to undermine you will likely badmouth others to you and you to others. Underminers criticize but offer no solutions because their goal is to make people look bad, not improve anything. Underminers think they look better if they make others look worse.

Merriam-Webster defines "undermine" as "to subvert or weaken insidiously or secretly." If you keep the "insidiously or secretly" piece of this definition in mind, you will be in a better position to effectively combat subversion.

They put negative thoughts in your head

Someone who is actively undermining you is likely to put negative thoughts in your head or tell you negative stories to get you ginned up and make you unhappy with your boss, your colleagues, your

work, or the workplace.

For example, he might say something like, “Why do you and I do all of the work for legal?” or “Senior management really needs to provide us with more resources like automated workflows!”

The underminer’s goal is to make you disgruntled because you’ll be less likely to form connections with others and less effective in your role. This allows the underminer to more effectively make you look bad to your colleagues and causes you to underperform in your role.

They take credit or place blame

An underminer is likely to take credit for your work or take full credit for something you worked on together. For example, if you draft a template agreement with your underminer, he is likely to tell your colleagues that he drafted an agreement for their use without ever mentioning your contributions.

On the flip side, someone who undermines may also blame you for her shortcomings. For example, if a sales representative you work with provides the wrong version of an agreement to a client, she may blame you, telling you that she gave the client the version you provided to her even if that’s not true.

They’re competitive in an unproductive way

Competition can be healthy, so not everyone you compete with is undercutting you. Those who undermine engage in an unhealthy form of competition. For example, they may act like they’ve worked at your company longer than you even if they haven’t, saying something like, “We’ve done it that way for the last five years,” when you’ve been there six years and your underminer has been there three years.

Another example of this unhealthy competition is someone shooting down everything you suggest or do, often in front of others, or correcting you in front of colleagues, the legal team, and/or your boss.

They withhold necessary information from you

Someone who is sabotaging you may withhold necessary information from you to thwart your work. Perhaps an underminer will give you an incorrect date, thus, making you miss a deadline or not give you all the relevant information so that, unbeknownst to you, you don’t do your best work.

They act like your supervisor

If the person subverting you is your lateral or is titled down the chain of command from you, he may start treating you like a direct report. For example, he may assign you work or talk to you like he’s senior to you. This may take place in front of others. The underminer’s goal is to make you feel less than him and, if done in front of others, to establish himself as the go-to resource among your colleagues.

They direct sabotaging comments and behavior at others as well

This is an interesting hallmark of underminers. Usually, the sandbagging behavior is not targeted. It’s usually directed at multiple people. For example, you may have an attorney colleague who you think is undercutting you, and you may observe him sabotaging others. For example, if the legal assistant

("Jane") takes a day off, the underminer might loudly say to the boss, "Where is Jane today?!"

When the boss responds that she took the day off, the underminer may reply, loudly, "Oh, okay, I'll just mail this myself." If it's part of an overall pattern, this is classic undermining behavior. It's subtle, but it points out to the boss that the assistant is not available for him when he needs her. Even if she has a legitimate day off, the underminer's goal is to put negative thoughts about the assistant in the boss' head.

They interfere with your productivity

To weaken your reputation, underminers may try to interfere with your productivity. Perhaps your underminer will stop by your office for a long visit to keep you from doing your work. Or perhaps she will encourage you to take a long lunch.

This is the tricky part of being undercut; some of the underminer's behavior seems friendly. You may think, "How nice to suggest I unwind with a long lunch!" If a well-intentioned coworker suggested this, it would be thoughtful, but not when your underminer suggests it. Your underminer has nefarious motives.

They're fake

An underminer's words often don't match their behavior. You may think that you're imagining the subversive behavior because the person doing it may be very friendly to your face, even acting like your buddy. Many of an underminer's activities require some sort of closeness or bond, so they are fake in order to have access to you to put negative thoughts in your head or to perform the other negative behaviors in this article.

They're envious of your success

An underminer is not happy when you succeed. If you get a promotion, the person torpedoing you is already finding ways to take that promotion from you or get herself promoted. Underminers think of work success as a zero-sum game. If you have more success, underminers feel like they are losing somehow.

Healthy coworkers can enjoy your achievements because they understand that multiple people can flourish in the workplace, but an underminer envies your good fortune and resents you for it. As much as it is important to be positive in the workplace, the underminer will prey on your positivity and use it to subtly sabotage you. Thus, if you recognize that someone is undercutting you, keep in mind that she is not happy about your advancement or you may be blindsided by her bad behavior.

They socially ostracize you

Your underminer may leave you out of social outings with colleagues or make rude or nasty comments, or backhanded insults in front of others. This is all part of the underminer's effort to subtly isolate you to undermine you in front of your colleagues.

For example, an attorney senior to you may drop an offhand comment about how she would not take your job because it would be beneath her level. This minimizes your role to your colleagues without being obviously hostile. It's subtle, but effective.

They act like the victim

The interesting part about an underminer is that, although they're victimizing you, they themselves often act like the victim. For example, someone who is undercutting you may socially ostracize you, then act like you're leaving him out when you bond with others at work.

They treat others a certain way

Interestingly, you can often identify an underminer by the way he treats others. For example, if you witness someone treating your colleagues in a way that minimizes their importance, you may be in the presence of an underminer.

If you see someone acting more demanding and entitled than cooperative and collaborative in the workplace, you may be in the presence of an underminer. If you observe someone only focusing on his own achievements and not the triumphs of those around him, you may be in the presence of an underminer.

They influence others to treat you differently

If someone you always got along well with suddenly starts to give you the cold shoulder for seemingly no reason, this is one of the most concerning signs that you're being undermined because this means that the undermining is working, at least with the person who is acting differently towards you. It is imperative to take steps to guard against any additional undermining.

The good news: Most colleagues are not undermining you

This may seem like a lot of negative information, but the good news is that most people you work with are not trying to undermine you. In my career thus far, I've worked with numerous intelligent and talented team players who rooted for my triumphs.

The best way to recognize underminers without compromising your positive attitude at work is to be fair to and open-minded about people in giving them a chance to be terrific colleagues; but, trust your gut if it tells you someone may be trying to undermine you.

What to do

Check with others

Check with other coworkers to see if the undermining is happening to them too. If it's undermining, chances are that it is. Keep in mind that the purpose of these conversations is information gathering, not gossiping and not bashing the undermining coworker. Engaging in the latter behaviors will only make the situation more complicated and worse.

If you find out others are being sabotaged as well, you can either handle the situation as a group or keep them in mind when you handle the situation yourself.

Document your concerns

Save emails and other correspondence with the underminer. Keep notes on undercutting behaviors

with dates and times of occurrences.

Keep everything transparent

Copy others on emails involving the underminer or undermining behaviors, including your boss, when it makes sense to do so. This is key when dealing with an underminer because they thrive by engaging in sneaky activities. If you bring everything out into the open, you severely hamper the underminer's efforts.

Maintain relationships with boss and colleagues

Continue to build your relationship with your boss. One way to do so is with regular meetings if your boss is willing to do that. The more your boss knows you care about your work and the better your boss knows you, the less a coworker will be able to successfully undermine you.

The same is true of your colleagues. The better the work you do for them, the less likely your coworker will be able to effectively undermine you to them. The more champions you have, the less someone can truly sabotage you, no matter how hard he tries. Building relationships with your colleagues is key to your career advancement for a wide variety of reasons.

Specific to dealing with subversion, if the underminer is hiding things from you, your network of colleagues will be invaluable. Make sure you're getting good information from your network or other sources so you don't look inept, unprepared, or out of touch.

Take a direct approach

When the undermining coworker does something concrete, approach him about it. For example, if a coworker leaves you out of a meeting, ask him why. If he continues to do it and you go to your boss about it, your attempt to resolve the problem directly with the offender and your documentation of the issue should go a long way with your boss.

If a promotion is up for grabs, make clear to your boss that you want it. Sometimes we assume that our boss knows we want a promotion, but always be direct in telling your boss that you want the position and are ready for it.

Remain professional

Throughout all of this, keep things in perspective and be calm, concise, and prepared. Stick to the facts of the situation. For example, you might say, "My challenge is that Joe no longer includes me in the monthly meetings we have with IT for a project we're working on." Contrast that with inserting personal, emotional, or opinion into what you report to your boss.

For example, avoid saying something like, "Joe is so selfish. All he cares about is himself and whether or not he looks good to IT!" Not only will this take away from your credibility, it also doesn't give your boss anything concrete to work with. Even if you're right and Joe is selfish, your boss can't fix that.

Your boss can only try to correct behaviors, which is why you solely want to present facts. Always remember that while you can handle your personal life any way that you want to, this is your

workplace. You need to remain professional and fact-based.

For mental health purposes, do remember that this is only the work portion of your life and this, too, shall pass. It's just something you have to get through and deal with. Rise above the drama and do not let the undercutting decrease your confidence.

I have watched great employees start to question themselves because of undermining coworkers or even undermining bosses. Don't let that happen to you. Keep your head held high and try to combat the sabotage with the information in this article.

I've written about this before, but it's a great reminder: Keep your sense of humor to avoid a cycle of negativity in your workplace, which is not healthy and not a headspace that you want to be in.

If all else fails, consider moving on

If it seems like your boss and your organization will not support you in your efforts to address the undermining, it's probably time to move on. Do your best at your current job, search for a new role, and leave as soon as you find the right opportunity.

You may wonder why an organization wouldn't address undermining if you present them with facts, but some workplaces are toxic or just aren't a good fit for you. It's okay to acknowledge that, keep the relationships you have with your champions, and move on to a new employer.

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products.