

Micromanaging in Organizations

Causes, Effects, Surviving, and Preventing

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subjects***

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Introduction

It is important to begin with a definition. For this eBook, micromanagement is defined as:

Managers who devote unnecessary attention to minor details

Micromanagers exist in organizations of every type and size. Their jobs differ, but they share common traits while performing those jobs. In general, these individuals are:

Focused

They focus intently on the aspects of their jobs that they consider important. Unfortunately for their subordinates, this means focusing on every detail of processes and procedures...which often hinders productivity. An example is as follows:

Jennifer works at a flower shop. Her main job is to assemble custom floral arrangements for special events. However, the owner Thomas slows her down considerably. Thomas insists on looking at every flower before Jennifer uses it. If he is not in the shop, then she cannot assemble the arrangements.

Thomas is very focused on making sure every flower meets his specifications before it is used. However, instead of conveying his specifications to Jennifer for her decision-making, he micromanages and examines every flower himself.

In this example, Thomas is a micromanager because he does not see the big picture. Instead, he focuses on the smaller aspects of Jennifer's job responsibilities.

Decision oriented

Micromanagers are strong decision-makers. Because of this, they often have difficulty delegating and become upset when their subordinates make a decision without their approval.

Micromanagers' decisions are usually well thought since they are capable individuals who understand the needs of the organization. However, the downside of their decision-making is that it is counter-productive. Many times subordinates are perfectly capable of making decisions, but they are not allowed to do so by micromanaging bosses. This delays tasks from getting completed, hinders organizational efficiency, and prevents goals and objectives from being accomplished.

Self-absorbed

It is not uncommon for micromanagers to be self-absorbed. In other words, they only show concern for their own thoughts and ideas. They have been known to be:

Narcissistic

They believe their ideas, methods, decisions, and thoughts are the best...and this is why they should be in control of every aspect of job tasks.

Overbearing

Most people who have been micromanaged understand that these types of managers can be overbearing. Their dominant and controlling presence has the potential to upset any employee...regardless of that employee's talent or disposition.

Unaware

This is the most interesting trait. Many individuals report having worked for a micromanager...but very few people admit to being one. This indicates that micromanagers truly are unaware of their actions.

Micromanagers often fail to realize they are controlling, narcissistic, overbearing, and domineering. They deny micromanaging, and instead claim that they are organized and conscientious...and they are only doing what is best for the organization

In short, micromanagers provide some good for organizations because they prevent mistakes by making sure their employees adhere to specific details of work-related tasks. However, for the most part, micromanagers hinder productivity by monitoring processes and procedures far too closely. They have been compared to bullies due to the high level of control that they possess...and their refusal or inability to delegate or relinquish that control.

Now that you have a basic understanding of micromanaging, let's move on to the causes of people's micromanagement.

Causes

This section focuses on the causes of micromanagement. In other words, it examines some of the reasons people micromanage others.

Micromanagement is typically not good. However, contrary to what some people might think, some situations legitimize this style of management. Below are examples of workplace situations that cause managers to micromanage their subordinates. Some of these examples justify the micromanagement, while others do not.

Justifiable micromanagement

The following are examples of justifiable micromanagement in workplaces:

Example #1

John works in inventory control for an office supply distributor. This is his first week on the job, and his boss Nancy makes sure that every aspect of his work is correct. She reviews all of his computer work and monitors his actions while he is doing his job. She

also tells him to come to her with any questions so she can decide the proper way to proceed...and he can learn proper company procedure in the process.

Nancy is a micromanager. She watches John closely, checks his work, and makes decisions for him. However, John is a new employee, and he might make mistakes that are costly for the organization. In this situation, Nancy's micromanagement is justifiable because it is based on John's lack of experience.

Example #2

Vicki works as a nurse at a doctor's office and has made several mistakes in the past few weeks. Dr. DeLong is concerned about her performance, so he starts to monitor her work more closely. He watches her take patients' blood pressure and listens to her conversations with them. He also tells her to not answer specific questions regarding medical treatment until she consults with him.

Dr. DeLong is a micromanager. He watches Vicki closely as she performs her job, and he does not allow her to make medical treatment decisions without his approval. In this situation, Dr. DeLong's micromanagement is justified because it is based on the mistakes that Vicki has made in the recent past.

Unjustifiable micromanagement

The following are examples of unjustifiable micromanagement in workplaces:

Example #1

Charles is a supervisor who has established a team of employees to find ways to lower costs at a toy manufacturer. He chose these employees based on their skill levels and areas of expertise, but he is not confident that they will make the right cost-cutting decisions for the organization. He believes he knows best what needs to be done, so he monitors their activities closely and makes sure he has the final say on any decisions made by the group.

Charles is a micromanager. He watches his team very closely and does not allow decisions to be made without his approval because he does not believe the members will make the best choices for the toy manufacturer. In this situation, Charles's micromanagement is not justified because it is based on his lack of trust in the team members.

Example #2

Shianne manages three employees in the quality department of a stamping plant. She monitors her workers' actions closely because she feels she needs to have control over all aspects of her department.

Shianne's employees are irritated by her behavior, and they have told her that she does not need to watch their every move. However, she claims her monitoring is necessary due to her conscientiousness and the fact that she cares about the work put out by her department.

Shianne is a micromanager. She watches her employees very closely, and they find this unnecessary and annoying. In this situation, Shianne's micromanagement is unjustified because it is based on her inability to delegate.

Example #3

Jerome supervises four workers in the safety department of a car rental company. He will not let his workers approach upper management with any suggestion for safety improvements...he makes it clear that he is the only person who is allowed to make these suggestions. His employees do not understand his reasoning for doing this, but they comply because he is their boss.

Jerome is a micromanager. He will not let his employees talk to upper management about safety ideas that they think would benefit the car rental company. In this situation, Jerome's micromanagement is unjustified because it is based on his concern that he might not receive credit for an idea generated by his department.

Based on the above examples, micromanaging does have a place in organizations. However, that place is limited to certain situations...and some people fail to realize those situations. That being said, the following are specific causes of micromanagement in organizations:

Insecurity

Sometimes micromanagement occurs because supervisors believe they have less knowledge than their subordinates. This might seem strange at first glance, but insecurity creates the need for supervisors to control employees to avoid being overshadowed by them.

Unfortunately, this type of supervisor behavior has consequences because people are held back from performing at optimum levels...which impacts productivity. It is rather obvious that this type of micromanagement is unjustified.

Change

Employees going through change are often unsure of how to perform their jobs. For example, a company might be bought by another organization, and employees are uncertain about the most important aspects of their jobs. In this type of situation, micromanaging is justified so employees can be helped to do the right things during every step of a process or procedure. In fact, some employees prefer to be micromanaged after a merger or takeover.

Loss of control

Some supervisors need to micromanage their employees due to their fear of losing control of them. These bosses put tight reins on their workers to prevent them from straying off in different directions and making decisions on their own. In this situation, micromanagement is unjustified because it is based on fear.

Loss of connection

Some supervisors feel themselves drifting away from their employees. They lose understanding of the day-to-day operations and can no longer relate to the jobs of the people they oversee. This is difficult for some bosses...especially if they were well connected at one time.

One way for supervisors to reconnect with workers is to micromanage them. This keeps them involved in their subordinates' work because they monitor their everyday actions.

Unfortunately, the loss of freedom that results from reconnection can be painful for employees. In this situation, micromanagement is unjustified because it serves no real purpose in terms of benefitting the organization.

Lack of experience

Supervisors sometimes micromanage their employees when those employees lack the necessary experience to make decisions independently. Please refer to justifiable micromanagement example #1 above for an example of this cause.

Lack of competence

Incompetent subordinates often need to be micromanaged to properly complete their assigned job tasks. Please refer to justifiable micromanagement example #2 above for an example of this cause.

Lack of trust

Some supervisors micromanage their employees because they do not trust them to properly complete tasks. Please refer to unjustifiable micromanagement example #1 above for an example of this cause.

Inability to delegate

Supervisors who cannot or refuse to delegate tasks often micromanage their employees. Please refer to unjustifiable micromanagement example #2 above for an example of this cause.

Loss of recognition

Supervisors who are afraid they will not be recognized for their employees' work often resort to micromanaging them. Please refer to unjustifiable micromanagement example #3 above for an example of this cause.

Now that you are aware of some of the causes of micromanagement, let's move into the next section that discusses the effects of this style of management.

Effects

The most significant aspect of a discussion on micromanaging involves the effects it has on workplaces. This knowledge is critical because it gives a good indication of whether this management style should be tolerated or eliminated. That being said, the following are factors affected by micromanagement in organizations:

Productivity

Employees become less productive when they are micromanaged. This is because they are spending less time doing actual work, and they are spending more time waiting for their supervisors to approve every task they complete.

Supervisors who are heavy micromanagers can literally bring productivity to a halt as employees wait in line for approval. It is similar to a man waiting to see a doctor at her office. If the doctor spends an extra 15 minutes with each of the three patients ahead of the man, then he will need to wait an additional 45 minutes to see her. Based on this, it is relatively easy to see how micromanaging can have a major effect on productivity.

Motivation

Micromanaged employees lose motivation due to the restrictions placed on them by their supervisors. When employees are not motivated, they do not perform to the best of their abilities. Lack of performance affects the bottom line because organizational efficiency suffers.

Empowerment

Empowered employees are more involved employees because they take ownership of their jobs. Micromanaged employees are not able to take ownership of their jobs. They are not empowered because their bosses dictate their actions and make decisions for them. This is not good for the employees or organizations.

Turnover

Employees who are not able to make decisions in their jobs often become frustrated. If that frustration continues for prolonged periods, those employees begin to look for other positions where they can make decisions. In this sense, micromanagement prevents employees from finding job satisfaction, and that lack of job satisfaction leads to turnover.

Potential

This is one of the most serious and often overlooked effects of micromanaging. Employees who are micromanaged are prevented from learning new skills due to the controls imposed on them. Consequently, they never reach their potential for growth in organizations, and this is bad for employees and employers.

Creativity

Many people think that creativity is limited to artists, musicians, designers, and similar job descriptions. However, this is not true because creativity comes in many shapes and sizes. For example, an accountant can be creative by coming up with a new way to track costs for a meat processing plant. All the accountant needs is the freedom to experiment with different ideas....and then creativity begins to flow.

Micromanagers restrict their employees' freedom and prevent them from being creative. When this happens, organizations lose the potential for novel thinking that could make processes and procedures better, less expensive, or more efficient.

Innovation

Similar to creativity, innovation also requires freedom. When employees are micromanaged, that freedom comes with a very short leash that prevents them from using original thinking to come up with new ideas. Once again, the organizations lose opportunities to get better.

Another interesting note about micromanagement and innovation involves secrecy. Micromanaged employees are not likely to share original ideas with their bosses because they fear their bosses will take credit for those ideas. This makes sense because micromanagers have to approve every decision made by a subordinate...so they decide if, how, and when that idea will be released to people in higher positions.

Collaboration

Workplace collaboration is the sharing of thoughts and ideas between coworkers. Micromanaged employees are led every step of the way, and their thinking is not shared with others unless they are told to do so by their supervisor. This puts collaboration at a standstill, and it does little to help organizations grow and prosper.

Workload

This factor pertains to the supervisors doing the micromanaging. These individuals create a lot more work for themselves when they oversee every detail of their employees' jobs. At some point, this workload will become unbearable and stress will result. That stress is not good for supervisors, employees, or the organization.

Excessive workload is a good reason why supervisors should do a serious self-analysis of their management style to determine if they are micromanagers. This analysis could prevent a lot of unnecessary grief and aggravation.

Now you understand some of the major negative effects of micromanaging. So, what does this mean? It means that employees experiencing this type of management style need to learn how to tolerate it and prevent it from getting worse. Prevention is discussed later in this eBook, and survival is discussed in the next section.

Surviving

It is now rather obvious that micromanaging is usually not good for employees or organizations. However, supervisors have micromanaged in the past, they do it today, and they will do it in the future. That being said, there needs to be a way to deal with these controlling individuals. This is not easy, but it is possible...and it is also essential for survival.

The following are techniques for surviving micromanaging supervisors:

Observe

Employees need to be observant of workplace happenings. For example, if it is apparent that cost-cutting measures are a priority, then workers should prepare cost-cutting measures for their jobs that can be presented to their bosses upon request. This is important for several reasons including:

- It shows employees have initiative.
- It indicates employees have an understanding of the needs of the organization.
- It builds supervisor confidence in employees.
- It eliminates the need for excessive micromanagement since the tasks are regularly being completed.
- It builds solid supervisor-subordinate relationships.

In short, a little observation goes a long way...all it takes is some time and effort.

Learn

Like it or not, politics play a role in virtually every organization. This technique involves politicking where employees learn what their bosses like so they can cater to their preferences. To do this, questions need to be asked by employees. Do their bosses like humor, sports, theater, cards, old cars, music, or movies? Understanding their preferences helps build better supervisor/subordinate relationships. Whatever is done, workers need to refrain from doing things that agitate their bosses because this will have the opposite effect.

Achieve

This involves staying ahead of the game, and it works well as a survival technique. Supervisors become micromanagers because they require their subordinates to perform job tasks accurately and correctly. The employees who consistently achieve this requirement are given the least attention by the supervisor...which means they are monitored less closely.

This technique will not completely prevent supervisors from micromanaging because their nature is to monitor people closely. However, it will make them less controlling and overbearing....and that is very important for employee survival.

Adhere

This is a common-sense suggestion for surviving micromanagement. Employees should always follow the rules established by organizations. This might not always help build better supervisor/subordinate relationships, but employees who do not follow rules can expect the opposite effect...and they can also expect to be micromanaged even closer.

Inform

This involves keeping supervisors updated. Micromanagers do not like it when they are unable to answer questions about the teams or departments that they are overseeing, and employees can help prevent this by providing them with information. This survival technique is similar to the achievement technique because it results in supervisors being less controlling and overbearing.

Promote

Employees need to promote the fact that they trust their supervisors and appreciate their support. Once again, this improves employee/supervisor relationships and results in supervisors reducing their level of control.

Discuss

This technique works because many supervisors do not realize that they are micromanagers. Employees need to let their supervisors know that they trust them and value their opinions, but they would like to do some things more independently. This can be done on a trial basis if the supervisors are uncomfortable, but the point is for employees to discuss their need for independence to get their micromanaging supervisors to relinquish some of their control.

Now you are aware of some techniques for surviving a micromanaging boss. While these are significant, it is even more important to prevent micromanagement in organizations so the negative effects do not have a chance to take root. Ways of doing this are discussed in the next section.

Preventing

It is great that there are ways to survive micromanaging, but survival techniques treat the symptoms instead of the root cause. Leaders of organizations need to find ways to prevent their supervisors from becoming micromanagers so the associated pitfalls do not have a chance to occur.

Suggestions for doing this include:

Hire effectively

Organizations need to screen people they interview for signs of micromanagement. This might seem difficult, but it is possible. For example, the following five questions can indicate the potential for a supervisor candidate to micromanage:

- Ideally, how would a team that you are in charge of accomplish goals and objectives?
- In general, how do you feel about employees making decisions without their supervisors?
- How do you feel about delegating authority to employees in your department?
- How much information do you provide your employees with when they need to complete a job-related task?
- Do you consider yourself a detail-oriented manager? Please explain the reasoning for your answer.

The answers to these questions can provide a lot about a person's tendency to micromanage. More interestingly, true micromanagers usually do not realize they are giving themselves up as being controlling and overbearing because they do not view themselves in this manner.

Communicate expectations

Make it clear that all employees in the organization are expected to make decisions and be held accountable for their decisions. This gives workers decision-making power and shows supervisors that micromanagement is not needed or wanted.

Encourage collaboration

Encourage employees to work together to find solutions. This prevents them from going to their supervisor for every decision.

Collaboration also brings multiple minds together for more diverse problem resolution. This increases workers' confidence while inspiring creativity and innovation. The end result is a win-win situation for employees and the organization.

Accept mistakes

Make it clear that mistakes are going to happen, and those mistakes are acceptable as long as employees strive to correct the associated problems and prevent a reoccurrence. This encourages employees to think on their own and not rely on their supervisors for every decision.

Mistake acceptance also prevents supervisors from micromanaging because their efforts to prevent every error are unnecessary. Employee blunders do not reflect negativity on bosses because those mistakes are expected to occur.

Summary

Micromanagers are present in organizations all over the world. Often times these individuals mean well, and there are some benefits to their management style. However, they also create workplace problems, and their actions hinder the growth of employees and organizations.

This eBook focuses on micromanaging in organizations. First, it explores the causes of micromanagement including insecurity, change, loss of control, loss of connection, lack of experience, lack of competence, lack of trust, inability to delegate, and loss of recognition. Next, it examines the way micromanaging affects productivity, motivation, empowerment, turnover, potential, creativity, innovation, collaboration, and workload. Then it looks at methods for surviving a micromanaging supervisor that include being able to observe, learn, achieve, adhere, inform, promote, and discuss. Finally, it offers suggestions for preventing micromanagement that require organizations to hire effectively, communicate expectations, encourage collaboration, and accept mistakes.

Congratulations! You now understand more about micromanaging...an important aspect of organizational behavior.