Death by Micromanagement

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Everybody hates to be micromanaged. So why do so many managers do it?   We know that overbearing, but well intended, managers micromanage all the time in an attempt to optimize performance. I will identify the cure for this habitual dilemma in this article.

The problem is that by micromanaging people, the manager is severely limiting performance rather than optimizing it, so the manager is operating at cross purposes to his stated goal. Unwittingly, the manager is removing incentive for effort and creativity on the part of the employee. We are so familiar with this problem simply because it is rampant in our organizations (Bielaszka-DuVernay, Harvard Business Review, June 23, 2008). Let us contrast micromanagement versus trust to give some insight on how the latter leads to greatly enhanced performance.

To micromanage someone implies a lack of trust. The manager is not confident the employee can or will do a job correctly, so the employee is besieged with "helpful" instructions from the manager on exactly how to perform tasks. At first, the intrusion is simply irritating to the employee, who has her own ideas on how to do the job. After a while, it degenerates into an opportunity to check out mentally and join the legion of disenchanted workers doing what they are told and collecting a paycheck. This leaves the employee's power on the door step of the organization every day.

Another drawback is that employees will try to avoid a manager who tends to micromanage, simply to reduce the aggravation. This leads to a circular decline, where the manager has less and less information, so he tries even harder to intervene and direct activities. This makes people want to avoid him even more.

To trust an employee is to think enough of the person to treat him or her as a thinking person who can have good ideas if given a goal and some broad operating parameters. In an environment of trust, employees have the freedom to explore, innovate, create, stretch, and yes, sometimes make mistakes. These mistakes can be thought of as waste, but enlightened leaders think of them simply as learning opportunities.

Here are nine ideas that can help leaders and managers reduce the tendency to micromanage, thus unleashing a greater portion of the power available to the organization.

1. Set clear goals and make sure your employees have the basic skills and tools to do the job.
2. Be clear on the broad constraints within which the employee must operate. In other words do not let the employee try to conquer the world with a tuna-fish can.
3. Express trust in the employee and encourage creativity and risk taking as long as the risks are well-considered and safe.
4. Reject the temptation to step in if the employee seems to struggle, rather make yourself available if there are any questions or requests for help.
5. Provide the resources the employee needs to accomplish the tasks.
6. Do not totally overload the employee with so many duties and projects that she cannot succeed at any of them.
7. Express praise and gratitude for positive baby steps along the way.
8. Give the employee time and space to try different approaches without having to explain why she is doing every step.
9. If problems occur, consider them as learning experiences and ask the employee to describe how she will do things differently next time.

These nine ideas are all simple, but they are nearly impossible for a micromanager to accomplish without constant effort. The concept of trusting employees does involve some risk, but the rewards of having people working up to their full potential rather than just complying is well worth that risk. You will see better, faster, and more robust solutions if you trust people and let their natural talents surface in an environment of less micromanagement.

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