



Delegation and Micromanagement

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

The two concepts of delegation and micromanagement are related and make interesting topics to analyze and dissect. I think it is ironic that most leaders have difficulty doing enough delegating, but they seem to have no problem doing plenty of micromanaging. Let's take the concepts one at a time, and then put them together to uncover some antidotes.

Why don't leaders delegate more?

The simple answer is a combination of fear and laziness. The fear comes from the realization that if something important is delegated to an underling, it may not get done up to the standard that the leader would do himself. (Note: I will use male pronouns here to avoid the awkward "he or she" language throughout. Clearly the issues in this article are gender neutral.) The laziness comes from the realization that to teach someone else how a task should be done is usually more time consuming than to just do it yourself.

A leader might reason that it is a better use of his time to get the task done and move on than to invest the time to explain the deliverables in great detail and then teach the underling how to accomplish the task, then wait for it to get done, and finally deal with the problems if the job is done poorly.

The result of not doing enough delegation is that people in the organization do not get developed; the leader is overstressed trying to do everything himself, which leads to low empowerment of the workforce and a grumpy boss. Also, the work product is continually accomplished through the leader's paradigm, which may stifle more creative solutions lurking in the minds of the underlings.

Why do Leaders Micromanage so much?

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.

Leaders who micromanage people are often not even aware they are doing it. They are really just trying to be helpful and prefer to call it “coaching.” Since they have a sincere desire to have things go “right” (according to their playbook), they invest in monitoring how things are progressing so they can make corrective suggestions early in the process when changes are easier to make.

If you are guilty of micromanaging more than you should, how can you tell? Look for clues in the body language of the people you are coaching. A stiffening of the facial muscles is an indication of stress. Also, watch the hands; if you see the fingers clench into a semi fist posture when you suggest that the person try something, it is a good bet that person is feeling micromanaged.

Another easy way to tell if you are too intrusive with your suggestions is simply to ask the person. “Am I being too prescriptive here?” often will generate an honest reply, especially if you have not bitten off the person’s head the last few times he has opened up about his feelings or expressed an opinion. You can also ask other people if you have a tendency to micromanage. Have the topic of micromanagement be on the agenda for group meetings and have an open discussion about the level of coaching you are giving. It may lead to healthy and valuable input.

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 not be aware how much micromanaging you are actually doing. 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.

Combining more delegation with less micromanagement

In the hubbub of everyday activities, it is easy for leaders to get on the wrong end of both conditions. They fail to delegate enough, and the things that are delegated are managed too closely. The remedy for these problems starts with awareness. First, examine your own actions and ask yourself if you would be better off making some changes. If the answer is yes, then it is a simple matter of deciding, one case at a time, to reverse the logic. Consider an action you would normally do today and ask someone else to do it. Once the specification of deliverable is crystal clear and **verified** for understanding, back off on the coaching for how to do the job.

You can let the person know that you are always available to help out where there is a question, need, or desire, but you are not going to hover as much as you have

historically done. Watch the body language when you say those words, and if you see a faint smile, you will know you are heading in the right direction.

If you are coaching other leaders who may have struggled with delegation and micromanagement, print out this article and give them each a copy of it, then have an open discussion someday as a “Lunch and Learn” session. It will be a very rich conversation.

Step out of your comfort zone when delegating, and trust that the task will be done well. You may be surprised that the quality of solutions made by empowered underlings is far better than you would do yourself. Accept that on occasion you will not be thrilled with the solution, but the benefits of creating an empowered workforce far outweigh the small risk of having to do it over.

Exercise for you: Today, try to delegate more tasks to others, and 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 delegate more and 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>

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change*, *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at** www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763

New Book in 2014 - *Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change* For more information go to www.astd.org/transition

