

Are you guilty of micromanaging? Stop before it's too late

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Ask the countless employees who find themselves working for a micromanager, and they'll tell you that it is not only maddening, but wearisome and demoralizing. Dealing with a controlling boss who needs to question and redo everything you do can be gruelling. But if you look carefully enough, the symptoms of micromanagement are there to see. You just may not have paid attention to them.

THE SIGNS OF A MICROMANAGER

You would have done it differently. The results never seem to be up to your high standards. You're the master of details, and you're proud of it; in fact, you take great satisfaction in catching typos and calculation errors. You constantly ask for frequent updates so that you can stay in the loop, and the best way to do that is to be cc'd on all e-mails. You love to edit and rewrite someone else's work. And it gives you great comfort to know exactly what your employees are working on and where they are at any given time.

If this sounds like you, then you probably also think that this defines good management – after all, getting the details right means that your department is putting out good work. But when this happens constantly, for every task, big or small, and with every employee, rookie or experienced, then it is micromanagement.

And the problem with micromanagement is, over time, it harms your team's morale, and eventually their performance and productivity. When employees don't feel trusted, when they feel disempowered and disengaged, then it's easier for them to not bother making an effort. Why invest in good decision-making and high performance when the boss is going to do it over anyway? Micromanagement doesn't just hurt your team, it hurts you as well. Focusing on the minutiae means that you have less time to spend on strategic, high-level responsibilities. And as your workload increases, your efficiency decreases.

If you're willing to admit that you're a micromanager and that you want to change, what can you do? Here are four ideas.

Focus on results: Shift from “what” to “how.” As a leader, it's your job to set expectations about deliverables. But there's a huge difference between stating what you expect and spelling out, step-by-step, how to get there. Trust that your staff has the capability to figure out the details – that's why you hired them. You might be pleasantly surprised to discover that their approach, perhaps not the way you would have done it, yields exceptional results.

Lose the perfection mindset: Everything does not have to be 100-per-cent perfect. Sure, there are notable exceptions, such as anything having to do with safety or life-and-death situations. But the vast majority of workplace activities do not require flawless execution: “Good” may be entirely acceptable.

Realize that your need for perfection is your vulnerability and it comes at a cost: lower efficiency and disengaged employees.

Hold weekly update meetings: The fear of loss of control is what often drives the need to micro-manage. So feed that need by holding weekly update meetings with your people. Your objective should be to obtain updates on progress, not to get bogged down in the minutiae. So fight the urge to sink into the “how,” no matter how enticing it may seem. In reality, your rise in the leadership ranks means you should increasingly be paying attention to strategic issues, so put your focus up high instead of down low.

Enlist support from your staff: Let your direct reports know that you are working on becoming less of a micromanager. Ask them to respectfully point out when you shift to micromanaging. And assure them that you won't shoot the messenger. It takes courage and vulnerability to solicit assistance from your people, but this is what characterizes exceptional leaders.

Remember to watch for the trap – if you're a micromanager, it's very easy to explain away your actions as “attention to detail” and “ensuring quality work.” But the unfortunate reality is that this behaviour comes at an immense cost: employee morale, team performance and workplace productivity.

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