

How to Stop People Undermining You

The Power Moves | 10 June, 2018 | by Lucio Buffalmano

How to stop someone from undermining you?

I'm glad you asked.

This article will delve into the nasty social phenomenon of social undermining.

By the end of it, you will know:

- What does it mean to undermine someone
- Why do some people undermine others
- How to stop someone from undermining you

Laughing at someone is one way to undermine someone's status

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What Does it Mean to Undermine Someone

We will work with this definition for “undermining someone:

Someone is undermining you when they say or do anything which decreases your social status, calls into question your moral and ethics, undermines your authority in a relevant field or causes third parties to lose respect for you.

Now that's a mouthful, I know, but it will be much clearer with examples.

How to Undermine Someone

There are countless ways to undermine someone.

Here are the most popular:

- Highlight their mistake

- Make a joke at their expense
- Directly challenge or attack them
- Laugh disproportionately at someone's mistake (it's a way to highlight it)
- Diminish their achievements (they cheated, lied, didn't do so great after all)
- Adding something after someone's finished talking

Here is an example from the last one.

Coming from Family Guy it's ironic and exaggerated, but it makes the point quite well:

Adding something is often a sneaky way of highlighting a mistake and to [steal the show](#).

It's as if they were saying "good, *but* you forgot this, now *I* will fix it". And that decreases your authority (and increases theirs).

As you might have noticed, it's a common cheap shot of [workplace warriors](#).

Undermining VS Social Climbing

In a previous article we have talked about [social climbing](#).

Social climbing is taking value away from someone for our own social gain.

Undermining and social climbing are similar and there's often an overlap. Undermining however doesn't have to happen in social settings.

It's because the underminer is not only and not always motivated by social gain, but also by an (unconscious) need to feel better with himself.

And dragging people down is one way to achieve it, whether it's in a social setting or not.

Why do People Undermine Others

It's been my life experience that people undermine when there is envy, animosity, low self esteem or somewhat of a "competition mentality".

- **Envy**

People undermine you when you're in charge or have more social power but they feel close enough to feel that *they* could be on top. And they resent it.

Undermining you is their way to bring you down so they can go up.

- **Low self esteem**

Bringing people down is a (sick) way for some to build themselves up. A very sick way. Instead of working on themselves and building alliances of equally cool people, they try to drag you down to make themselves feel better.

- **Socially clueless**

Some people just don't know any better.

They grew up in family acting in [socially retarded way](#) and never realized how damaging it is.

- **Power move**

Undermining is a way of challenging someone and saying “I can tackle you” or “I’m above you / you’re not that far higher up”.

With these people, you better nip it in the bud or they will see your silence as a sign of weakness.

Never let the power mover smell blood.

But in my experience, power movers are a minority when it comes to undermining, and the majority are in the first three categories.

Undermining Examples

Here are a few real life examples of undermining someone

#1. The Ironic Underminer

The ironic underminer throws a jab and then hides behind the “it was just a joke” defense.

Here is an example:

It was a hot day a couple weeks ago. But it was a long time I hadn’t rocked my Japanese-styled overcoat, and I decided to take it for a spin.

When I arrived to my location, I was greeted with a typical ironic undermining move:

| **Underminer:** Did you realize it’s 30 degrees today

Well no, I was freezing, but now that you say it, I suddenly realize it’s quite warm indeed -eye rolling-.

#2. The Serious Underminer

Has this ever happened to you:

You joke about something, and you think it should be obvious it’s a joke. Then here it comes the guy who does not get, or pretend he doesn’t get it, and schools you as if you what you had said was not in jest, but serious.

If you don’t know what I’m talking about, here is a great example.

The topic was that opprobrium that is GDPR:

You can almost see the underminer’s finger being wiggled there

Mine was rather obviously a joke, but the underminer twisted it as if it was a serious comment. And then proceeded to take the high-authoritative road on me.

This was undermining + power move.

It reminded of [this scene in Meet the Parents](#).

#3. The Inconsequential Mistake Fixer

Some mistakes are inconsequential.

People busy with their life will let it drop.

And socially skilled people would act like Carnegie suggest in [How to Win Friends](#) and help others save face.

But not the underminer. Any mistake they can fix is too good an occasion to pass up!

Look at this example:

[The humorous delivery frames the “I got you SOB” undermining game](#)

Why do some underminers like to fix other people’s mistakes?

Fixing someone's mistake is a big shot of confidence for the ego starved. It says "I got you, I'm smarter".

And the more someone perceives himself being lower on the value scale, the bigger the boost they get from undermining you.

If you are in a similar situation, deliver your correction in a serious tone, or you risk looking like a cheap underminer who derives joy from pointing other people's fault.

#4. Undermining in Relationships

One of the most heinous forms of undermining happens in relationships.

It's one of the worst because relationships should be the safest place for us, and undermining instead tells our partners that it's not really "us", but it's you VS me.

Here's an example:

By saying "36.999 of which are mine" he is undermining her achievements and dragging her down. Terrible stuff for any relationship, please don't do that :).

Why You Must Stop Undermining People

If you catch yourself doing any undermining, start by not being too harsh on yourself.

I've been there, I sometimes still fall for it.

But at the same time don't accept that kind of behavior from yourself.

Here's why we must fix it and eradicate it:

It's Low Quality

Not undermining is not about being nice and friendly. Undermining is low value behavior.

It's passive aggressive, sneaky and the most glaring sign of "frenemy". High value people either speak directly or ignore.

It Wastes Your Own Resources

When you undermine you waste resources and mental cycles on the negative aspects of life. On tearing people down instead of increasing your own value.

It makes you bitter and ugly -in the large sense of the word-.

It Doesn't Work

Undermining people won't increase your status. It's more likely to decrease it!

Not everyone will understand what you're up to, but they will catch on the negative feeling of disgust that undermining evokes in most people.

How to Stop Someone From Undermining You

And now here's the meat of the article.

How to stop people undermining you:

#1. Seek To Turn Them Into Friends

Remember this:

Many underminers are undermining you out of jealousy and envy, *plus* because they think you disdain them

In social dynamics, I call this “[self-rejection](#)”.

Such as, they think that you will reject them -or have already rejected them-, they feel bad about it, and so they jump on “social attack mode”.

That’s why I recommend first and foremost to try to extend an olive branch, [add more warmth to your power](#), and [set-up collaborative frames](#).

Strategically, it pays off to be kind first.

See this chart:

So first, try to mend things.

Yes, you might be angry at the underminer. But remember that he might be undermining because he thinks you’re an a**hole.

And even if you *are* a bit of an ahole, this strategy simply works better.

So show him first you can be a good friend, and then if that doesn’t work move to the next steps.

#2. Address it Directly

Prolonged undermining can be annoying and can call into question your actual power, authority, or willingness to confront disrespect.

That’s why addressing it directly, either publicly or privately, can be a great antidote.

You would start with something like this:

You: Hey, I’d like to talk you about something. It makes me quite uncomfortable when you...

Two things to remember when you address it directly:

1. Either bring specific, clear and *recent* examples
2. Do it as soon as they undermine you

Otherwise, if you do it too long after they will play dumb, pretend it’s not true or say they were “[just joking](#)”.

#3. Take it To the Surface

Undermining comments derive their power by being sneaky and looking *almost* like normal comments.

By questioning you want to push the underminer fully into the “bad guy” side, so that he will show himself for who he is.

At that point, once you make it clear for everyone to see what he was up to, you can either take the high road and drop it or you can address it directly.

I much recommend the former.

Here’s how that would work with the first example:

Underminer: Do you realize it's like 30 degrees today?

You: It's a hot day, yes, why are you saying that

Underminer: you're wearing a jacket

You: And? Is there something wrong with wearing a jacket on a hot day?

See where you're going?

Now you're cornering him.

You're basically communicating "why the hell are you criticizing me", but playing his own game, without being direct.

Now he either comes up with something, and he looks judgmental and narrow-minded, or he has to backtrack.

If he backtracks, you won.

If he keeps going, you keep cornering him further before he is so over-extended that it's just natural to drop your social ax.

Like this:

Underminer: yeah, it makes no sense to wear a jacket when it's so hot

You: who says that, is there like a law prohibiting to wear a jacket on a hot day

Underminer: not it's just silly

You: I don't think so and you sound a bit judgmental today mate. Anyway, good seeing you

You can also use this technique in a bit more of a confrontational tone if the situation calls for it. Here's a great example from "Horrible Bosses":

Notice his facial expression: perfect.

#4. Ignore It

This is pure [basic frame control](#).

Both socially and mentally, never let an underminer get to you.

If you can't ignore it and it's taking a toll on your psychological well being, then you need to address it with one of the two above options.

But if you can truly and honestly be superior and ignore it without the underminer actually denting your self-confidence and your social standing, then you're golden with just moving forward.

You won't waste energies on it and you can focus on yourself.

Eventually, the underminer will be naturally crushed by the huge distance that you will put between yourself and him.

And they will be free to move on to undermine someone else a bit more on their level.

Don't Undermine: Build People Up!

Now, here's an example of a socially skilled, warm and friendly fella.

Compare the first example of my jacket on a hot day with what another [socially smarter](#) guy said that same day:

Me: Wow, cool jacket man, as usual you're on top of the game. Where did you get it

Who do you think I liked most?

But also, let's drop who I liked the most as maybe nobody gives a flying F about who I liked most.

Who brought good vibes for everyone? Who improved the mood and who *everyone else* also liked more?

Silly questions, right?

People who make friends, but also people who build alliances and are socially successful don't undermine people, they build them up!

How High-Value People Behave

[High-value people](#) don't usually have [frenemies](#) who they try to undermine.

They have friends. Or have enemies. Or largely ignore or keep a distance from those they can't make enemies, but don't want to be friends with.

If you have a problem with someone, you talk to them straight.

If you don't like someone, don't engage them and ignore them. Or say it to their face.

Like Scarface brilliantly explained:

Also read:

- [How to spot a frenemy](#)
- [Dealing with subtly rude people](#)
- [Leaders who undermine others](#)
- [Social climbing](#)
- [Alpha male posturing](#) (quit that shit)

SUMMARY

This article was originally entitled "how to lose friends and make enemies".

Then I changed it to make the topic clearer.

But that old title still tells the truth: undermining people will not make you friends and it can easily make you enemies.

All the while, you poison yourself and you broadcast low-value to the world.

They all sound great reasons to stop undermining and start building up.

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