The Micromanagement Disease: Symptoms, Diagnosis, and Cure

By Richard D. White, Jr., PhD

"The best executive is one who has sense enough to pick good men to do what he wants done," Theodore Roosevelt once observed, "and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it."[1] Unfortunately, many managers have not heeded TR's century-old advice to practice self restraint, but instead needlessly over-manage, over-scrutinize, and over-frustrate employees. Such meddlesome bosses now are called micromanagers.

A micromanager can be much more than just a nuisance in today's complex organization. The bothersome boss who second guesses every decision a subordinate makes, frets about the font size of the latest progress report, or inspects all of his employees emails not only frustrates and demoralizes his harassed workers, but seriously damages the productivity of the organization and, over the long run, may jeopardize the organization's survival. Unfortunately, micromanagement is a fact of management life. Why do so many people hate to be micromanaged, yet so many managers continue to do it? Why have we all worked for micromanagers—but have never been one ourselves? But have we? Maybe the noted management consultant and cartoon icon, Pogo, had it right when he quipped, "We have met the enemy...and he is *us*."[2]

Micromanagement now commonly refers to the control of an enterprise in every particular and to the smallest detail, with the effect of obstructing progress and neglecting broader, higher-level policy issues. Micromanagement has been practiced and recognized well before we labeled it as an organizational pathology. In 1946, Peter Drucker called for a "democracy of management" whereby organizations need to decentralize and delegate more decision making authority to employees.[3] In 1960, Douglas McGregor described a Theory X manager as one possessing many of the characteristics of the modern micromanager, one who is poor at proper delegating but one who believes he delegates well.[4] While micromanagement has always disrupted organizational life, it only recently has entered the workplace vocabulary, with the first mention of the term appearing in 1975 in an article in the *Economist*.[5] Since then, increasing concern has been focused on the impact of picayune bosses.

At its more severe level, micromanagement is a compulsive, behavioral disorder similar to other addictive patterns. People who micromanage generally do so because they feel unsure and self-doubting. Micromanagers, like many addicts and alcoholics, are the last people to recognize that they are hooked on con-

trolling others. Extreme micromanagers behave pathologically, refusing to accept personal responsibility or accountability and create scapegoats to blame for their own mistakes. They seldom develop people but instead exploit them, preferring to control results rather than inspiring creativity. Fearing competition, they rarely hire people with the talent, experience, and know-how to challenge them. Micromanagers tend to dumb down their organizations. As they hire drones, they must work even harder because drones take more work to manage than do thinking, industrious workers. It becomes a vicious cycle. Good workers leave, more drones are hired, and the organization begins a downward spiral in skill, morale, and productivity. No organization can be truly efficient when it is constantly re-hiring and training new workers.

A good manager who is concerned with details is not necessarily a micromanager. Details matter, and good leaders use micro-indicators to signal bigger problems or impending disasters. There is nothing wrong with being detailed oriented, especially when analyzing critical reports, reviewing accidents, and compiling a budget. There is a big difference between micromanagement and monitoring, and every important task should have a monitoring plan to insure performance.[6] Some areas are just too important and cannot be over managed, such as the recruitment of the best personnel or insuring overall customer satisfaction. But way too often the detailed-oriented boss loses the forest in the trees, becomes overly concerned with nitpicking details, and soon begins to micromanage subordinates.

In some cases, micromanagement may increase productivity over the short term, but long-term problems will eventually defeat any short-term gains. Studies have shown that putting fear into people at work does have an impact, it does increase productivity, but only temporarily. Workers become so afraid of constant criticism from micromanaging bosses that they no longer take risks, creativity dries up, and customer service goes down the drain when frustrated employees take it out on customers.[7]

Symptoms of the Micromanager

So, at what point does good detail management end and the loathsome micromanagement begin? The following are some of the more likely symptoms:

- Micromanagers oversee their workers too closely and spend an excessive amount of time supervising a particular project and telling people exactly what to do and how to do it. They compulsively monitor good employees as well as those who are not performing well.
- Micromanagers are control freaks. Type A personalities are the most likely culprits, as they are fundamentally insecure and afraid to trust the performance of those below them.[8]
- Micromanager typically go alone to the bosses office, as they do not wish subordinates to gain credit. They become irritated when others make decisions without consulting them. They explode when their bosses by-pass them and go directly to one of their subordinates.

- Micromanagers are obsessed with meaningless details. They love numbers, lots of them. They confuse accuracy with precision. They keep track of the number of copies made on the Xerox machine, count paperclips, or scrutinize the number of long-distance phone calls.
- Micromanagers come in earlier than their employees and stay later. Employees at first feel guilty, but no matter how late they stay, the micro-boss stays later. Soon they give up and stop trying. Micromanagers frequently call the office while on vacation.
- Micromanagers dictate time, often creating deadlines for deadlines sake. They demand overly frequent and unnecessary written status reports.[9] They are so busy that delays happen frequently, while people wait for their input or signoff. Their inbox is always full.
- Micromanagers stretch themselves too thin and take on too many projects. They move from one to another without completing any of the jobs. They are too busy to meet with subordinates and not available to provide guidance. Micromanagers have no idea why they are a bottleneck because they are too busy trying to do all of the jobs of the organization.
- Micromanagers abhor mistakes. Seldom praising, they consider their employees incompetent and soon lose the respect of coworkers and employees. While quick to blame, they seldom admit their own mistakes and shortcomings.

Micromanagement and LMX Theory

While anecdotal concern over micromanagement has been growing, empirical investigation of its occurrence and consequence remains sparse. A modest amount of research does attempt to explain why some managers delegate to their subordinates and why others do not. Because managers who cannot or will not delegate often resort to micromanagement, Leader-Member Exchange Theory, also called LMX or Vertical Dyad Linkage Theory may help to explain why some managers fall into the micromanagement trap.[10]

LMX researchers conclude that managers who are reluctant to delegate, and become possible micromanagers, are those that show a lack of confidence in subordinates' capabilities, see tasks as being too important to be left to subordinates, or view the tasks as too complex or technically difficult.[11] Other studies report that leaders who delegate are those willing to undertake risk, those whose workloads are greater, and those with more job experience as supervisors.[12] Delegation is more likely when subordinates have access to organizationally relevant information.[13] A more recent study concludes that more delegation is more likely when a subordinate is competent, shares the leader's task objectives, has worked longer for the manager, is a supervisor also, and has a favorable exchange relationship with the manager.[14]

Micromanagement and Structure

The manner in which an organization is structured can contribute to micromanagement. Bad structure, especially in an organization that is too top heavy, can ruin good people. Too many levels in the hierarchy give managers too few decisions to make. Supervisors with not enough to do—especially the energetic Type A's—will fill their spare time by micromanaging employees. A good manager who is micromanaged from above may feel forced to micromanage his own employees, thus creating a destructive ripple effect down through the organization as supervisors and employees fight to make the few decisions available. Similar to micromanagement, a bloated hierarchy also sacrifices productivity and quality, damages job satisfaction and morale, and drives away the most talented and competent people.

Prescriptions for Micromanagement

How can micromanagement be avoided? First, it must be recognized. Micromanagement can be revealed by examining the decision flow in the organization. Are decisions made at the proper (and lowest) level where the decision maker has the authority, skill, and necessary information to make the decision effectively? Have talented employees been empowered, allowed to make decisions, and held accountable for performance? If there is no empowerment of employees to make decisions, then the good ones will leave. Is turnover a problem? Are there bottlenecks where managers are taking on too much work and trying to make too many decisions?

Once discovered, how can micromanagement be avoided? First, promote carefully. Just because an employee was a ball of fire and top producer does not necessarily mean that he should be promoted to a supervisory position. Because it is often more difficult to manage a job than to do it yourself, many people cannot make the transition from worker to supervisor, and if incapable of doing their new job, they micromanage those doing their old job. Unfortunately, some people are just born micromanagers. They cannot be trained to delegate properly, leaving no choice but to transfer, reassign or replace them.

Insure that all personnel have a clear understanding of what they are expected to do. Often micromanagement is created when managers are unclear about their duties. With no guidance from above, they never know when they have done enough and have no idea how their performance is being judged.[15]

Encourage managers to delegate. To some, handing over control is horrifying, but they must soon learn that delegation is one of the most important productivity skills a manager can master. When properly exercised, delegation establishes responsibility and accountability, and builds mutual trust and reciprocity between superiors and subordinates. Delegation produces more satisfied managers who are able to take on larger jobs at higher salaries and it produces more satisfied employees who are able to develop a broader range of skills and thus prepared for promotion.[16]

Allow mistakes. Create an organizational environment that is open to innovation and new ideas. When mistakes happen then you know employees have been empowered with decision making authority and are taking risks.

Flatten the organization by abolishing unnecessary hierarchy. Moving decision making to lower levels can reduce a manager's workload while developing employees' skills, knowledge, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment.

Substitute micromanagement with leadership. Be resolute with strategy but flexible with tactics. Create an atmosphere of open communications by encouraging employees to speak up and insuring that they are heard. Value their opinions and judgment even if you don't agree. A trusting environment starts at the top. Mistrust is contagious and tumbles quickly down through the hierarchy. LMX theory suggests that managers must give subordinates enough authority to complete important assignments, prepare them for difficult assignments, and provide the special information necessary for their task accomplishment.[17]

And finally, we need to find out if Pogo was indeed correct. We need to ask ourselves if we have met the enemy [the evil micromanager], and if so, is he us.

Notes

[1] Roosevelt quote from Tuia, S. "Executive Coaching and the American President." *Morgan Article Archive* (2005).

[2] Kelly, W. *Pogo: We Have Met the Enemy and He Is Us*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987)

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[4] McGregor, D. *The Human Side of Enterprise*. (New York: McGRaw Hill, 1960).

[5] *Oxford English Dictionary*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), citation from *Economist*. 102 (November 15, 1975), 2.

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[7] Dew, J.R. *Empowerment and Democracy in the Workplace: Applying Adult Education Theory and Practice for Cultivating Environment*. (New York: Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1997), 14.

[8] Heimer, p. 67.

[9] Ibid. (Heimer)

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[15] Hymowitz, C. "The Confident Boss Doesn't Micromanage or Delegate Too Much." *Wall Street Journal*. 241. (March 11, 2003), B1.

[16] Dew, p. 111.

[17] Graen, G.B. (1989) *Unwritten Rules for Your Career*. New York: Wiley, 58-63.

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