

HR Director Article

The rise of 'deep help' – why today's leaders must go beyond shallow advice and favours

Most innovative leaders look for ways to offer their employees autonomy and the opportunity to manage themselves. However, this freedom doesn't mean managers should simply leave their staff alone. In fact, many issues at work require help and support from experienced co-workers. So how can leaders provide help which is accepted and used, when many still fear that deep involvement equates to micromanagement?

Over the past nine years, I've been studying the dynamics of helping in organizations, together with my colleagues [Julianna Pillemer](#) from The Wharton School and [Teresa Amabile](#) from Harvard Business School. [In a multi-year study of a major design consultancy](#), we found that leaders in complex, knowledge intensive environments often spent hours or even days assisting employees with complicated, persistent problems in their work. We call this kind of leader behaviour 'deep help.' We discovered that deep help can play a major role in the success of projects, especially when businesses adopt flatter, more collaborative approaches to management.

We found two distinct ways in which leaders provided deep help. First, when employees faced important transitions between different stages of a project, leaders would serve as "guides", helping in a series of long, tightly grouped meetings. Second, when subordinates had more persistent problems, leaders served as "path-clearers" when they addressed a persistent problem in briefer, intermittent sessions. These sessions took the heat off of employees by doing whatever needed to be done – even if these were more menial tasks, like ordering lunch.

Our research suggests that providing deep help was one of the most valued things that leaders could do for their employees. But how did these leaders avoid being seen as micro-managers when providing deep help?

First, leaders in our study were careful to *frame their role* as soon as they could. In other words, they made it clear that they were there to help – not to judge or takeover. They were sending clear signals from the beginning.

Second, these leaders made sure that they *allocated enough time* to really understand issues from their subordinates' perspective. Rather than coming in and pointing out what needed to be done, they asked questions and listened respectfully, or they made general proposals to help, but made sure they waited for their employees to come to them and ask for specific help.

We also observed some instances in which leaders tried to give deep help, but ended up undermining their employees' sense of autonomy and ultimately disrupting their work rather than helping them. When leaders didn't frame their role, subordinates often felt like they had no choice but to accept all of a leaders' suggestions. They believed that a manager was spending so much time with them because they didn't trust their abilities, rather than an honest effort to support them. We call these instances *takeovers*, which employees found threatening and counterproductive.

On top of this, when leaders were in a hurry, they often only had time to identify problems, but not to figure out how to fix them. In our study, workers referred to such instances as *swoop-and-poops*. This is where leaders quickly swooped in and would "poop" on the hard work of their subordinates by offering criticism, but not advice for how to address it. This was usually not done out of spite, but only from lack of time.

To counteract this, organisations should take several actions to promote deep help. This means giving senior employees flexibility in their schedules and making it clear to teams that managers want to help. The outcome is an open working environment where workers are happy to receive help, and senior leaders are happy to give it.

As we know, getting genuinely valuable help can be difficult when teams are overwhelmed by the ambiguities of a project and the pressure to complete it. Therefore, leaders should also make sure that they are addressing the most important problems and allocating enough time to do so as this often requires more than a quick conversation.

As work gets more complex and people's job descriptions more ambiguous, deep help will become more necessary than ever. The biggest change, though, may be encouraging leaders to consider helping as a critical part of managing in today's business world.

Main Research Basis for this article:

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<https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2016.0207>