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The Travails of Micromanagement

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The Travails of Micromanagement

Abstract

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Inevitably perhaps given their subject's compass, publications on management often make recommendations to enrich the discipline and enhance its practice. (Continuing advances ininformation technology and psychology—that, respectively, enable and accelerate globalization and draw from both social neuroscience and databases on billions of individuals' decisions—will surely broaden the vista.)

Startlingly, however, few articles (even less tomes) ever mention micromanagement as an endemic corporate sickness we ought to cure. Our bodies are, to a large degree, a reflectionof our lives: their physical disorders point to what we should look at, for instance, toxic lifestyles (and their workplaces) to which we may be addicted. But could it be that we learn to love our diseases? Do the belief systems and associated (sub)conscious patterns we fashion shape in turn our lives to such an extent that we eschew common sense and come to "need" what ails us?

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Knowledge
Solutions

The Travails of Micromanagement

By Olivier Serrat

Micromanagement is mismanagement. What is it that one should decide in the higher echelons of an organization that, given the same data and information, personnel in the lower echelons might not run just as well?

Do we Love Our Diseases?

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Startlingly, however, few articles (even less tomes) ever mention micromanagement as an endemic corporate sickness we ought to cure. Our bodies are, to a large degree, a reflection of our lives: their physical disorders point to what we should look at, for instance, toxic lifestyles (and their workplaces) to which we may be addicted.[1] But could it be that we learn to love our diseases? Do the belief systems and associated (sub)conscious patterns we fashion shape in turn our lives to such an extent that we eschew common sense and come to "need" what ails us?

A Micromanagement Thesaurus

In a necessarily social context, to micromanage is to direct and control a person, group, or system with excessive or unnecessary oversight or input. (In its mildest form, it translates as setting tasks to "subordinates" but checking on progress frequently, leaving them with the distinct impression that they could do it better and faster.) By so doing, micromanagers take decisions away from those who should be making decisions.

Micromanagers feed on formal authority in personal fiefdoms. The more inveterate among them must know all that is going on. They decide how work gets done. They dictate time and track it. They hold meeting after meeting and meetings before meetings. They demand bullet points, briefing notes, and status reports, preferably in large folders with tagged separators, aka "reportomania." They swear by management information systems and results dashboards. They multiply the levels of approval required and focus on procedural trivia in greater detail than they can actually process. They patrol corridors

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[1] Traditional Chinese medicine—based on Taoist philosophical and religious conceptions of balance and opposites, e.g., Yin-Yang and the Five Elements of fire, earth, metal, water, and wood and other metaphysical belief systems, has for 2,000–3,000 years paid attention to the interrelationships of organs. (Poor health is seen to result from an imbalance between what are believed to be interconnected organ systems, with one organ system weakening or overexciting others.) In the West, Edward Bach (1886—1936), an English physician and homeopath, found that when he treated personalities and feelings the physical distress and unhappiness of patients would be alleviated as the natural healing potential in their bodies was unblocked and allowed to work once more. (He developed the Bach flower remedies, a form of alternative medicine inspired by classical homeopathic traditions.)

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(but do not manage by walking around). They hover to make sure subordinates do things right. They e-mail at speed messages they asked you to draft. They nitpick and rewrite your correspondence with a red pen, counting salutation and closing. They give tedious advice on minutiae (but do not coach or mentor). They hand out tasks but pull them back at the first sign of trouble, thereby curtailing the reasonable freedom that individuals and teams must have to embrace failure. They rarely entertain proposals for change; when they do it is to deconstruct them. (The only original thinking a micromanager recognizes is his or her own: the fact that he or she was promoted previously is meant to bear that out.) They share responsibility—indeed, magnify that of underlings, but not formal authority. They call your home at night from their BlackBerry.[2] They do not like to praise (and therefore go to the boss's office on their own in order not to give credit).

Obviously, any of these traits can only adversely affect interpersonal communication, feedback, openness, flexibility, vertical and horizontal trust, creativity and innovation, productivity, critical thinking, problem solving, and organizational performance. At worst, "control freaks," aka "dream killers" and "nanomanagers," can make work a wretched experience for personnel (and, of course, their families) with detrimental impacts on work quality and turnover.[3] Intense micromanagement is akin to bullying.

Why Micromanage?

On the whole, people micromanage to assuage their anxieties about organizational performance: they feel better if they are continuously directing and controlling the actions of others—at heart, this reveals emotional insecurity on their part.[4] It gives micromanagers the illusion of control (or usefulness). Another motive is lack of trust in the abilities of staff—micromanagers do not believe that their colleagues will successfully complete a task or discharge a responsibility even when they say they will.[5] Both explanations owe to poor management (and leadership) skills.

> *Pointy Haired Boss: Build a new server to replace the one with the corrupt operating system.*
>
> *Dilbert: That's what I'm doing right now.*
>
> *Pointy Haired Boss: Recover the data from the bad server and put it on the new one.*
>
> *Dilbert: That's the whole point.*
>
> *Pointy Haired Boss: Then see if you can reinstall the operating system on the old one and redeploy it.*
>
> *Dilbert: Do you have any instructions that are not blindingly obvious?*
>
> *Pointy Haired Boss: This is called managing. The alternative is chaos.*
>
> *Dilbert: How did you just make chaos sound like a good thing?*
>
> *Pointy Haired Boss: You should test the new server.*
>
> *Dilbert: Seriously, can we try the chaos thing?*
>
> —Scott Adams

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2   The Blackberry is a line of mobile e-mail and smartphone devices introduced in 1999. During meetings, corporate Blackberry owners shuffle the device in and out of their pockets to check for new messages and respond quick-fire amid conversation to affirm their executive status. (In some organizations, trying very hard is more important than delivering useful results: not responding swiftly—even after working hours or over the weekend—might indicate one does not care enough to check.)

3   It is self-evident that giving people responsibility for making decisions in their jobs generates greater morale, commitment, and productivity. Most of the time, micromanaged personnel become indolent, apprehensive, frustrated, or depressed. They cease being accountable. Since high levels of engagement and enablement clearly benefit organizations, disengagement has commensurately high direct, indirect, and hidden costs, not least of which inhibited staff development. (Micromanagement should also curtail a manager's promotional possibilities: someone who is poor at delegation, or does nothing to develop one or more potential successors, ought not be considered for promotion to a level where delegation takes on even greater importance.)

4   It can, of course, be the case that the person selected for a job is not a good fit. At the time of appointment, little or no research was done to determine his or her suitability for the demands of the position. Else, the top candidate may have been selected largely based on education, background, experience, and interviews, that is, subjective means, not objective means, e.g., assessment of values, behaviors—including past efforts at delegation since historical performance is a reliable predictor, and personal skills.

5   In opposition, they may deliberately micromanage staff who have a bigger vision than them.

> *The best executive is the one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done, and self-restraint to keep from meddling with them while they do it.*
>
> —Theodore Roosevelt

To note, although micromanagement is readily distinguished by personnel,[6] micromanagers do not often consider themselves as such: they characterize their working style as structured and organized; if pushed, they will only admit to being perfectionists. But the sum total is that they impose on colleagues conditions that meet their personal needs, not those of the affected parties who may be just as much concerned with, say, application of technical knowledge and skills, client orientation, achieving results, working together, learning and knowledge sharing, managing staff, leadership and strategic thinking, or inspiring trust and integrity as the supervisor (if not more). In such instances, micromanagement gets in the way of organizational performance.

People learn by observing what others do—indeed, the first person everyone examines to determine behavior is one's "superior." To micromanage less and delegate more, supervisors are obliged to embody the right attributes and attitudes. Management is the process of doing things right. (Leadership is the process of working out the right things to do.) Under a manager who dictates all actions and otherwise tries to control every move, individuals and teams will never be as efficient and effective as they would under servant or distributed leadership. The steps to losing the micromanager label are to (i) admit one's tendencies; (ii) solicit the views of staff (and supervisors)—that is, talking and especially listening to them; (iii) make out the exact cause(s) of one's proclivities;[7] and (iv) ask for advice, guidance, and training.[8] (A key element of learning and development would be experiential exercises that showcase the benefits from delegating and the costs of not doing so.)

Without a doubt, the very structure of an organization can facilitate or hinder delegation: where people have broad purviews, for instance, in flatter, egalitarian organizations, delegation is the norm; hierarchical organizations, on the other hand, can signal the nature and strength of boundaries and favor the emergence of silos, the habitat micromanagers thrive in. Machine, missionary, and political organizations—to name three of Henry Minztberg's seven configurations—tend to attract people who are by nature autocratic.[9] In time, their management style may sow in inherently fertile ground an organizational mindset that will be difficult to alter if senior management and human resource departments do not pay

> *More and more people in the workforce—and most knowledge workers—will have to manage themselves.*
>
> —Peter Drucker

continuing attention. The entire organization might then develop a culture of micromanagement, whereby the behaviors its structure is prone to encourage become embedded in business processes and serve as the operational model for day-to-day activities. The detrimental effects would then extend beyond the organization's four walls to damage its reputation, as revealed perhaps by external surveys of perceptions, causing insecurity among senior management and prompting further micromanagement.

The Antonym of Micromanagement

Micromanagement is one of the most widely condemned managerial sins yet remains an acceptable way of failing. Culprits should have better things to do with their time:[10] management is not about directing and controlling work; it is about enabling it to be done.

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[6] Hint: epithets people use to describe a micromanager include bothersome, bureaucratic, controlling, critical, dictatorial, judgmental, meddlesome, snooping, suspicious, and toxic.

[7] Who and what do you micromanage? When and where does the behavior occur? Why do you micromanage?

[8] These *Knowledge Solutions* do not discuss the case of micromanagers who know their shortcomings but still strive to retain direction and control to continue enjoying the status and perquisites of their function. Where micromanagement is consciously carried out, a time-honored sequence runs thus: faced by micromanagement, the more engaged workers that might represent a challenge quickly vote with their feet and move on; since the talent pool shrinks and the micromanager fills vacancies with drones and sycophants, more management "help" becomes necessary. These *Knowledge Solutions* do not purport either to suggest what steps micromanaged persons might take to improve the situation, such as volunteering to take on additional work they are confident in or communicating frequently their progress, lest that exculpate micromanagers for negative behavior.

[9] See Henry Mintzberg. 1989. *Mintzberg on Management: Inside Our Strange World of Organizations*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

[10] Time and energy spent micromanaging—multiplied across an entire division, office, or even department—amounts to a significant, self-defeating waste of a manager's resources.

Delegation is the antithesis of micromanagement and a wellspring of organizational performance. Specifically, it is the downward transfer of formal authority, a sure recipe with which to increase empowerment and job satisfaction and more directly meet the needs of clients, audiences, and partners. Currently, four broad

> *Surround yourself with the best people you can find, delegate authority, and don't interfere as long as the policy you've decided upon is being carried out.*
>
> —Ronald Reagan

principles underpin measured delegation (and concomitant efforts to build readiness levels): (i) match staff to task, (ii) organize and communicate clearly, (iii) choose the level of delegation carefully, and (iv) transfer formal authority and accountability with the task. However, in the 21st century, high-performance organizations might have to go further. They will have to ask: what is it that one should decide in the higher echelons of an organization that, given the same data and information, personnel in the lower echelons might not run just as well? The concept of subsidiarity[11] already exists; with new imperatives and associated belief systems, we can shake the micromanagement disease.

Further Reading

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For further information

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[11] The organizing principle of subsidiarity proposes that matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest, or least centralized competent authority.

Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.