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How to Handle a Disrespectful Employee as a New Manager

THE MANAGER TRACK · EPISODE 335 CLIFF NOTES

The main messages from the episode: why the first moment of disrespect is a test the whole team watches, the 2 default mistakes, the 4-step calm correction with the exact lines to use, and what to do when it turns into a pattern.



01 The core idea

The first time someone on your team is openly disrespectful to you, more people are watching than the one person you're dealing with. You're focused on whoever rolled their eyes. Meanwhile, five other people in the room are working out what just happened and what it says about you.

WHAT DISRESPECT MEANS HERE

A moment when someone signals, in front of others or around you, that your role doesn't carry much weight. Disagreement is different. People should absolutely disagree with you.

That first moment is almost always a boundary being tested. Someone wants to know where the line is, and the line ends up wherever you let it settle. The instinct is to treat it as a relationship problem: Do they like me? How do I win them over? Look at the structural problem first. The way you respond shapes what the whole team believes is acceptable, and that matters far more than whether one person likes you.

What it usually looks like

- An eye roll when you introduce a new process
- A "per my last email" reply with your boss copied
- A joke about something you said that gets a laugh in the team meeting
- A deadline that gets ignored, followed by surprise when you raise it
- Someone going straight to your manager with something they never raised with you

If you react big over an eye roll, you look rattled. If you don't react at all, you've told everyone the line is further out than they thought.

02 The 3 people who test you early

On the surface it's the same eye roll or snarky comment. Underneath, different conversations are going on in their heads, and naming which one you're dealing with changes your response.

WHO	WHAT'S GOING ON	WHAT THEY NEED TO SEE
The peer who wanted your job	They applied, assumed it was theirs, or hoped to be asked. They're not necessarily out to sabotage you, but part of them needs the decision to have been a mistake.	That you were the right fit for the role, and that you're staying.
The loyalist	They liked the previous manager or how things ran before, so every change can read as criticism of what came before.	That you respect what came before, and that your changes aren't a verdict on it.
The senior person	Someone with more tenure or expertise is checking whether your title has anything behind it.	That you make a decision and hold it, with confidence and competence.



03 The 2 default mistakes

Mistake 1: Letting it slide

You tell yourself it's not worth the friction. You're new and want to keep the peace. But silence is also a response. The person who tested you learns the line is further out, everyone who watched learns the same thing, and the next test is usually a little bigger. It doesn't need to become a bigger issue, and it still needs to be addressed.

Mistake 2: The public correction

"I don't appreciate that comment," said in front of everyone, can feel strong in the moment. What the room often sees is that one comment, especially the first one, got under your skin. Now the meeting is about the two of you instead of the work, and you look like the one who got rattled, which can read as insecurity.

THE EXCEPTION

If a comment is genuinely inappropriate or discriminatory, address it right away and make your response visible to everyone.

04 The calm correction

The principle: address slight disrespect **promptly, privately and briefly, with no visible emotion**. The calm does a lot of the work. It tells everyone, including the person who tested you, that this didn't knock you off balance or shake your confidence.

- 1 **Reset the room**
One line in the meeting that acknowledges it without engaging with it. Then keep going.
- 2 **Follow up the same day**
In private, while it's fresh for both of you.
- 3 **Ask first, then state the standard**
Get curious about what was behind it, then say the standard once.
- 4 **Close the loop**
End the conversation clearly and treat them like anyone else afterward.

Step 1: Reset the room

A new manager presents a new way to prioritize incoming requests in her second week. A former peer leans back and asks, in front of everyone, "Is this an actual necessary change, or is this a new manager thing?" A couple of people laugh. Her instinct is to walk through the whole rationale again, and the meeting turns into her defending herself. One line, with no edge and no fishing for agreement, keeps the frame.

SAY THIS

"Let's take that offline. Next item."

OR THIS

"Fair question. I'll come find you after this meeting."

OR, IF A BRIEF ANSWER FITS

"Yes, this is a meaningful change. We'll track the numbers over the next two months, then assess what the data shows and decide what's next."



05 Steps 2 to 4: The private follow-up

Step 2: Follow up the same day

It's a small behavior, so it deserves a timely reaction, not a mention at your next one-on-one in 10 days. If you wait, you rehearse it in your head and it grows, they assume you've dropped it, and when you finally bring it up they wonder why you sat on it for so long. Walk over to their desk instead of sending an email. Doing it visibly also tells the team you're not letting it go.

SAY THIS

"Hey, can you quickly hop in a meeting room with me?"

Step 3: Ask first, then state the standard

Open with curiosity, since you don't know yet what was behind it. Sometimes there's a real concern underneath. Sometimes they genuinely didn't realize how it landed. Call out the behavior, ask an open question, then stop talking and let them answer.

OPEN WITH

"I noticed what happened in the meeting. You seemed frustrated when we talked about the new process. What was going on for you?"

A SMALL WORDING RULE

Say "you seemed frustrated," never "you were frustrated." You can't read someone's emotions for certain, so hedge it.

Whatever they say, take the substance seriously and separate it from how it was delivered. Don't lose the message because it wasn't delivered nicely. Then state the standard, once.

THEN SAY

"Look, we can disagree, and we can disagree openly and respectfully in front of the team. What we can't do is disagree in that way, with that tone. If you have a concern about a decision I made, bring it to me first, and we can hash it out."

WATCH FOR THE LECTURE

If you catch yourself explaining why respect matters, or listing other times they did something similar, you've drifted into a lecture. The lecture tells them they got you rattled. One standard, said once.

Step 4: Close the loop

END WITH

"Good, let's leave it there and move forward."

Then, the next day, treat them exactly the way you treat anyone else on the team. No coldness, no point-making, no cutting them off. That's how they learn you addressed a behavior and aren't holding a grudge.



06 What the research says

Christine Porath at Georgetown and Christine Pearson at Thunderbird polled 800 managers and employees across 17 industries about what they did after being on the receiving end of incivility at work.

48%

intentionally decreased their work effort

78%

said their commitment to the organization declined

12%

said they left their job because of the uncivil treatment

Source: Christine Porath and Christine Pearson, "The Price of Incivility," Harvard Business Review, 2013, as summarized by the Thunderbird School of Global Management. When disrespect goes unaddressed, the cost lands on the people around it, and those are the people you're responsible for.

Behavior spreads

Will Felps planted an actor in small teams working on a business task, playing a jerk, a slacker or a downer. Teams with him performed 30% to 40% worse, and when he played the jerk, others started acting like jerks too. The one group that held up had a member who asked questions, drew everyone in and defused conflict. He didn't confront the actor or make a speech. His steadiness set the tone.

Source: Will Felps, as described on This American Life, Episode 370.

And it's about you, too

Nathanael Fast at USC and Serena Chen at UC Berkeley ran 4 studies on people in positions of power. When people in a power role felt incompetent in it, they became more aggressive toward the people below them. When the researchers boosted their sense of self-worth, the aggression went away.

Source: Fast and Chen, "When the Boss Feels Inadequate," Psychological Science, 2009.

"It's the combination of having a high-power role and fearing that one is not up to the task that causes power holders to lash out." Serena Chen

New managers are exactly the group that feels this. When a comment hits hard, ask how much of your reaction is about the comment and how much is about your own doubt that you're ready for the role.

07 When it becomes a pattern

WHEN	WHAT IT MEANS	YOUR MOVE
First time	A moment.	The calm correction.
Second time	Information. They heard the standard and chose not to meet it.	A much more direct conversation that still ends with a question: "We talked about this two weeks ago, and it happened again in today's meeting. I need it to stop. What's going on?"
Third time	A performance issue.	Write down the date, what happened and what you said, specifically: "On the 4th and the 12th of this month, you dismissed a decision in front of the team," not "You're disrespectful." Tell them plainly it's now part of how you evaluate their work. Loop in your own manager or HR.



08 An advanced move: public credit

Within a couple of weeks of the private conversation, find a real reason to credit that person publicly for something specific. It shows the team the correction was about behavior, and it shows the person the way back in. Plenty of people who test a new manager are waiting to find out whether they can work with you. This answers it.

FOR EXAMPLE

"The analysis that Jordan pulled on the vendor costs changed what we decided last week. Thank you so much for doing that."

09 Before you respond

1. Is this ☐ a disagreement ☐ a status move?
2. Who am I dealing with? ☐ The peer ☐ The loyalist ☐ The senior person
3. Can I address it in one sentence? ☐ Yes, answer briefly ☐ No, take it offline

My one line for the room _____

When I'll follow up today _____

10 Try this week

- ① **Pick your one line**
Before your next team meeting, decide on the sentence you'd use if someone pushed on you, so you don't have to find it in the moment.
- ② **Reflect on your reaction**
Think of the last comment that got to you. How much of your reaction was about what they did, and how much about whether you think you belong in the seat? A year from now, what do you want your team to say about how you handled it?

Keep going

The Leadership Accelerator is Archova's 12-week program for new and early-stage managers. It covers setting expectations with people who used to be your peers, having direct conversations without avoiding them or overdoing them, giving direct feedback and staying calm and composed, in a small cohort with live group coaching, on-demand training and one-on-one support.

archova.org/leadership-accelerator [Book a Leadership Strategy Call](#) [Listen to Episode 335](#)