

The Perils of Micromanaging

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"If I was meant to be controlled, I would have come with a remote." —AUTHOR UNKNOWN



Scientists are trained from the earliest stages to be in control. Experiments are controlled, variables are controlled, and even our methods of writing and speaking about our work are controlled. It's probably not a big surprise that when scientists achieve the role of supervisors they have a strong desire to maintain a high level of control over projects (and supervisees). Chances are they learned the behavior from a previous supervisor and they perpetuate the cycle of micromanagement. The words micromanager and micromanagement have strong negative connotations. Nobody wants to be micromanaged, and nobody wants to be considered a micromanager. Yet very few micromanagers recognize their own leadership style.

Are you a micromanager?

Do you feel the need to take the lead on every project? Do you have to provide input into every decision? Do you prefer to direct nearly every step in a process? Do you frequently think something to the effect of "It'll just be faster if I do this myself instead of teaching someone to do it"? Is your favorite saying "If you want something done right, do it yourself"? Have you noticed your people avoiding you? Does the word "delegate" make you cringe? If you do actually delegate a task to someone do you get actively involved at the first sign of trouble? If you answered yes to one or more of these questions, you might be a micromanager.

Micromanagers rarely recognize their own condition. They quite honestly believe that they are improving the process by being involved in and controlling nearly everything that is done. Granted, every person you work with will require different levels of input, and some people really need close supervision, especially in the early stages of learning a new task. Basically, you need to question the motivations behind your actions. Are you diving into the details in order to get a better grasp of what's going on? There's nothing wrong with that. However, if you are digging into the weeds and controlling every decision because you need to remind folks that you are in control or because you simply can't trust anyone but yourself, then you have a problem.

So what's the problem?

Simply put, micromanaging your supervisees may make you feel better by giving you a sense of control, but it's just not an effective leadership style. Research indicates that micromanaging is a great way to reduce job satisfaction, limit creativity, stifle communication, and reduce productivity (for review see "The Consequences of Micromanaging," **Kenneth E. Fracaro**, *Contract Management*, July 2007). Micromanaging adversely impacts the people you work with by inhibiting their development, limiting their creativity, making them feel undervalued, and ultimately reducing their motivation to near zero levels. Work quality decreases and employee turnover rates increase. Micromanaging also reduces the productivity of the micromanager by overburdening them with tasks that could be accomplished by others if they were just willing to take the chance.

What can I do about it?

1. **Make yourself let go.** Most micromanagers work under the assumption that their involvement either saves time or ensures the task is done right. Put it to the test (after all, if you are reading this you're probably a scientist). Pick a task you would have been likely to closely monitor, if not outright do yourself, and give it to someone and let them go. Don't go looking for constant updates, encourage the task-doer to come to you. See how it goes. Keep track of the time spent on their part and yours. Now factor in that the next time the task comes up you will need to spend even less time on it, as will your supervisee. You'll likely see that the overall man hours spent will decrease as productivity and efficiency increase. Even if these factors are equal, pay attention to what it does for your supervisee's morale.
2. **Ask, don't tell.** A question can get you to the same point as a command. Ask "What do you think we should do here?" See if it meshes with your vision. If not, come to a compromise, or even (gasp) let them try their way first.

3. **Cultivate independent thinking.** Take the time to encourage new ideas, good and bad. When providing feedback, stick to the "ask, don't tell" principle. If you identify a weak point in an idea, ask questions that lead the innovator to the conclusion you've already come to. Keep the tone positive, and do whatever you can to encourage spontaneity and creativity.
4. **Provide resources, not correction.** Instead of jumping in at the first sign of a problem and taking control to remedy the situation, soothe your need to manage by providing the resources for people to solve the problem themselves.
5. **Try to be a leader, not a manager.** There is a huge difference between leadership and management. According to author and business consultant **Patti Hathaway** "managers manage details...leaders manage people by encouraging a sense of ownership and accountability among subordinates." Remember, when you micromanage people you are effectively saying "I don't need you" or "I don't trust you." Keep your focus on the big picture and trust people to execute the tasks that you delegate.
Give it a try, take your hands off the wheel. You never know, you might like it. ■