



Intelligent Micromanagement

INTRODUCTION

In today's business environment the word micromanager sends shudders through anyone who might have the misfortune to be so labeled. Micromanagement can have negative consequences when done too often and done badly. This poses a real dilemma for many executives. Opportunities to solve or prevent problems as well as opportunities to achieve more results can go unrealized out of a fear of violating level boundaries and being labeled a micromanager. Yet there are times and circumstances when the executive has a right and perhaps even a responsibility to micromanage.

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There are important cautions that must be considered before engaging in micromanagement. It is easy to undermine the authority of the subordinate when the executive engages in micromanagement. The relationship between the executive and the subordinate can also be damaged when there is not mutual agreement as to what is going to be done and who is going to do it. It is also important for the executive not to let people come to him or her to override earlier decisions by the subordinate. Micromanagement can also be an excuse for an executive to indulge a need for power and control rather than providing benefit to the organization. An executive who periodically uses micromanagement as a technique might get used to this control and find it difficult to stop. Poorly done, micromanagement can drive good people from the organization.



Despite these risks, there are circumstances where micromanagement is not only possible but preferable. An executive can balance out the cost and benefits associated with micromanagement and use micromanagement in a judicious way. However, several factors should be considered before an executive chooses to micromanage.

Micromanagement

Knowing when to micromanage and how to do so without creating problems requires careful consideration. The following checklist can help an executive decide whether to intervene a level or two down in the organization.

Determine When to Micromanage

It is critical to determine whether the circumstances are advantageous for micromanagement.

Micromanagement may be indicated when an issue has significant impact, critical timelines, or is one that will receive lots of attention (good or bad).

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1. A key first step is for the executive to develop a personal understanding of micromanagement as a right and sometimes even a responsibility. The executive needs to be willing to use micromanagement when appropriate.
2. Thought should be given to the type of issue for which micromanagement is appropriate. Micromanagement may be indicated when an issue has significant impact, critical timelines, or is one that will receive lots of attention (good or bad).
3. Micromanagement should be done judiciously and executives need to exercise restraint in its use. If an issue will self-correct in a reasonable timeframe the executive may not need to intervene. Sometimes a subordinate is going down a path and the executive knows that very quickly it will become evident to the subordinate that the path is incorrect. In other circumstances the executive can provide information or ask that certain information be obtained. This additional information can stimulate self-correction. In both cases further involvement by the executive is not needed.
4. Micromanagement may be beneficial when the subordinate doesn't have the expertise to handle the issue. By being involved the executive can help get the issue resolved in the best way possible. This can also be an opportunity for the executive to teach the subordinate how to handle such issues in the future.
5. The executive's power and status may be necessary to resolve the issue. By intervening the executive can push through barriers those lower in the organization can't overcome. Yet the executive needs to be cautious in exercising this power.



6. Corporate responsibilities may require the executive to be in closer contact with people throughout the organization in order to assess the talent and to get to know high potential individuals. This can be done by high degrees of involvement with issues that provide an opportunity to see such individuals in action.
7. Selective micromanagement may be indicated when an executive needs to get a better sense of how projects are moving forward. Sampling progress at a detailed level can provide the executive with important insights. It also provides the executive with the knowledge necessary to intervene when appropriate.
8. Micromanagement can provide the direction and urgency needed to handle a crisis. There are issues and circumstances where powerful, directive, and highly involved leadership is needed.

Determine How to Micromanage

If micromanagement is indicated, the following steps can help in doing it well.

1. Forewarning allows everyone to be prepared and thus not be surprised when the executive engages in micromanagement. Initially, the executive can announce matter-of-factly that he or she will periodically engage in micromanagement as appropriate. In addition, the executive can describe a belief that he or she has a right or responsibility to periodically do so.
2. The executive and subordinate can mutually define the circumstances that would lead to the executive's involvement. The two also need to reach an agreement about when and how micromanagement will be conducted. With this agreement in place the two can define who does what as issues arise and avoid potential hard feelings. This gives the subordinate an opportunity to publicly support intelligent micromanagement and to not subtly undermine it.
3. Micromanaging is not all or nothing. An executive should determine how much personal involvement is required based on the needs of the issue. For example, it may be only necessary to micromanage the conceptualization of what needs to be done and not be involved in the execution. Other issues may require heavy involvement throughout the process.
4. Micromanagement brings important educational opportunities with it. It is essential that the executive not unilaterally engage in micromanagement but to use such circumstances to teach. Although this is an easy step to skip, this investment of time can lead to personal benefits for subordinates by preparing them to unilaterally handle such issues in the future. This has major long-term executive development benefits.

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5. It may be easier and quicker for an executive to rush in and solve a problem but this runs the risk of undermining the subordinate. The executive and the subordinate should form a partnership which brings the best minds together to address an issue and demonstrate to the larger organization the wisdom in doing so. When done this way the chances of the subordinate being undermined are significantly reduced.

Determine How to Debrief the Micromanagement:

After the micromanagement is over it is important for the parties to debrief the experience.

1. What outcome was achieved by the micromanagement? Was this outcome what was required? Would the outcome have occurred without the executive resorting to micromanagement? What learnings occurred for both the executive and subordinate?
2. Were there any unexpected consequences to the micromanagement? What downsides, if any, happened and how can they be prevented in the future?

CONCLUSIONS

Micromanagement doesn't have to be negative. There are times and circumstances where micromanagement is not only appropriate but required.

Yet micromanagement should be undertaken with caution since the potential for negative consequences is high. Intelligently done micromanagement can have individual and corporate benefits which outweigh any risks.



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