

Be the boss without being overly bossy

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Employees are complaining that I micromanage and don't follow a chain of command when giving out assignments. I'll admit that I'm afraid of the mistakes people can make, because mistakes cost us money, customers and reputation. Also, I can't stand having people sitting around, so I give people who aren't busy something to do right then and there. Or, if I need something, as owner of the company I feel it's my right to ask whoever is nearby to pitch in. Obviously not everyone in my company agrees with my approach. And I do want to get out from under having everything sitting all on my shoulders. What do you suggest?

Some business owners say they want more cooperation, more teamwork, smoother workflow. Unfortunately they have some bad habits that get in the way. Interruptions and micromanaging can dilute what the owner really wants: an organization that can function independently, productively and profitably.

Think about the owner who tells her managers they are in charge, then asks individuals in the manager's department to, "do me a favor". Or, the manager who tells people not to do something, because they're afraid the person is going to make a mess of things. Often this behavior of disrupting what people are supposed to be doing has the best of intentions, but less than productive outcomes.

There is a better way. Working with people in regularly scheduled meetings, being clear about expectations and respecting the organization chart will help. Learning to hold back from instant requests and feedback in all but the most dire of circumstances will also lead to progress.

Changing behavior is all about changing habits. Anyone who has tried something new knows that most things don't always go so smoothly in the beginning. This owner is going to have to put intention onto what she wants, and be willing to practice until new habits are built.

What are the new habits? Start by working with managers. Ask managers to tell you how they're going to manage workloads and staff. Ask how they will follow up until they know tasks are correctly completed. Listen, and ask questions, rather than telling them how to do things. Get managers to talk it through, until you're in agreement as to how things will unfold.

If you want something done by a specific deadline, or in a specific way, state your demands. Allow for some negotiation, as your managers may have information that could affect what you thought you wanted to have happen. Ask yourself, "Is it crucial that override what the manager has planned? Or is it possible that even though the manager is approaching things differently than I would, things can still work out?" Pick your shots.

Everybody wants to report to the company owner, but if your company has more than a few employees, that just isn't efficient or effective. Figure out how to get down to 6 direct reports. Learn to delegate through them to the rest of the organization.

The best way to work with managers is through regularly scheduled meetings: same day, same time, same place. Between meetings, build a list of things to discuss. Set a time limit to each meeting. End when the time limit is up, even if you haven't covered everything. Check off items that get covered. At the end of the meeting take suggestions for items to go over at the next meeting.

Now you're onto daily activity. Consider the organization chart before intervening. Every time you ask someone to take action at your direction, you're in effect telling them they work directly for you. Unfortunately if this isn't one of your 6 direct reports, you probably won't have the time needed to follow up properly. Or, if you do take on the task of following up, you'll likely end up neglecting another responsibility to one of your other direct reports. Remember, there's only so much room on your plate.

When it's time to provide someone with corrective feedback, ask yourself, who is this person's manager. Of course, if something life threatening is about to happen feel free to step in. Otherwise, as long as life and limb aren't in jeopardy,

make a note and pass it along to the employee's manager: "Saw employee x doing y and z on (date) at (place). Concern was that . . ." Or, bring the note to your next meeting with that manager, for the two of you to discuss the situation.

Let your managers do their jobs. Don't interrupt their plans. And by all means respect and reinforce their authority by working through them rather than around them.

Looking for a good book? Try *What To Do When You Become The Boss: How new managers become successful managers*, by Bob Selden.

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