

6 Tips to Avoid Being Micromanaged

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Most of us have been in a situation where we have felt micromanaged. We were given something to do, but then badgered about exactly how to do it. This happens more in low trust groups, and it often creates a further degradation in trust. We usually fault the manager for this problem because he or she is the one barking out the minute and detailed orders on how to do the job.

I have a theory on micromanagement. It is not entirely the fault of the leader who is intrusive into the workings of employees. I believe the employees are at least partly to blame in many cases. Reason: I used to work for a leader who was known as the king of all micromanagers. He basically tried to run everything by telling people exactly how to accomplish their tasks. He was an excellent leader otherwise, but people always dinged him on being way too intrusive.

I learned about his reputation before ever going to work for him. During my first few weeks, I went way overboard in my preparation. I would anticipate any potential question he might have and be prepared with data to support my conclusions. When he would suggest something to try, I usually could say, "it has already been done." I would communicate my plans to him every day (including weekends) and ask lots of questions about what was wanted. He never had an opportunity to get to me because I always got to him first. After a while, he basically left me alone and did not micromanage me very much for the next 25 years. We got along great, while he continued to micromanage others.

This experience led me to create a list of six tips you can use to reduce the tendency for a boss to micromanage you. Granted, this will not be 100% effective in all cases, but these steps can really help reduce the problem to a manageable level. Note: I will use the male pronoun here for simplification, but the same concepts would apply for both genders.

1. Try to anticipate what the manager will suggest

Work to understand the point of view of the manager, and figure out the suggested methods so when he says, "Do it this way," often you can say, "That's exactly how I am doing it. Or you might say, I tried doing it that way, but it created too much scrap, so I am now doing it a better way.

2. Be sure you are clear on the expectations

Often the manager has been somewhat vague on the precise deliverable. Before going off to do a task, take that extra time to verify what the boss really wants in the end. If it is a long or complex set of activities, see if you can get some sub-goals that you can deliver along the way.

3. Get to the boss before he gets to you

This technique really helps when you have a voice mail or text connection with the boss. Get familiar with the timing of communications and preempt the instructions with a note of your own. For example, if the boss has a habit of catching up on his micromanaging tasks during the lunch hour, simply provide an update to him at about 11 a.m. every day.

4. If the boss is getting intrusive, surprise him

It stops a micromanager dead in his tracks when he tries to tell you how to do step 3 and you tell him you are already on step 8. Step 3 was done yesterday, and the results were supplied to him in his e-mail inbox. The boss is blown away that you made so much progress.

5. Seek to build a trusting relationship with the micromanager

If the boss really trusts you, it means there will be less worry on his part that you will do things incorrectly. That means you are left alone to do things your way.

6. Call him on it

The boss needs to understand that for you to be empowered and give your best effort to the organization, you need to be free to use your own initiative. I knew one employee who brought a set of handcuffs into the office. Whenever his boss would try to micromanage him, he would just get out the cuffs and slip them on. The message was loud and clear, "if you want me to do this well, don't tie my hands."

My rule of thumb on micromanaging is that credibility and communication allow you to manage things as you see fit. Lack of credibility and communication often lead to being micromanaged.

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