Differentiating Micromanagement From Effective Management: A Manager's Guide

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KeyWords

Micromanage, Manager, Effective management, Staff, Organisation, Subordinate, Employees, Features, Guide

ABSTRACT

Majority of organisations aspire for maximum productivity and efficiency while achieving group objectives. These aspirations inform the kind of managers who are assigned various roles in the organisation. For such managers to succeed, they often require maximum input from subordinates. Nevertheless there are some unnecessary detailed pieces of information that managers demand, which negatively affect employees' performance. These unnecessary details, also referred to as Micromanagement, is felt only when managers find themselves at the receiving end or when they are being micromanaged. There is therefore the need for every manager to be able to perform self-assessment based on some features like the excessive need for information, stress and crisis management and how negative results are handled, among others, to be able to know when as a manager, one begins to micromanage. In addition to this, there is the need for managers to be able to draw the line between effective management and micromanagement and be able to apply the brakes when features associated with micromanagement are noticed.

1.0 Introduction

Organisations, whether big or small, mostly aim at achieving departmental goals and targets, as well as attaining organisational objectives. This explains why managers are strategically positioned in business organisations; to ensure that these expectations are realised. Since business owners expect so much from managers who have been assigned particular responsibilities and are expected to produce results; the unrealistic expectations and outrageous deadlines push such managers to the extent where they begin to micromanage. To micromanage according to the Cambridge Dictionary, basically means to control every part of a situation or project even including the small details, in a way that may not be necessary and may not give enough responsibility to other employees.

Most managers under normal circumstances will not want to be classified as micromanagers. However, most of them, considering assigned targets that have to be met and the expectations from business owners, tend to micromanage other employees without even knowing it. It is very difficult if not impossible to have managers accept the fact that they are micromanaging. They mostly argue about the fact that they have deadlines to meet and have to submit reports with some level of quality - thus free from errors. Micromanagers, like many addicts and alcoholics, are the last people to accept that they are hooked on controlling others [1].

On the other hand, employees often find it very easy to identify micromanagers. Indeed everyone notices when they are being controlled, blamed for what they are not responsible for and exploited, without any opportunity to be creative and innovative. However, some of these same employees find their way to the top and tend to treat their subordinates the same way they were treated prior to promotion that they were complaining about – micromanaging. 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" [1]. It will be prudent to have managers first consider their ways as to ensure traits of micromanagement are nipped in the bud.

Micromanagement comes with a lot of effects on subordinates and the organisation as a whole, regardless of the intent of the micromanager. Micromanagement does not add value to individuals or processes. No matter the intent, results of micromanagement are a subtraction not addition. Employees, who have a micromanager in charge of affairs, tend to be unable to plan or prioritize for themselves; and every instruction often comes with the same sense of urgency. They tend to be so frightened by constant threats that even if productivity increases due to the threats, it is temporary. Owing to constant criticisms, such employees are unable to

take risks; creativity gets into extinction with a decrease in client service. With time such employees become frustrated; which is made obvious in their client relations. Eventually, the organisation tends to be less productive and ineffective.

Though micromanagement comes with a few benefits, especially during instances where employees are inexperienced in getting the job done; or when processes in the organisation change and employees have a challenge adapting; micromanagement disadvantages far outweigh the benefits. With this established, knowing that it is much easier to identify a micromanager when it has to do with another person; and not accepting it when we are the actors, some features of micromanagers are considered to assist managers know when they begin to micromanage.

2.0 Micromanaging Features

In order to be able to notice when micromanaging has set in, there is the need to be aware of some characteristics of micromanagers so that related traits can be controlled when they begin to manifest. The truth is that everyone at the receiving end or anyone who is encountering a micromanager needs not be told that "the boss" is a micromanager. However no micromanager accepts the fact that he is micromanaging. Even if it is accepted, there is likely to be a very genuine reason for micromanaging. Micromanaging is an easy habit to identify in others, but a very difficult habit to break in ourselves [2]. A few micromanagement features have been identified and discussed.

2.1 Micromanagers Are Often Former Experienced Employees

Most micromanagers used to be former, very experienced lower level staff. In fact, their promotion to a managerial role was as a result of the fact that they were the best in their field of work. Such lower level employees who are promoted mostly have very little managerial skills to complement their experience. They overcorrect by trying to do more of the same things they used to do as subordinates; even though they are supposed to be managing. They overburden subordinates by trying to maintain control over everything. They lack the flexibility and agility to shift their leadership behaviours and become more effective [2]. As a manager, if during any instance there is the temptation to compare the quality of work of your subordinate to what you would have done if you were in their shoes; or what you used to produce when you were at the level, there is a great possibility that micromanagement may be setting in without knowing.

2.2 Micromanagers Dread Negative Results

Micromanagers are motivated by fear of failure, public embarrassment, being left out of the information loop, or fear of not knowing what is going on with subordinates [2]. The fear of not meeting superiors' expectations, requirements or specifications, causes most managers to micromanage hence trying to prevent every form of failure. Beware if as a manager, the fear of being embarrassed publicly pushes you to looking at every little detail, following the process every little step of progress made as well as concentrating on unnecessary information. This results in asking employees to meet unrealistic deadlines. For instance in a situation where Mr. X is asked to submit a report by end of the month to facilitate management meeting, he then asks Mr. Y, his subordinate to prepare the report and submit to Mr. X about a week to his own deadline. The one week tolerance in time is to facilitate correction of all anticipated errors and ensure the report meets all requirements. While Mr. Y is working so hard to meet the unrealistic deadline, there are numerous interruptions from Mr. X on how to prepare the report, what to include and even how to format the document.

2.3 Micromanagers Perceive Compromising as Weakness

Most often, micromanagers feel compromising on issues in favour of their subordinates is a weakness while exercising "raw power" and stubbornness is perceived as strength. If a micromanager takes a decision, it is very much unlikely that he will change his mind. No matter the adverse effect that decision may have on his subordinates, there is a strong determination to see the decision or plan implemented to the latter. If you often come to a realisation as a manager trying so hard to ensure your decisions are implemented to the latter despite inputs from subordinates or even adverse effects on them, the possibility the you may be micromanaging is high.

2.4 Micromanagers Seek Lots of Information

The micromanager is mostly not content with information provided by subordinates. They keep asking for more. They abhor being kept in the dark or uninformed about updates. They like to be carried along every step of project progress. Even with numerous progress reports, the meetings they call for never seem to end. Their subordinates sometimes feel the update reports are unnecessary since many errors are identified in the report and will have to be redone with several updates from management. This is a big burden on subordinates. Most employees get frustrated and sometimes quit their jobs. Indeed managers need relevant information to remain effective and efficient. However, pressurizing subordinates for lots of information are traits of micromanagement and need to be controlled.

2.5 Micromanagers Thrive on Stress, a Sense of Crisis and Urgency

With most micromanagers, every task or project is treated as priority with very strict deadlines. Both major and minor tasks are

treated as high-priority tasks with very tight schedules and limited timelines. Since these deadlines are unrealistic and very difficult to achieve, subordinates are always under pressure to achieve results. This creates an atmosphere of extreme stress for subordinates. The micromanager will always want to check every employee's desk to ensure they are attending to tasks they've been assigned, trying to steal glances on their screens to know if they are attending to personal stuff of official duties. They are happy when they realise that subordinates are overwhelmed with unrealistic deadlines and there seem to be a crisis. In such situations they feel in charge, thus creating the impression that they are the only ones who can keep the situation under control. It must be stated here that productivity under such circumstances is rather low as it does not bring out the best from employees.

2.6 Micromanagers Disregard Advice and Judgment

Owing to the fact that most micromanagers used to be experienced employees in the past before they were promoted to the management level, they tend to believe they know it all. This does not open them up to accepting inputs from their subordinates when they decide on a particular line of action. They consider such inputs unnecessary and unwarranted. They uphold everything that comes from them as excellent such that if they are scrutinized or questioned by their subordinates, they either get offensive or disregard whatever judgment arises as a result of their decisions. If as a manager, you have difficulty receiving constructive criticisms from your subordinates and taking advice in good faith, there could be a possibility of micromanagement in your style of management.

2.7 Difficulty in Distinguish between "Trained Staff" and "Staff being trained"

Micromanagers have difficulty recognizing when someone can be considered "trained" rather than "in training" (Sanaghan & Lohndorf, 2014). They convince themselves that a new employee has a lot to learn and as a result will always allude to the fact that the person has not been fully trained. Even when employees are ready to be independent in performing their duties, there are still unnecessary dependencies on micromanagers. As a manager, treating trained staff as novices requiring guidance in everything portrays you as a micromanager.

3.0 Critical Questions

Managers who ask themselves questions outlined below are likely to find out for themselves if micromanagement has distorted their management styles.
1. Do you allow your subordinates to make judgment for day-to-day work or do all decisions have to come to you?
2. Do your subordinates approach you with seemingly minor and trivial decisions on a regular basis?
3. Do your subordinates feel comfortable proposing new methods or processes?
4. Do you feel that if you are not directly involved in all projects, they won't be completed properly, on time, and within budget?
5. Are your policies as a manager, a set of well-defined guidelines or a rigid set of rules?
6. Is your staff review process more focused on work not completed poorly rather than work done well?
7. Are you mostly 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)?

3.1 Do you allow your subordinates to make judgment for day-to-day work or do all decisions have to come to you?

Decision making in organisations obviously lies at the doorstep of management especially when it has to do with strategic planning. In the case of tactical decisions which are likely to affect routine operations of the organisation, depending on the organizational structure, there is the need for senior management to delegate some level of decision making to lower level employees.

An effective manager ensures that some day to day decisions are made by subordinates of the organisation. He allows subordinates to take some level of responsibility for operations. Micromanagement disregards judgments and decisions from subordinates regardless of how important or insignificant. Every decision or action so far as it does not originate from the boss is not valid. Answering yes or no to this question indicates whether it is effective management or micromanagement. To reduce the tendency to micromanage, there is the need to allow subordinates the room to take some tactical decisions as well as judgements in the interest of the organisation.

3.2 Do your subordinates approach you with seemingly minor and trivial decisions on a regular basis?

There are some subordinates who approach management on virtually everything no matter the freedom management gives them. Others are ready to take initiative, get things done and solve seemingly complicated problems excellently without approaching management. They just report to management on the outcome of the activity. For a subordinate who falls in the second category, there is the need to give them some room to be innovative. If at any point in time subordinates approach you for very trivial things to get done, micromanagement is eminent. Effective management ensures that every employee takes initiative on how some activities should be carried out. Once in a while subordinates can get management's opinion on how some trivial problems should be solved. This however should not become the modus operandi. If this becomes a regular occurrence, it makes micromanagers out of senior management.

3.3 Do your subordinates feel comfortable proposing new methods or processes?

In some organisations, there are cultures that have been established over the years. These cultures do not allow for changes to methods and processes outlined for getting things done. Problems are solved the same old way without any room for modification. Managers in such organisations hardly allow for creativity. It is very easy to turn into a micromanager in such an environment. However effective management ensures that subordinates feel comfortable proposing new methods of getting things done. Subordinates should be able to comfortably suggest new alternative solutions to problems. There is no point in hiring the best candidate for a position if all that is expected from them is to follow laid down rules and regulations regarding how things are done. Subordinates should be allowed to think through issues and propose practical alternatives comfortably. Micromanagement stifles the creative ability of innovative subordinates when such subordinates feel uncomfortable proposing new methods and processes. All employees should be able to approach management to discuss proposals, new methods and processes with ease.

3.4 Do you feel that if you are not directly involved in all projects, they won't be completed properly, on time, and within budget?

The greatest expectation of management is to have projects completed excellently, on time and on schedule. It gives project managers great joy to know that projects are progressing according to planned schedule. Despite these, it is not the best to have management interfere with every aspect of work that has been assigned to subordinates. Lower level employees should be considered as competent enough to handle various aspects of particular projects. Regularly interfering in the activities of subordinates gives them the impression that they are not competent enough to get the work done. This sometimes has a negative impact on employees. As a result, some refuse to go the extra mile, meet deadlines and produce quality work. Effective management ensures that projects assigned to subordinates are inspected at the end of phases. For some employees who slack on the job, some inspections can be scheduled in the middle of the activity to ensure they are on course. These inspections should be controlled in order to prevent the micromanagement tendency. As a manager, there is the need to be confident in the talent of your subordinates such that whether you are directly involved in their activities or not, the right thing will still be done. The feelings that without your direct interference, work will not be done are clear signs of micromanagement and need to be checked. If these fears are not checked, you may end up doing the work assigned your subordinates by yourself.

3.5 Are your policies as a manager, a set of well-defined guidelines or a rigid set of rules?

The fact that management thrives largely on planning for virtually all aspects of the organisation's business does not imply that roles and procedures cannot be amended especially if your team requires the amendment for quality work and efficient performance. The interesting thing is that some of these rules come from top management and so very little can be done to alter them. Otherwise, as a manager, you should be open to exceptions to rules, alteration to some procedures as well as inputs to well defined guidelines. Consciously making room for these little alterations will ensure micromanagement tendencies are checked to a large extent. Sometimes it bestows on the manager to advocate for subordinates when such policies, rules and guidelines are from top management.

3.6 Is your staff review process more focused on work not completed poorly rather than work done well?

It is very disappointing and disheartening when a report is submitted or some work is completed, submitted to management and the initial things that are noticed are the errors and shortfalls of the document. This disregards all the efforts that went into producing the work. It is best if employee performance appraisal focuses more on work done and how it can be improved rather than pinpointing how the work was completed poorly. Focusing on the shortfalls of subordinates tend to make them defensive. They try to present to management reasons for which the final work turned out that way. Truth is sometimes the micromanager is to blame for such poorly completed work; as a result of the several interruptions. However, concentrating on work done and how it can be improved helps these subordinates accept recommended training and development programmes that will make them better. An effective manager through trainings and development programs can make a productive subordinate out of one who previously was producing unsatisfactory work. On the other hand, micromanager can turn a once productive and efficient subordinate into an unproductive one.

3.7 Are you mostly dissatisfied with the quality of your staff's work?

Some "bosses" are very difficult to please. Nothing a subordinate does actually pleases them. It is not as though they just want to be difficult. The quality or standard of work they have in mind and would want you to reproduce is way higher than what they see you presenting. As a manager, there is no need to have extremely high expectations for your subordinates. The truth is when you were at their level, you were producing much excellent work but you are no more at the level. You now have a higher level where you can groom these "imperfect" subordinates to become as perfect as you were. Rather than making them feel bad for producing shoddy work, not up to your standard, allow them the freedom to express their ingenuity and be the best they can. By so doing, the hidden micromanager is kept in check.

3.8 In the event of a quality control issue, what do you do?

A micromanager will never let negative quality control issues slide. A micromanager faced with such issues is likely to look for

which particular individual was responsible and get them punished severely or review the entire quality control process. As a manager, no matter how serious a problem is, there is the need to sometimes let it go. Rather than relieving someone of his post, it is better to offer training for such employees.

4.0 Effective Management

Micromanagement is mostly mistaken as effective management. Half (2018), in his article outlines characteristics of an effective manager as follows: Effective managers value employees; express gratitude; communicate clearly; listen actively and attentively; make decisions; trust employees to perform; resolve conflicts; know their employees; set good examples to subordinates; are transparent; are high achievers; and finally stay one step ahead of everyone else [3]. A close look at these characteristics exposes that to be an effective manager, attention has to be more on the subordinates or employees than on the manager. How these characteristics relate to micromanagement is considered, as it is in the quest to be an effective results-producing manager that people tend to micromanage [4].

4.1 Micromanagement vs. Valuing Employees

No employee is given an opportunity to join any organisation when they are not really needed. No one employs people just to increase the number of full time salaried workers in the company. Once that person has been employed and assigned to your department, it only means that the person's expertise is required on board. As a manager, rather than suppressing them, you need to know the employee's worth. This is not to say that there are not employees who can get on your nerves as a manager. Employees are not immune to the manager's admonition or correction. The important thing to note here is that no matter where that person is coming from, the manager should be able to come to terms with the unique qualities these subordinates possess and are bringing to the table and how these capabilities can be channeled into achieving organisational objectives. Your effectiveness as a manager becomes evident when organizational objectives are achieved and exceeded consistently due to the values subordinates bring on board.

4.2 Micromanagement vs. Expressing Gratitude

We have established that one of the weaknesses of the micromanager is to appreciate subordinates for the work they do. This is so because the micromanager does not even accept that the work that has been presented by the subordinate is good enough to merit any appreciation or gratitude. According to Half (2018), an attribute of effective managers is their ability to express gratitude for the work their subordinates present to them [3]. As an effective manager, even if a subordinate fails to meet the required criteria management expects, it is best to show appreciation for the effort that was put in the work done. Once this is done, the employee will be open to further recommendations or suggestions from management on how to improve on the quality of work that has been done. It makes employees know that genuinely they have to do better the next time they are tasked with a similar project.

4.3 Micromanagement vs. Clear Communication

The place of clear communication cannot be overemphasized in effective management. One of the micromanager's limitations is being able to communicate clearly to subordinates. Sometimes this reflects in the final output of projects assigned these subordinates. The micromanager feels that communicating clearly eventually equips the subordinates and empowers them to function effectively without interferences. This in turn results in a feeling of insecurity in the micromanager. The opposite of this however is true as clear communication is a basic requirement for every effective manager. Subordinates should be able to understand exactly what is meant, what is required of them, timelines, and scope of work as well as all details they would require to produce the best job at the first attempt. Once this is done, there is no need to keep checking on the subordinate at short intervals only to find out if they are working within schedule. Communicating clearly, empowers subordinates to continue working effectively even in the manager's absence. Work is not unduly delayed in the manager's absence. Another benefit of clear communication is the fact that it eases pressure on the manager as subordinates don't need to be seeing you at short intervals for clarifications on how to get the work done.

4.4 Micromanagement vs. Active Listening

When a subordinate is communicating with a manager, there is the need to fully understand the message being sent across. Managers cannot fully know the worth of their employees if they fail to listen actively. Subordinates sometimes get the impression their thoughts don't matter to management. With time, the creative power and innovation they bring on board quickly diminishes. Active listening involves making use of all the human senses - sight, smell, taste, touch and sound. Managers who listen to their subordinates actively get to see things from the subordinate's point of view and they are likely not to fall into the trap of micromanagement.

4.5 Micromanagement vs. Decision Making

Every effective manager is a decision maker. The same applies to micromanagers. Most micromanagers are very good decision makers. Sometimes, it is this decision making quality that turns them into micromanagers. Though decision making is a good quality, there is the need for subordinates to also be allowed to make some inputs in corporate decisions. Indeed there are times that subordinates have to be tasked with the responsibility of decision making. A manager who always does the decision making will sooner or

later fall in micromanagement.

4.6 Micromanagement vs. Trusting Employees to Perform

Micromanagers have a great difficulty knowing and accepting the fact that their employees are able to perform tasks assigned to them without any interference. Effective management on the other hand trusts in the competence of subordinates. Most employees are rigorously taken through the recruitment process and as the best candidates, have emerged to assume specific roles in the organisation. Not trusting in the competence of such employees plays down on the whole recruitment and selection process. Management should come to terms with the fact that once the best was selected to fill the position, the best will be able to perform on the job.

4.7 Micromanagement vs. Conflict Resolution

Conflicts are bound to spring up in every human institution. It bestows on management to ensure that as and when these conflicts arise, they will be resolved. An effective manager rather than finding faults with his subordinates when conflicts arise, looks for the best alternatives to get those conflicts resolved. The micromanager on the other hand views conflicts as instigating other employees against management. Instead of tackling the issues, the micromanager feels threatened and becomes insecure. This results in the employees involved in the conflict either losing their jobs or being punished severely. This makes subordinates tend to work in fear, unwilling to voice out any grievances they are likely to have so as to avoid conflicts.

4.8 Micromanagement vs. Knowing Employees

To be able to manage employees efficiently there is the need to know who your subordinates are, how they are motivated as well as challenges affecting them at work as they discharge their duties. If employees get to know that their personal lives matter to their superiors, they give off their best at work. An effective manager knows his employees – both strengths and weaknesses. He knows projects on which they are likely to succeed or fail. The micromanager on the other side of the coin only concentrates on what the employee is expected to do but not the person. He is interested in the results or output but not the key player in the whole process. This therefore portrays him as someone who doesn't care what happens to his subordinates so long as the work gets done as scheduled.

4.9 Micromanagement vs. Being an example

A micromanager is almost always an example to his subordinates due to past successes attained while functioning at a lower level. Being an example in this case refers to cases where he (the micromanager) becomes the point of reference for his subordinates and their output is directly measured against what he would have done if he were at their level. Being an example to subordinates which is supposed to result in effective management now becomes a snare for employees owing to the fact that they are unable to match up to previous works of the manager. To be effective as a manager, the example you are or have been should inspire your subordinates to do better than you did and become better than you are, not ensnare them to reproduce your works.

4.10 Micromanagement vs. Transparency

Effective managers tend to be open, honest and accountable. These virtues increase subordinates' trust in management. They do not read any ulterior motives in the actions of management knowing that no matter the decisions that are made, they are in the best interest of the entire organisation. There is in reality nothing to hide as all information and decisions made are done carrying every member of the workforce along. At any point in time all employees are on the same page as to work progress, updated plans as well as future courses of action. Micromanagers however find it difficult being transparent. It makes them feel as though they are not in control of issues as they actually would want.

4.11 Micromanagement vs. High Achievement

Most effective managers are high achievers and so are micromanagers. Micromanagers are very high achievers who fail to see the possibility of others attaining that same height or even higher. Effective managers ensure that their subordinates not only complete tasks excellently but also strive to become high achievers just like they are. When subordinates are encouraged by management to become high achievers, the tendency to micromanage such employees is greatly minimized as micromanaging loses relevance when employees become high achievers.

4.12 Micromanagement vs. Being a Step Ahead of Everyone

All managers as a matter of fact are expected to be a step ahead of everyone else. This is to ensure that instructions given to employees originate from well-informed sources and are necessary to meet management's expectations or organisation's objectives. Micromanagers take pride in being ahead of others to actually bully subordinates. They bully subordinates when it comes to setting realistic targets, deadlines and the quality of work to be presented to management.

4.13 Micromanagement or Effective Management

In as much as micromanagement and effective management have a lot in common and sometimes are mistakenly interchanged,

the end results are never the same. Employees respond positively to effective management and negatively to micromanagement. Though the line between effective management and micromanagement is very thin, every manager should be able to critically examine himself so as to push the pause or stop button when features of micromanagement begin to show up.

5.0 Conclusion

The fact has been established that employees generally don't want to be micromanaged. Why then do we still have micromanagers dominating various offices and departments? The people who don't want to be micromanaged are the same people who micromanage when they have an opportunity to manage others. No wonder it is difficult to accept that we are micromanaging even if the traits and behaviours are clearly pointing to the facts. However if as a manager, you are conscious of these traits, the possibility of being able to keep them under control is higher. The questions above should be answered by all managers sincerely in order to ensure we kick out unnecessary pettiness and micromanaging. With all the negativity that is associated with micromanaging, it is really not worth entertaining a micromanager or its traits no matter the temporary benefits that are being enjoyed.

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