

THE DEVIL IN THE DETAILS

Getting Past Micromanagers Requires Care and an Understanding of Their Concerns

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AFTER FOUR YEARS IN THE LAW firm trenches, Erin is hanging it up. The former big-city, big-firm associate recently handed in her resignation to take a break and re-evaluate her commitment to the practice.

The culprit, she says, was micromanagement. Her supervisor, a slightly senior associate, could never let go. No matter what she did, she says, her work would be redone. Her opinions didn't count and her voice wasn't heard. When she confronted her supervisor, he responded angrily.

"Micromanagement creates a kind of mental laziness," says Erin, who asked that her full name not be used. "When everything is truly micromanaged, it doesn't matter what you do, they will redo it."

Erin is hardly alone. Most workers—close to 80 percent—report experiencing the effects of micromanagement at one point in their work lives, according to a study by Harry E. Chambers, president of the management and leadership development firm Trinity Solutions in Atlanta.

In his research, Chambers also found that 22 percent of managers acknowledged subjecting their workforce to micromanagement.

"Controlling people just because you can is self-serving, but in reality it's very disruptive and dysfunctional to the staff," says Chambers, whose latest book is *My Way or the Highway: The Micromanagement Survival Guide*. "People work better in an environment where they think they're valued," he says. When they don't feel valued, they often underperform, he says. Or, like Erin, they leave.

"Micromanagement is never an acceptable behavior," he says, adding that when taken to its extreme, it becomes "abusive management."

SAVE THE SNIVELING

TYPICAL MICROMANAGERS, WHILE WELL-MEANING, TEND TO require excessive approvals on nearly every decision or next step in a process. Chambers says it's not too hard to identify a micromanager—just look for a workflow bottleneck and a group of employees with low morale.

Suffering employees have options, but whining and complaining aren't on the list. And directly confronting a micromanager, if it's done wrong, could elicit a response of denial and defensiveness, as Erin found out.

Instead, Chambers says it's important to move forward by first resolving not to be a victim of micromanagement.

That could mean changing jobs, but Chambers offers other alternatives. Micromanaged employees need to think of reactions and strategies that will yield the best results. They also can identify areas where they have influence, separating what is under their control from what isn't.

Chambers recommends finding out what makes micromanagers tick. "If you can find out what it is they are trying to accomplish or avoid, you may be able to offer alternative methods for success," he writes in *My Way*.

Specifically, Chambers asserts that micromanagers will more likely trust their employees to decide how to do things if the managers feel as if employees are taking into account their interests and desired outcomes.

For example, Chambers has found that managers are often issuing perfunctory approvals—it's not that they're concerned with reviewing the quality of the submitted



work, they simply want to be kept in the loop. Yet this approval requirement, says Chambers, holds up workflow and lowers morale because it forces employees to wait for an OK before they can move on.

To resolve this, Chambers recommends that associates ask their managers to identify the types of decisions the managers want to be involved in, saving the rest for post-review. That way, managers keep their oversight responsibilities and employees are freer to do their work.

In Erin's case, she says her job left her feeling marginalized, as if she were performing the functions of an administrative assistant. The lifestyle a law firm salary provided was nice, but in the end, not worth the professional angst. Micromanagement, she says, "takes away the value of the work you're contributing." ■