



# They're trampling me!

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DEAR CHIEF: I'm the boss on a small engineering team. Quite often my subordinates openly disagree with me on the decisions I make and sometimes they even do it in front of others. I feel disrespected and weak as a boss. I've lost my confidence and am second-guessing my decisions on a daily basis. And it always seems like they have to have the last word. Shouldn't I be the one having the last word? How can I get a handle on this?

## TRAMPLED BOSS



DEAR TRAMPLED BOSS: It can certainly be challenging at times when dealing with outspoken or egotistical subordinates. When people on your team openly disagree with you in front of others, it's typically because they either: 1) Feel confident enough to engage in debate because of an open climate that welcomes people's input; or 2) Think they're smarter than you, constantly need attention, or don't respect your status, expertise, and/or boundaries.

If #1 applies to your situation, that's a good thing as creativity and healthy conflict will bring about effective decision making. If #2 applies then someone is probably out of line and you must address it with them as soon as possible, and if feasible, in a private setting. If you're hot under the collar about it, be sure to give yourself some time to simmer down beforehand. And while you're making your point to the subordinate, still give them an opportunity to express their opinions

and feelings as well (you can learn quite a bit by listening to them whether they are right or wrong). Ensure they understand why their actions are not conducive to good morale and discipline and give them examples of how they can constructively disagree with you without being disrespectful. Also reassure them you value their point of view and want them to continue to speak up, but in a more constructive way.

If this tactic doesn't work, then more drastic actions may be necessary. Human resource departments, if you have one, can give you proper guidance on administering potential disciplinary actions. Otherwise, remember that people who work for you are grown-ups. You have to give them room to be real people and that means they will sometimes disagree, argue, and get upset. As long as you have a good team and people respect one another, it can be healthy for them to openly speak up or debate important topics.

When you make non-emergency decisions, do you ever consult with your subordinates beforehand? If not, I recommend you do so when time permits. By discussing matters to get their opinions before you make a decision, you can absorb their disagreements upfront, allowing them to express their ideas. In fact, these discussions could actually unveil potential issues or problems that you might have otherwise overlooked. Likewise, these discussions give your staff an opportunity to learn your perspective of the situation, giving them a better understanding of why certain actions may be necessary.

Applying this type of group thinking

is almost always better than individual thinking. Like the age-old saying "two minds are better than one," your involvement of your team's ideas, suggestions, and concerns will lead to effective decisions on courses of action necessary for given objectives. And quite often, when people know their opinions are heard and considered when decisions are made, they will feel like they contributed to those decisions and not be as susceptible to openly disagreeing with them later on. This approach to decision-making will give you added confidence and respect and should help alleviate your feelings of being a weak boss; however, be aware during times of crisis or emergency that more direct and timely decisions (without subordinates' input) will be necessary and required.

So try involving your subordinates at the onset of your decision-making process and you'll make great strides in restoring your status and confidence as the boss. And keep in mind: It doesn't pay to always have the last word, always be right, or always correct people on every little thing. Sometimes, whether they are right or wrong, it's best to let it go. Know the difference between things important enough that you need to have the last word and things where it really doesn't matter.



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