



Trust and Micromanagement

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Few things sap engagement and trust within workers as much as being micromanaged. When you are told what to do and then given explicit details about how to do it, all creativity and enthusiasm are snuffed out. Furthermore you feel the boss does not trust you to do the job right, which is exactly the signal being sent to you. I learned a way to prevent being micromanaged early in my career.

At one point I was transferred to another division, and was very excited because my new boss was earmarked as a leader with a great deal of potential. I figured he would have good coattails. He had a great reputation in the organization, but he did have one flaw of which many people complained. This leader was prone to micromanage the people who worked directly for him. The reputation was that he was the king of all micromanagers.

Knowing this, I set out on a course to accomplish two things in my early interfaces with him. First I tried to anticipate what he was going to ask of me and tried to have an answer ready. For example, if he would say, "Why don't you increase the temperature on the cooling cycle," I would reply, "I did an experiment on that two days ago, and it made the product too brittle."

In order to anticipate what he might suggest, I really had to do a lot of extra thinking about his approach to the process and what he could potentially request. In doing so, I actually over prepared myself with knowledge about the process, which ultimately impressed him.

I recall at one point inviting him into a conference room on his lunch hour to show him several dozen charts of experiments I had already tried on the process. He did not share many suggestions after that because he figured I had covered all the bases.

The second thing I did was to over communicate. He never wondered what I was up to and did not have a chance to get to me first because I always beat him to it. For example, I observed that he had a habit of leaving instructions for his staff by voicemail

during his lunch hour. Every day at about 11 a.m., I would send him a voicemail sharing my plans and ideas I was working on that day. After a few weeks, he basically left me alone to do my work in my own way, and we got along very well for 25 years while he micromanaged the others.

Leaders who micromanage people are often not even aware they are doing it. They prefer to call it “coaching,” but the impact can be quite negative on the culture.

Micromanagers are not well liked or well respected because they send signals that the workers are not trusted to do the work correctly without constant intervention. They sap the organization of vital enthusiasm and creativity. You may be doing a lot more micromanaging than you are aware of. It becomes a habit, and it feels like the right way to get things accomplished. Yet in the end, it undermines the culture of trust and leads to low engagement.

Exercise for you: Today, make a special note of how you coach people to do their work in your organization. Try to be as objective as possible so that you’re not fooling yourself. Make sure you are viewing your actions from the point of view of the workers rather than through your own filters. Ask yourself what would be the result if you were able to scale back your micromanaging tendencies by about 50%.

Increasing your awareness of the tendency to micromanage is really the best defense against overusing this hurtful practice. You can improve not only your own productivity but also that of the entire organization by scaling back on your interventions and trusting others more. It is really just a bad habit, so it takes some real effort to change it.

The preceding was derived from an episode in “Building Trust,” a 30 part video series by Bob Whipple “The Trust Ambassador.” To view three short (3 minutes each) examples at no cost go to <http://www.avanoo.com/first3/517>

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