

When 'Managing' Becomes 'Controlling'

Author and HR consultant Harry E. Chambers says that the negative effects of micromanagement are quite costly to companies from both a financial and HR standpoint, since employee morale, job performance, and even employee turnover are negatively impacted by micromanagers.

In Chambers' book, *My Way or the Highway: The Micromanagement Survival Guide*, he explains that "Micromanagement occurs when influence, involvement and interaction begin to subtract value from people and processes. It is the perception of inappropriate interference in someone else's activities, responsibilities, decision making, and authority."

Before writing the book, Chambers commissioned a survey to be administered to employees and managers regarding micromanagement. Chambers highlights some of the significant findings:

- 79% of people perceive that they are being micromanaged now or in their past work lives.
- 85% said their morale has been impacted negatively by being micromanaged.
- 71% said that micromanagement has interfered with their job performance.
- 67% of people who have been micromanaged have given serious thought to changing jobs because of it.
- 36% have actually changed jobs because of micromanagement.

What can HR do? According to Chambers, HR must learn to identify when and where micromanagement is occurring and take steps to help affected managers change their behaviors.

Behavior of Micromanagers

Micromanagement can be seen in individuals and sometimes in an entire work culture, Chambers explains. There are signature behaviors and identifiable characteristics

common to managers engaged in micromanagement.

Excessive approvals. One of those signature behaviors involves the requirement for excessive approvals at every step in the work process. Chambers asserts, "Not only does this send a message to employees that we don't think that they're smart enough to make decisions; they're not trustworthy besides. The work becomes stuck; the manager becomes a bottleneck—how many times do we see employees waiting to get approvals from a manager on a decision prior to moving forward on a project?" This prevents the work from being completed in a timely manner.

Here's an example Chambers uses to illustrate the point. A service representative makes a field visit to a client company and is supposed to write a summary report, providing a copy of the report to the company within 30 days of his visit. The service representative finishes the report in a week and then has to wait not only for his manager's approval, but also the approval of the manager's supervisor before he can send the report to the client.

The manager and his supervisor hold up the process so that the report is late to the client, resulting in the company not fulfilling its service promise to the client firm. The service representative who made the original field visit takes the brunt of the client's displeasure, when it is his management's fault. The question that arises is this: Was it necessary for a standard summary of a client visit to be approved at two levels?

Excessive reports. Another signature behavior may be found in excessive reporting requirements on the part of managers from their employees. Chambers suggests that HR should review the number of and content in multiple reports required by managers from their staff and reports required by company leaders from middle managers.

"How many reports really aren't relevant," questions Chambers. "And in how many cases [upon a careful review of reports] is the same information required in many different formats? Some reporting is necessary, but micromanagement is taking legitimate behaviors to the point where they interfere with people's ability to do their jobs. Excessive reporting interferes with a person's ability to get his work done."

Excessive control of the process. Another characteristic of micromanagement involves a manager focusing more attention on the work process and specific tasks than on the final outcome of projects. Chambers comments, "Micromanagers think that they're Frank Sinatra. They want everything done their way. They want to exercise total control over how everything is done in their environment."

A Delicate Problem

Chambers notes that the trickiest part of recognizing and dealing with micromanagement on the part of specific managers or an entire work culture is that only 22 percent of managers (according to the survey) recognize that they're doing it. In addition, if you look at management behaviors along a continuum, you'll find that the behaviors of micromanagement are legitimate managerial behaviors taken to the extreme, he adds. It takes careful analysis to determine when managerial behaviors have reached the extreme and have become micromanaging behaviors.

Once the problem has been identified, it's probably best to couch any planned managerial training and skills development in the form of leadership development so that managers react positively to the training sessions and adopt better management skills, notes Chambers.

For more information about *My Way or the Highway* or Chambers, visit www.harrychambers.com. See page 8 of this issue for more on this topic.