

Is Micromanagement Really That Bad?

Making Sure the Task is Understood, Supervised and Accomplished

By Ben Baran, Ph.D., Agility Analytics Practice Leader

One of the courses I've taught to both graduate and undergraduate business students is "Managerial Skill Development." And among other high-energy theatrics that I employ during our class meetings, I typically ask students to think about the best managers they've ever had and the worst managers they've ever had.

I then ask them to share some of the characteristics of these "best" and "worst" managers. The answers have become highly predictable. You probably wouldn't find many of them to be surprising.



Their "best" managers tend to (among other behaviors):

- Be supportive
- Show an interest in their development
- Know what they're talking about
- Have good organizational skills
- Communicate clearly and frequently

Their "worst" managers tend to (among other behaviors):

- Be selfish
- Lash out in anger
- Have a low level of competence in their field
- Be disorganized and scattered
- Confuse people through inadequate or inaccurate communication

Additionally, there's one phrase that people always mention when talking about their "worst" managers.

"They micromange."

"They're micromanagers."

I get it—no one loves having the boss poking around in every detail of a project. It can be rather annoying, feel like a waste of time and leave you with the impression that he or she doesn't trust you.

But I wonder if all micromanagement is really that bad?

In other words, might there be good micromanagement and bad micromanagement? By labeling all micromanagement as bad and demonizing the entire concept, I wonder if we run the risk of being too far removed from the work, advocating a managerial style that could allow people and projects to go much too far in the wrong direction without necessary course corrections.

My [amazing colleague Mike Richardson](#) makes this distinction between good and bad micromanagement. So does the U.S. Navy, in a way, in one of its Leadership Principles. That principle—number six of 11 in the list—is “Make sure the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished.”

Another way we talk about this principle in the Navy is through the concept of “intrusive leadership.”

In some ways, both “micromanagement” and “intrusive leadership” sound horrible. Yet think again about some of the great managers and leaders you've had in your career. Chances are that they were also the people who asked you tough questions. They pushed you to new levels of performance and attention to detail. They didn't necessarily take it at face value when you said that you knew what were doing or when you reported the status of a project. Instead, they probed. They ensured that you were both on the same page regarding the nature of what needed to be happen, where you were in the process of finishing it and that you both had the same definition of “done.”

Great managers and leaders aren't always there just to make us feel comfortable. Many times, they're there to help us come to know what we never considered. They're there to guide us even when we don't realize we needed guidance. In the words of President Ronald Reagan, they “Trust, but verify.”

Considering two factors can help when deciding how much we trust versus how much we verify. Those two factors are (a) the nature of the task and (b) the level of experience of the people performing the task.

If the task is routine and the people are highly experienced, managers can be much more “hands off.” If the task is unusual and the people are inexperienced, however, managers might need to be much more involved. When there's a mix (e.g., a routine task and inexperienced people or an unusual task and experienced people), managers will likely need to exhibit a balance of “trusting” and “verifying” during the life of the project or task.

Of course, “bad” micromanagement does exist. My thought is simply that there’s value in not going too far in the other direction, toward a style of management in which a lack of communication and oversight leads to inefficiency and ineffectiveness.

Namely, it’s a good policy to “make sure the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished.”

This post is [one in a series](#) that I’m doing on all 11 of the U.S. Navy’s Leadership Principles. Here are all 11 of those principles:

- 1 Know yourself and seek self-improvement ([read more](#))
- 2 Be technically and tactically proficient ([read more](#))
- 3 Know your people and look out for their welfare ([read more](#))
- 4 Keep your people informed ([read more](#))
- 5 Set the example ([read more](#))
- 6 Make sure the task is understood, supervised, and accomplished**
- 7 Train your unit as a team
- 8 Make sound and timely decisions
- 9 Develop a sense of responsibility among your people
- 10 Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities
- 11 Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions

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