






Thread Advisory

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Demystifying Micro-management

For as long as I can remember, micro-management has been a taboo word, and being a micro-manager has been an undesirable leadership attribute, that most people managers avoid at all cost.

I started thinking about this matter recently, as I was running a leadership assessment project for employees at entry leadership level (Assistant Managers / Managers), and upon asking them a question around their delegation style, I kept hearing them say over and over again that they give the assignment to their employees with some contextual information, they explain the expected outcome and they ask their employees to come back if they have any problem or need any support. And upon asking follow up questions around how do they ensure things turn up according to expectations and on a timely manner, many of them admitted they struggle with this, as they didn't want to become or be perceived as a micro-manager.

And I asked myself: if as a people manager I don't micro-manage (at least for a while) a young employee or a new employee, or even experienced employees during a high risk / crisis situation, or within highly regulated / compliance environments, how do I ensure they are able to perform according to expectations? How do I ensure they are able to understand what is acceptable and unacceptable in terms of behaviours and interactions? How do I ensure they don't waste time and effort going in circles and trying to figure out how to effectively and efficiently contribute and make an impact?




I then came to the conclusion that perhaps the word micro-management has been misunderstood. And I want to take this opportunity to put forward my own perspective around micro-management to allow those new managers to reflect on it, and make up their own mind about the benefits, suitability and approach towards being an effective "micro-manager".

It starts with the way we **assign tasks**. We have always been told that we need to start with the end in mind. What is the desired outcome? Instead of trying to dictate the way work needs to be done to achieve the outcome. We are told that by going through the details and helping people understand the steps will limit their creativity, their ability to provide their perspective, and that it may result in long term disengagement. But, what if by avoiding a more detailed conversation, we are setting the individual for failure? Many new managers will tell me they end up having to pick up the pieces and doing the work themselves. Isn't this equally demotivating? So what I will say is:

1. Start with giving **context**. Why is this task or assignment required, and how it fits within the overall expectations from the function / department. This will allow the employee to understand the importance of the task / assignment and how the work is an integral part of the outcomes required from the role / function.
2. Explain what is the required **outcome**. And here is not just to say something like "I need you to produce a marketing report", but it is more like "you need to produce a marketing report that should contain the following sections, or the following type of information and insights". This will allow the employee to have clarity around the expectations in terms of quality and content.
3. Set the **timeline**. It is not just to say "I need it ASAP", but instead to say "I would like to see the final version of the report on 5th April by 5pm". This will allow the employee to think through the other tasks he / she may have at hand, to ascertain the best way to prioritize, or to raise the conflicting priorities that may need to be managed.



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4. Paint the **process**. Here is when you don't need to tell them step by step how to go about getting the report done, but it is when you provide them with an overview of how do you want the report to be put together. You can say something like: "Take the next 2 days to do some research and put your thoughts together. Meet me on 25 March with your initial thoughts. Once we have this conversation, I will be able to provide you with feedback, and support you with anything that you may not be able to find, or with any question you may have. Let's meet again on 30th March with the first draft of the report, so that I can see how it is progressing, and can provide you with further inputs to enable you to finalize it on time. Finally, let's catch up on 5th April at 5pm so that you can walk me through the final report".

And I ask both manager and employee: Does the above sound like micro-management? Is it preventing the employee from contributing his/her ideas or limiting their ability to innovate or being creative? Is it giving the manager stress and doubts the employee will be able to cope / deliver? I will say, the above conversation has set both parties on the right path towards producing a report that will be impactful, comprehensive and delivered on a timely manner.

Now, let's move forward a few days, to the day the employee is expected to have completed the initial research and formed an idea of how he/she wants to put the report together. What should the employee do? Wait for his/her manager to ask how he/she is doing? How should the manager act? Should the manager approach the employee and ask how she / he is doing? Or wait for the employee to come forward to share? Well, the answer is simple! This should have become, together with all other discussed check-points, a calendar invites from the day the report was assigned. This would have taken care of blocking manager-employee time to have this discussion, and would have eliminated the uncertainty of how to go about providing updates / seeking feedback. This showcases from the beginning a collaborative approach towards preparing the report.




And how should the check-point meetings be conducted? This is the employee's opportunity to showcase their tangible progress, their ideas, their contribution. These check-points should not be a high-level conversation. They should be an opportunity to share the content of the report, the format, the tone, the graphics, the font etc. By showing how it is taking shape, the employee will have an opportunity to explain how he/she is curating the document, will allow for the employee to identify areas where he/she may need help / support and will allow the manager to provide feedback and his/her own ideas / experience in order to ensure the final product is as best as it could base on what is expected and required from the report. The check-points replace the last-minute sense of urgency with a progressive sense of achievement. The check-points build upon ideas and reduce the stress, anxiety and uncertainty that is generated by a more fluid and unstructured process.

Some of you may argue that building a checkpoints process will kill creativity and it may not work for everyone, as some people tend to have a more "last-minute" approach to getting things done. I will argue that creativity needs to be adjusted to timelines. What is the point of creativity if nothing comes out on the expected delivery date? And about the "last-minute" style? I will argue this approach seems to be a bit self-centered, and will prevent the individual from reflection time, consideration of alternatives and exchange of ideas with others. As the work we do becomes more complex and requires the participation of others in order to be completed, all of us participating in the assignment will need to adapt to a team-centered approach that works in the context of what is ultimately required of the team. It can't be driven by individual style and preference.

And so, the due date comes. What do you think will happen on that 5th April 5pm meeting? Most likely both manager and employee will come together to have a last look at the report, make the final touches and adjustments and hopefully have an opportunity to reflect on the process, the experience and what can be improved for the next report.



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But for a minute, let's try to imagine what will be the reality on that 5th April at 5pm if this check-points approach, which some may call micro-management was not in place. This may be the first time the manager gets to see the report. This may be the first time the employee is presenting the content of the report. And this may be the time when the manager realizes that the report as it stands is not what he/she was expecting. Very soon emotions will come into play, maybe blame will be assigned as to why things did not move in the right direction, maybe defensive responses may be given, and the focus will then shift to defending a position instead of the report itself. In many instances, the manager will tell the employee, "Let me take over from here, so that we can get this report out on time". This is overall a frustrating and disappointing experience.

And now I ask, how many new managers have landed in this same situation over and over again? And why is it happening? I dare to say, it happens because we have grown fearful of the word micro-management and the benefits it brings with it.

So, the next time you as a new manager is delegating work to a team member, remember:

1. Set the context
2. Clarify the expected outcome
3. Provide a cursory process that will facilitate the achievement of the outcome
4. Set clear datelines
5. Define check points and lock them in the calendar
6. Make the check-points an opportunity to review tangible progress.

And I ask you to evaluate the results of your newly found micro-management skills around the following criteria:

1. Quality, completeness and timeliness of assignment
2. Learning and growth opportunity for the employee
3. Ability to contribute ideas / insights / experience for the manager
4. Overall well-being of both parties

I am determined to bring back the value of effective micro-management to our leadership vocabulary. I hope you do too after reading this article. However, if you have a differing opinion, I would really appreciate it if you could share it with all of us. The more perspectives, the better for our collective learning and growth!