

Chapter 2

Micromanagement

Ah, micromanagement — the term that no person wants to hear from his manager other than in the context of “Don’t worry, I won’t micromanage you.” And even then, the simple fact that the manager made reference to the term makes the person’s hairs stand on end because he hears, “Don’t worry, I won’t micromanage you . . . so long as you do exactly what I say.”

Now here is what is amazing: we all know that nobody likes to be micromanaged. Yet despite this knowledge and negative connotation surrounding it, micromanaging happens. Being micromanaged is annoying. It sends the message, “I can’t trust you to do your job without constant oversight.” It also sends the message, “I, the manager, am a control freak.”

So how does this inadvertently happen? There are many easy ways to fall into the trap of becoming a micromanager. Here are some ways:

- An inevitable breakdown in quality of work can result in a lack of trust or confidence in the person or persons doing the work. A manager who is not knowledgeable in *quality / process management* methods¹ will tend to opt for micromanage-y solutions because he doesn’t know of any other ways to improve quality.
- A manager, who at one time, was a superstar at the position he now oversees may never be convinced that anyone else will be able to do as good of a job as he did. And so, he may have a natural tendency to want to closely review his staff’s work.
- When a manager is / feels under pressure from his boss to meet short term goals (e.g., performance output, budget cuts, etc.), the manager may opt to closely supervise the work to guarantee that the goals are met. When there are a lot of short term goals then he becomes a micromanager since he begins to closely supervise everything.

¹There is a different type of mismanagement that can occur here, but that’s less behavioral and more operational mismanagement.

- A manager can have difficulty recognizing when someone can be considered “trained” vs “in training”. It is easy for a manager to convince herself that a new hire has a lot to learn and as a result will never consider that that person has been fully trained. This can result in longer than necessary training-level scrutiny of a person’s work.
- Sometimes a newly-minted manager / supervisor wants to make a few points about a) who’s in charge, b) how he is bringing new ideas to the company, and c) how he has hit the ground running. So to get these points across, he begins to, among other things, tightly control how the work is done, redefine his staff’s roles, etc. These changes may very well be warranted, but without taking adequate time to understand and observe the processes in place, the manager can quickly find himself in a position where he has to watch things extra closely because of the new and sudden changes he brought into place.

Micromanaging isn’t just about closely scrutinizing mechanical tasks like data entry or widget making, it is just as easy to micromanage a manager whose job is, by definition, more operational than mechanical. An unreasonable insistence on periodic status reports is a classic example of how managers are implicitly micromanaged by their bosses. Status reports are good and necessary to a certain extent, but sometimes the amount of detail required or the frequency at which project statuses have to be provided can constitute as micromanagement. It is a way for the manager’s boss to say, “I don’t trust you with being able to supervise your staff, so I will require that you provide to me a play-by-play. Then, at least the act of you having to tell me in great detail what is going on will ensure that you are doing your job.” In my view, not trusting your staff is the easiest way to becoming a micromanager.

2.1 The quality breakdown

There will always be a breakdown in quality. Someone is going to make a mistake. Something is going to be botched. A natural tendency may be to “completely overhaul the process so that this never happens again.” That may be the correct solution depending on the quality breakdown, but typically it’s an overreaction. We know that there was a mistake. So we have to address it with the person or persons responsible. We have to show that we also made changes so that we reduce the likelihood of making the same mistake. If we don’t, then we’ll be seen to be lazy or incompetent or not having enough command authority. Worse yet, we don’t want to get chewed out again about this. This is all understandable, and if you think / feel this, you’re not alone. But, we oughtn’t make decisions under this line of thought.

I like to think of events like this as battle wounds. They’ll scab over and scar and we’ll always have the incident in our conscious forefront. And we want to do everything we can to not have to go through it again. So, we manage a

bit more closely. Then more closely. Then more closely. And then before we know it, we're micromanaging. Let's avoid this downward spiral.

One question I've always liked to ask when confronted with a quality control "problem" is, "What was the mistake, on a scale of 'accidentally destroyed an ant hill' to 'accidentally started global thermonuclear war'?" If the answer is "accidentally destroyed an ant hill", then my response typically is, "alright, just be a bit more careful" and there's nothing more to say or do. If the answer is "accidentally burnt my cubicle", then there's a bit more to do — starting with "How did you burn your cubicle?", followed by "Any collateral damage?", followed by "Can this be cleaned up?", followed by a dialogue about the clean-up effort (time, money, resource requirements, etc.), followed by the actual clean-up effort, then a discussion about what to do, if anything, going forward, and then finally followed by recognizing that "to err is human, to forgive, divine." If global thermonuclear war was accidentally started, then, well, heads are going to roll, including yours.

In any case, the point here really is that we're all human, we're going to make mistakes, and we need to understand those mistakes in the proper context. We should try not to have knee jerk reactions. As managers we really need to make a value decision about what steps to take to remedy the quality control problem. Sometimes it really is just a matter of saying "just be more careful", other times you have to make minor tweaks to the process or build better quality control tools or provide additional training. Still other times, you may very well have to redo the entire process. If the mistake were "I burnt down my cubicle", and the response were "Alright, don't do it again", then this is just as disproportionate as redoing the entire work process because someone accidentally stepped on an inconsequential ant hill.

2.2 Superstar gets promoted

You're a superstar. Everyone has said so. You've been promoted to manager because you're excellent at what you do. Now you have a group of 5, 10, 20, 50 people to oversee. Your boss(es) are expecting that your group's productivity increase by [x%] in one year and that operating costs are reduced by [y%] in one year. How are you going to make it happen?

It really is easy to panic when you feel that pressure from above to squeeze out productivity from your staff. And it is easy to convince yourself that you just have to work people a bit harder and get them to change their inefficient ways. But this is a micromanagement trap. You don't want your bonus to be negatively affected, you don't want to be fired for not meeting your performance goals, etc. These and similar concerns are valid and understandable. What you have to do is pause for a second and think about the path you want to take.

If you want to head down the micromanagement route, then this is how. Have a general group meeting or send out a mass email laying out a new set of processes and explaining that "we are doing this because that's the only way to meet the goals set forth to our group." Further, you can explain that

the processes you have described are the ones that you followed and they have reliably produced results.

You may very well be correct that there need to be new processes to meet the goals set forth by management. In fact, you may very well be correct that the processes that people should follow are the ones that you adhered to. However, it comes back to the *how*. Remember, since everyone knows you are a superstar, you will probably have implicit trust by your staff about the decisions you make. However, it still behooves you to engage with your staff when making (large) sudden changes. This is important because trust is a two-way thing. Explaining the constraints at hand and getting input from your staff does several positive things:

- it creates a positive bond between you and your staff in that your staff will begin to view you as not only someone who is in charge but also as someone who wants and respects their opinion,
- it allows you to see who has leadership qualities,
- it sets a clear distinction between what your mandates are versus the mandates that come from elsewhere, and
- it just might be possible that someone has an idea that is better than the one you thought of
- you may realize that there will have to be a larger (or smaller) training effort than you had expected
- by involving your staff in the decision-making process it becomes far more easy to get your staff to adopt new processes and methods than if you just suddenly announce the changes

There are many ways to go about getting buy-in from your staff. Here's what's worked for me — it's a mix of consensus building and healthy debate.

1. I clearly state the issue / problem that needs to be resolved.
2. I ask my staff to provide input about what things should change.
3. After all participants have had a chance to express their thoughts, I provide my opinion and open it up for comment.
4. If time allows, I give it a day. If there's anything I've learned, it's that when making changes, just give it a day.
5. Finally, I make a decision on the path to take incorporating many of the suggestions given by my team.

There is one thing to remember here — you will have people who disagree and want to take another path. You want people to be able to speak freely, even if it means they are expressing some form of frustration (though, I am also the

moderator and I keep the conversation from turning into a “whine and jeez” event). For this, you have to address their concerns but not get into the habit of always negotiating — more on this in Chapter 7.

You don't have to continue making the point that you are very good at your job by becoming hypersensitive to how your team does its work. Not everyone is going to be as efficient as you. Not everyone is going to be able to work and think like you do. What you really should be after is a type of “global” efficiency. Insisting on work to be done in an exact manner will just lead you to have a team filled with automatons who won't make even the smallest judgment call. The eventuality is that you will spend an inordinate amount of your time dealing with daily minutiae that your staff could have easily handled on their own if you let them. Your constant involvement in all matters will go to lengthen your workday, which will lead to elevated stress levels for you, which will lead you to burn out, which will lead you to fail at your job, which will lead you to be disgruntled, and then you'll quit and burn all your bridges.

Don't let this happen. Let your staff make decisions about their day-to-day operations. Nose around, but not excessively. Don't obsess over every little inefficiency, but rather create lasting efficiencies incrementally by building consensus, engaging in dialogue, and providing any necessary training.

2.3 Pressure from the manager's boss

Everyone has a boss. The head of a company has a boss — namely, shareholders and clients. Thus, everyone is under pressure to meet someone else's requests. And in an effort to please (or not displease) we choose one of two paths: micromanage our staff and get our boss what she wants or not micromanage our staff and still get our boss what she wants. Fear, panic, the desire to please, the desire to not fail, etc. can put us on edge and take away trust in our staff. Once we've lost trust, the micromanagement floodgates have opened up.

Now, we can rationalize and say something like, “But I have to keep a close eye on this because this is for a very important client.” Sure. Keep a close eye on it. There's nothing wrong with keeping a close eye on something. But don't turn “keeping a close on eye on something” into “there's going to be a mistake and I need to take steps to make sure that there won't be a mistake” — that will just send you down the path discussed in Chapter 2.1.

The easiest way I've found to manage the pressure from a boss is to do the following:

1. Acknowledge the importance and urgency of the given task.
2. Obtain as specific of an understanding of the work required of your team. This includes deliverables, deadlines, resources available, and any constraints (e.g., budget).
3. Select your team.
4. Explain to your team the importance and urgency of the given task.

5. Explain to your team what the deliverables are to be, what deadlines exist, what resources they have available, and what, if any, constraints there may be.
6. If time permits, allow your team to come up with a plan of action or provide a plan of action and see if there are any objections.
 - (a) Address any objections.
 - (b) Approve the plan of action.
7. Explain to your team that given the importance and urgency of the work, that you will be checking-in “more than usual”.
8. Let your team do the work and work closely with them should they need any assistance.

Now, I know — easier said than done. Every situation will have its particular nuance. But that’s exactly where you, the manager, should come in. Recognize those nuances. Recognize that the steps given above are not an exact script (otherwise, *I* am micromanaging) but a conceptual guideline for how to work with your staff and for helping you to not feel disproportionate pressure. The key items to take away here are

1. Even if there is a microscope on you, you don’t have to transfer that pressure onto your staff by putting a microscope on them.
2. You shouldn’t lose trust in your staff just because one project is more important than the normal set of projects your group handles.
3. Be clear and explain to your staff the visibility, urgency, importance, and any specific out-of-the-ordinary nuances for the important project.

2.4 Training woes

Growing businesses will have to bring in new talent. And this new talent will have to go through some form of training. It is easy to feel, especially, in technical work, that despite going through the standard training regimen, the new hire is not fully trained. As a result, a manager can feel hesitant, reluctant to fully engage the new talent onto projects. This hesitation, though, is just a result of trust not having been built. Unlike when there is a quality breakdown, where trust / confidence is lost, a new hire neither has her manager’s trust or distrust. Thus, the cautious manager will “go with the devil he knows” and take longer than usual to let new talent operate with appropriate independence while continuing to rely on her experienced staff to handle work that could be given to the new talent.

It is also easy to rationalize excessively close monitoring of new hires — “I don’t want to throw them to the wolves.”; “This is uncharted territory.”; “This is an important, long-term client and we need to make sure that everything gets

done in the way they're used to." And here begins a steady movement towards inadvertent micromanagement. To these rationalizations, I counter, "The bird has to leave the nest."; "A growing business will always be venturing into lands unknown."; "Every client should be important and every client should get what it is they had contracted to get."

The truth is, no one will ever be "fully trained" by going through training. Requiring one to be "fully trained" by going through training is just wasting resources. The purpose of training is to get an individual or individuals a general understanding of the day-to-day work. By staffing new hires on complex or non-standard projects, they can gain experience and understand the subtleties of the business. This allows the manager to have more breadth and depth from her talent pool, which in turn allows her great flexibility in reallocating work.

Now, there is nothing wrong with having an extra layer of review of work done by new talent during the training period and even for some time after that. But at some point, the manager needs to take a (small) leap of faith and consider the new hire trained. If there is legitimate hesitation on staffing the new hire on a complex or non-standard project, then so be it. But they have to gain that experience somehow and somewhen.

A simple way for a new hire to gain that experience is to give her a non-standard project but have a more senior team member be a mentor. In fact, the manager can certainly be a mentor. The advantages of having a mentor / mentee relationship are that it will allow the manager

1. to get to know the new hire's strengths and weaknesses,
2. to gain the confidence he needs to entrust future work to the new hire,
3. to evaluate the training program and update it, if necessary,
4. to stop seeing the new hire as a new hire

2.5 The new manager

The new manager has a lot to do. He has to get to know his staff if he was brought in from "outside" or he has to cultivate a new working relationship if he was promoted "from within." He likely has a new reporting structure. He has new responsibilities. Also, he wants to get off on the right foot. He wants to show that he is in charge and capable of bringing in new ideas. He wants to hit the ground running.

So, once again, it comes to down to *how*. The micromanagement path is to immediately begin instituting new policies, redefining roles, setting up benchmarks to be met, etc. Almost immediately there is going to be dysfunction. People are going to need time to adjust. Some people are going to be confused. Others will need additional training. Some may just simply resign. Before he knows it, he is short-staffed, the work is still coming in, and because of the sudden changes, he ends up having to make a lot of micro decisions.

This type of scenario can be avoided by

- introducing changes gradually and systematically
- recognizing that the pressure to perform, while real, does not mean that the expectation is for overnight changes
 - find out the goals
 - find out what the milestones are along with an expected time by which said milestones should be reached
- letting go a little bit and observing the process

2.6 Developing more mismanagement habits

Now micromanagement will certainly beget more micromanagement, but there are other negative side effects. Micromanagement can lead to Benign Neglect (Chapter 3), Bureaucracy (Chapter 4), and Tyranny (Chapter 6). Also, we can get to micromanagement through Bureaucracy, Tyranny, or Benign Neglect. This section will delve lightly into each of these transitions.

2.6.1 Micromanagement to Benign Neglect

Congratulations! We've recognized that we are micromanaging because we've been meddling a bit too much in our staff's day-to-day, we have very rigid policies and work flows, etc. Now, we want to put an end to this. So, we back off. But we back off a bit too much. For fear of micromanaging we decide to not worry about policy at all. We decide that we shouldn't check in with our staff. Those weekly status meetings? Smells like micromanagement! Let's not have those meetings at all! We have to trust our staff, correct? If there are problems, they'll be brought to our attention or better yet, if we just ignore them, the problems will resolve themselves because it'll be more worth it for someone else to take the reigns than for us.

Oops. We went a little too far. Yes, let's scale things back a bit. But we have to remember we are still in charge and still responsible for the work done by our staff. Those weekly meetings, as painful as they may be, are probably necessary; if we had hourly meetings, maybe we want to re-evaluate that. Policies are also good; we don't want to abandon them altogether. And certainly, we want to have some say in resolving differences, dysfunction, etc. Some things may very well take care of themselves, but that should be our default method for managing.

2.6.2 Micromanagement to Bureaucracy

Well, once we've started to micromanage, the next thing we want is to make sure that all the steps we've laid out are being followed. What better way to ensure this than to make it policy and create checklists for our staff to fill out? Then, of course, we'll need a checklist to make sure that all the checklists are

being filled out. Then we'll realize that we have too many checklists, so we'll condense them into one giant checklist.

Checklists aren't a bad thing. They can be a good way to make sure that we're not forgetting items. For example, when we go grocery shopping, we may have a checklist because we don't want to waste time by having to go back. Checklists (or to-do lists) are a good way to keep things organized and to give oneself a sense of accomplishment — it feels nice to mark off another task complete.

Of course, there are more sinister ways to use checklists. If we find ourselves relying heavily on checklists as a quality control method, as a tool to keep our staff "inline", as a way to measure staff performance, etc. not only are we micromanaging, but we are beginning to create a bureaucracy. We have to recognize this behavior and make an honest determination about what paperwork is necessary and what paperwork is just there to satisfy other paperwork.

2.6.3 Micromanagement to Tyranny

We are very detail oriented. We have clear instructions about how the work should be done and what needs to be done. And now, we are losing our patience since no one can seem to get things done the way we are saying it should be done.

It is so easy to become a tyrant if we've already been micromanaging. We use our command position forcefully so that the work gets done the way we see fit. It is also easy to recognize that we are becoming that caricatured, evil, controlling boss. We raise our voice. We don't tolerate other opinions. We care more that the work got done the way we said it should be done than if the work got done at all. If we find ourselves doing these things, we've become a tyrant. Let's take a step back and let go a little bit.

2.7 Micromanagement from a different type of mismanagement

When the company culture or the department culture "requires" a heavy level of bureaucracy (e.g., lots of paperwork to be filled out) to ensure work quality, this inevitably leads to / requires a heavy scrutiny of work.

When a manager is used to getting his way by using heavy-handed methods (tyranny) she may push this one step further and begin to dictate almost every aspect of her staff's actions. In this case, micromanagement is an extension of tyranny.

When a manager who tends to take a policy of benign neglect for resolving disputes, dysfunction, etc., receives complaints about his staff from someone more senior or from a client, he may feel that he has been too lenient, too distant, too passive. Consequently, the pendulum can swing too far into the "other direction" and he begins to make excessive inquiries and reviews. In the short

run, this may be justifiable and understandable, but indefinitely maintaining an excessively high level of scrutiny is a problem.

2.8 Some thoughts

How can you tell if you are micromanaging or becoming a micromanager? To find out, answer the following questions:

1. Do you allow your staff to make judgment calls for day-to-day work or do all decisions have to come to you?
2. Do your staff come to you with seemingly minor / trivial decisions on a regular basis?
3. Do your staff feel comfortable proposing new methods or processes?
4. Do you feel that if you are not directly involved in the non-standard projects that they won't be completed properly, on time, and within budget?
5. Are your policies a set of well-defined guidelines or a rigid set of rules?
6. Is your employee review process more focused on work not done poorly rather than work done well?
7. Are you generally dissatisfied with the quality of your staff's work?
8. In the event of a quality control issue, do you
 - (a) review the quality control process in place?
 - (b) identify the individual(s) associated with the matter?
 - (c) let it slide, recognizing that mistakes happen?
 - (d) do both (a) and (b)?

It should be obvious what would constitute micromanagement from the questions above. If you don't allow your staff to have appropriate autonomy or to be creative (#1, #2, #3), if you don't trust your staff with work that's not just run-of-the-mill (#4), if you don't feel your staff can meet your expectations in your absence (#4), if your policies are rules rather than well-formed principles (#5), if your focus is on "avoiding bad" rather than "doing well" (#6), if you don't consider procedural solutions and rely heavily on corrective methods for individuals (#8), then you are almost certainly in the micromanagement camp. If you find yourself doing this, then stop, drop, and roll. Uhhh, stop and think. Ask yourself if what you are doing is necessary. Ask yourself if there are legitimate personnel or process issues. Ask yourself honestly what would happen if you were to loosen your grip. Would everything fall apart? Hopefully, the answer is that things wouldn't fall apart. If that's not the answer, then you need to try to find a way to create a healthier work environment.

Finally, we have to put all this in the appropriate context. The management culture and methods in a hospital operating room are going to materially different from that of the Department of Envelope Lickers. Heavy scrutiny of the work done is probably the necessary norm in the former, while in the latter there are probably just some guidelines about how frequently one should gargle and drink water. Nevertheless, it is possible to micromanage surgeons as well as envelope lickens and we just have to understand when we are crossing over into micromanagement land.

For question #7, it is possible that the quality of your staff's work is indeed poor. That in itself doesn't constitute micromanagement. It's how you decide to address the quality issues that will determine if you are heading towards a culture of micromanagement. Has your staff received appropriate training? Do they have the correct educational background? Do they have access to the correct tools? Is your group just understaffed? A manager should try to address these questions before pointing the finger squarely at individuals. If a manager has well-trained staff, with the correct education background, access to the necessary tools for them to do their job, and who are not chronically overworked, then maybe the problem really is the staff OR the problem is the manager OR there is some other mitigating factor. At a very superficial level, it would be difficult to believe that the staff members are *all* doing low quality work. When one has to conclude that the problem is with everyone, then the problem is, in all likelihood, actually somewhere else.

As for question #8, a general rule of thumb is that when there is a quality control issue it is prudent to have a review of the process in place and the personnel involved. Of course, this is dependent on the situation. If a computer program crashes, it probably has nothing to do with the individual. If the main door is left unlocked and wide open throughout the night, that's probably more of a personnel issue.