

Back to Basics

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Don't worry about micro-managing. Worry about under-managing.

Bruce Tulgan has a question for you: How often do you manage your employees?

By that, he means the basics. How often do you talk to employees about what you expect of them, monitor their performance, provide feedback and reward or admonish them accordingly? Tulgan, a consultant with New Haven, Conn.-based Rainmaker Thinking, asked 500 managers the same question, and got some discouraging answers: Only 1 percent of managers covered all the bases with all their employees every day, 10 percent did so at least once a week and 25 percent did so once a month. In fact, only 65 percent did so at least once a year, meaning one in three managers he talked with didn't fulfill their basic management duties even once a year. People often complain about micromanagers, but Tulgan thinks the biggest problem facing government agencies and other organizations is the reverse: under-managers.

Tulgan says the problem may be even bigger in government because red tape, bureaucracy and personnel rules distract supervisors from the job of actually managing the work employees need to do. "In some ways, the legacy of management in government is even more hands-off," Tulgan says. Some supervisors also tell Tulgan that they have too many people to manage, making it impossible to do it properly. Still another reason managers cite for under-management is time - especially if their jobs include numerous other tasks.

He acknowledges those reasons, but says managers have to make time to talk with their employees - every day if possible, but at least once a week. If they don't, they'll find themselves unaware of what's going on in their work groups, ill-equipped to set appropriate goals and deadlines, unlikely to catch problems before they spiral out of control, thus spending more time putting out fires because they failed to prevent problems in the first place. In addition, employees lose respect for managers they view as out of the loop.

Tulgan suggests asking a very simple question to start a daily conversation with employees: "What are you doing today?" Managers can use the answer to make sure people are focusing on the most important work, using their time efficiently and doing their jobs productively. Those conversations also can help managers distribute work effectively by knowing who's busy and who's not.

When Tulgan suggests the daily conversation to managers, they sometimes tell him that people will be insulted by being told what to do. That's not how it works out in practice, he says. Great employees love to talk about what they're doing. They get to show off how good they are, and managers have little to say other than "good job." Weaker employees could use the guidance, and some appreciate the help. If employees react with hostility, it might be because they have gotten away with skating and are in need of closer supervision.

"Somewhere along the way, managers got spooked by micromanagement," Tulgan says. He suggests it's time to get over it. "If you tell people what to do, you're managing," he says.