Micromanagement: When to avoid it and how to use it effectively

What is micromanagement? Simplistically, micromanagement can be defined as evaluating processes or people closely. This management style is often perceived negatively, which is partly attributed to the fact that micromanaging tends to interfere with details best understood by other members of the team. Micromanagement is associated more with the process by which a task is completed and less with the results that are achieved. In 2000, Wright\(^1\) suggested that there is a strong negative correlation between the degree of micromanaging and the amount of autonomy a micromanaged team member possesses. However, in certain cases, micromanagement can be used appropriately as an effective management tool. Managers must differentiate between setting goals and dictating each detail of a process. Effective micromanagement means knowing when to get involved and when to get out of the way.

Pitfalls of micromanagement. Micromanaging can have a deleterious impact on employee morale. For instance, employees may feel that they are not being listened to and can begin to either shut down or avoid making positive suggestions for continuous improvement.

During a crisis situation, employees may not be willing to sacrifice their own time or resources to address the problem, assuming that their manager will take full responsibility and credit for managing through the crisis.

Micromanaging can lead to employee disengagement. An actively disengaged employee has a negative impact on both service and productivity, which ends up costing the organization money.\(^2\) Furthermore, his or her performance is undoubtedly limited because the manager has in effect chosen to remove any incentives for the employee to demonstrate effort and creativity. There is an implied lack of trust between the employee and the manager when micromanaging is used inappropriately. The manager perceives the employee as being unable to complete a certain task or function, while the employee gets frustrated by not being able to incorporate his or her own ideas on how to complete the task or function. Ultimately, the employee can end up spiraling downward into a silo and evading the manager to avoid aggravation and frustration.

Micromanagement may give managers an illusion of effectiveness, especially if there are early successes when they micromanage tasks or functions that could be done by subordinates. In the long term, the team’s ability to innovate and create new value-added services is hindered—and it falls solely to the manager to be creative. Empowering the staff is a bold approach for any manager to take, but success ultimately depends on managers’ ability to surround themselves with a strong team.

When is micromanagement appropriate? Managers should not avoid micromanagement entirely. In fact, there are instances where micromanaging has its role in the workplace. A noted business professor has suggested that there are six
situations in which managers should engage in micromanagement: (1) the strategy of the organization is changing, (2) a new endeavor is starting, (3) there is a new leader, a new employee, or a new division or unit, (4) an employee or leader fails to execute on an initiative, and, as a result, the program lingers, (5) serious complaints or errors have occurred, and (6) the division or department has poor results. During these situations, the manager should practice proactive micromanagement (setting the course straight and identifying individual needs before the journey begins, as in the case of a new employee) or reactive micromanagement (to remedy poor results or errors). In these circumstances, it is important for the manager to review the details and fine mechanics of projects and initiatives—oftentimes referred to in business circles as the “raw ingredients.” When investigating the root cause of a problem, managers can evaluate the raw ingredients relative to their own experiences in order to better assess a project’s progress.

When switching from a “hands-off” leadership style to micromanagement mode, it is important for managers to help team members understand why they are getting into the details of the initiative. In such situations, the manager can simply state, “The goals of this initiative are shared by all of us, and I want to offer support to resolve any standing issues as a team.”

While micromanagement is sometimes necessary, doing it for too long can be detrimental, and managers should be attuned to the need to reevaluate their role and back off at the appropriate time. In the words of one management expert, “Effective micromanagement through setting structure, developing strategy and plans, creating reliable systems for others, and teaching people how to be independent thinkers can actually empower others to do their jobs with little involvement from you at all. Yet truthfully, they are being micromanaged; they just don’t feel it, because you’re not in their faces.” Managers need to assess how often they are practicing in a micromanaging mode. If managers feel they are spending too much time in the weeds, they should consider whether they are hiring the right team members.

**A self-assessment tool.** Managers are constantly being called on to create new contexts in which their subordinates can succeed. The ability to have a good balance while knowing when micromanaging is appropriate is an essential skill that
managers should possess. The former Section Advisory Group on Manager Development of the ASHP Section of Pharmacy Practice Managers has created a self-assessment tool to help managers at all levels determine their tendency to micromanage (appendix). This tool, also available online (www.ashp.org/menu/PracticePolicy/ResourceCenters/Pharmacy-Practice-Managers/Business-Management), provides a quick pulse-check on identifying tendencies toward micromanaging.

Closing notes. Strategies to reduce micromanaging include three main principles: (1) understanding the pitfalls of micromanagement, (2) knowing when micromanagement is appropriate, and (3) adjusting the micromanagement switch to accommodate for certain situations. Overall, managers must set clear goals and ensure that individuals have the tools necessary to succeed in their initiatives. Managers should conduct frequent self-checks in order to avoid inappropriate micromanagement.


### Appendix—Micromanagement self-assessment survey

The following pulse survey, created by ASHP’s Section Advisory Group on Manager Development under the Section of Pharmacy Practice Managers, can be used by managers to periodically self-assess their tendencies toward micromanagement within the workplace. For each question, choose one response option (point values are listed in parentheses); sum points for total score.

1. My team performs most efficiently on their assigned projects when I
   a. am hands on. (1)
   b. provide feedback at key points in the assignment. (2)
   c. provide leadership support when needed. (3)
2. When I propose changes or delegate assignments within the organization, my coworkers
   a. do not fully understand the changes I am proposing and ask many questions. (1)
   b. understand partially the reason for the proposed changes and ask a few questions. (2)
   c. have full understanding of the proposed changes and rarely ask any questions. (3)
3. If there are tasks that I can easily complete myself,
   a. I usually do them myself. (1)
   b. I delegate the task half the time and complete it myself half the time. (2)
   c. I usually delegate it to the appropriate team member. (3)
4. The reporting that I demand from my team is
   a. routine and frequent. (1)
   b. in moderate amount and usually associated with a task or assignment. (2)
   c. only requested when it is needed. (3)
5. When I am out of the office and away from work, my team
   a. usually needs me to respond to their e-mails. (1)
   b. only sometimes needs me to respond. (2)
   c. rarely needs my attention when I am gone. (3)
6. As a manager, my team thinks
   a. I criticize too much and affirm too little. (1)
   b. I sometimes criticize too much or sometimes affirm too often. (2)
   c. I criticize too little and affirm too often. (3)
7. My role on my team during a project is to
   a. be a taskmaster. (1)
   b. provide some vision but also complete tasks. (2)
   c. provide only the roadmap. (3)
8. I believe it is best to
   a. direct employees. (1)
   b. combine both directing and empowering employees. (2)
   c. empower employees. (3)
9. Relinquishing power or control to other team members
   a. is very difficult and uncomfortable. (1)
   b. happens but is still uncomfortable. (2)
   c. is easy for me to do. (3)
10. When completing assignments on their own, members of my team are
    a. often not capable. (1)
    b. sometimes capable. (2)
    c. always capable. (3)

**Scoring:**
A total score of 10–16 suggests a high level of micromanaging. You may need to detach yourself from current projects. Ineffective micromanaging has a deleterious effect on staff morale and productivity, and managers should learn how to avoid this toxic atmosphere.

A score of 17–24 indicates a medium level of micromanaging. You have a good balance of mixing it up. Watch for the negative signals though.

A score of 25–30 suggests a low level of micromanaging. Make sure you can get ‘in the weeds’ when you still have to. Sometimes, micromanaging is necessary for effectiveness and to execute results.

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