

# What to Do When the Boss Is Wrong

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Mercurial bosses in dysfunctional offices sometimes give orders that their employees just ignore—even when that dysfunctional office is the highest in the country. According to Robert Mueller’s recent report, Donald Trump tried to get his staff to impede the special counsel’s investigation, but figures such as Don McGahn and Rod Rosenstein protected the president—and themselves—by quietly letting those orders slide.

In better-run offices, employees defy their superiors overtly. Back in the early 1980s, when Joanna Hoffman was in charge of marketing for Apple’s nascent Macintosh computer system, her boss, Steve Jobs, was a demanding, tantrum-throwing perfectionist. According to his biographer, Walter Isaacson, every year from 1981 on, the team developing the Mac gave an award to the person who could best stand up to Jobs. The first winner was Hoffman.

At one point, Isaacson wrote, she found out that Jobs had adjusted her marketing projections “in a way she found totally reality-distorting.” As she marched toward his office, she told his assistant, “I’m going to take a knife and stab it into his heart.” The company’s counsel overheard her and rushed out to stop her. “But,” she told Isaacson, “Steve heard me out and backed down.” The next year, she won the award again.

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Workplaces function better, business ethicists point out, when they make room for a certain amount of defiance. “I think you *always* have to make independent judgments about orders that come down to you,” Charlan Nemeth, a psychology professor at the University of California at Berkeley, said in an email. Nemeth, the author of the 2018 book *In Defense of Troublemakers*, added, “People who speak up are often those most loyal to the organization.”