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How coaches and mentors can help people who micromanage

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How coaches and mentors can help people who micromanage

One of the most common problems that holds talented people back is their tendency to micromanage. Usually driven by insecurity, micromanagement is bad news for the individual and for their team. For the individual, it means that they never have enough time to do things that are important not urgent, nor to focus on longer-term issues and opportunities. It's also highly stressful, worrying which ball they might drop and when. When there is a real need to delegate tasks, they haven't developed their direct reports to the point, where they are confident in them – so the vicious cycle goes round. For their team, it can be frustrating to be second-guessed all the time, and talented people tend to move to jobs, which offer more responsibility and learning.

At its extreme, micromanagement borders on an illness that requires professional psychological therapy. Most of the time, however, the person can learn to trust others and gradually wean themselves off the need to control everything.

Coaches and mentors can help by:

- Recognising the clues that someone is micromanaging
- Helping them confront the issue and plan how to change their behaviour
- Supporting them in making the change

The clues to micromanagement

These are many and varied, but some of the most common include:

- They complain about their work-load and the stress it brings
- They complain about not being able to trust their direct reports (so they can't delegate)
- They don't ask direct reports for advice
- Talented direct reports don't stay long – the micromanager accumulates a team of second-raters, who will do what they are told
- They tell direct reports or contractors not just what they want done, but how – often in detail
- They spend a significant proportion of their time monitoring what their direct reports are doing
- They snatch back tasks, if they have any concerns about what the other person is doing
- They like people in the office, where they can keep an eye on them
- They tend to work from the assumption that their way of doing things is the "right" way – so they discourage any innovation or creativity
- Giving instructions that focus on how to do things, but don't really address why
- They see more risks than opportunities in new projects

Confronting the issue

Persistent micromanagers typically know about their behaviour – it will have come up in performance appraisals, exit interviews and from other sources. However, they tend to downplay the significance of the problem. “That’s just the way I am” or “You just can’t trust people to do it right”.

So any confrontation has to address their instinctive avoidance of the issue. One practical approach is to focus on consequences – making it clear that micromanaging will seriously limit their potential for promotion. Another is for them to measure their stress levels at regular intervals during the day and to link this to consequences. So, for example, “How important is to you to still be alive when your children get married? Your choices about how you work will have a significant effect on your chances of being there.”

In practice, some micromanagers still won’t or can’t admit to the impact their behaviour has on themselves or on others. Sadly, for these people, it takes a serious trauma (like a heart attack) for the message to get across.

Planning behaviour change

Given that (whether they admit it or not) the cause of their behaviour is fear (of making mistakes, of being blamed, of losing reputation), it’s unreasonable to expect radical change in a short period of time. Rather, they need to concentrate on gradual changes that will allow them to build confidence in letting go. The coach or mentor can help them create and work to a 12 month plan that addresses step by step change towards a series of goals. For example:

- Changing the style of conversations they have with direct reports, to put more emphasis on suggestions from them
- Delegating more tasks – including some of the monitoring of other people’s work
- Shifting from a perspective that the team is there to support them to one where they are there to support the team
- Having regular developmental conversations with direct reports
- Measuring trust (theirs in the team, the team’s trust in the manager and between team members) and reviewing progress in creating a climate of high psychological safety.

Supporting the change

When things go wrong – as of course they will when their team is not used to taking responsibility and initiative – it’s to be expected that they will panic. Talk through with them their strategy for coping with this and be available to help them.

One of the critical issues will be how they behave towards a direct report, who doesn’t deliver a task in the way the manager intended. Instead of taking the task back, and undermine the person’s confidence, they can ask themselves the questions:

- How can I turn this into a learning opportunity for the direct report?
- How can I respond in a way that will encourage and motivate them?
- What can I learn about myself and how I prepare direct reports for tasks that would make this kind of mistake less likely in future?

Help them also reflect on how they manage a relapse. A key question here is:

- Who form your support network for this behavioural change?

Their support network may include you, perhaps some peers, their boss and, of course, the direct reports themselves.

Summary

Helping someone learn not to micromanage requires patience. The coachee or mentee may need time and support to admit they have a problem and commit to doing something about it. They may struggle to accept significant change, and even with step-by-step change, will be prone to relapse. Having a change plan and a support network are key ingredients.

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