

Beware the micromanager

By Steve Hart

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Nervous managers who are new to the job and desperate to make an impact often adopt a command and control style that's fuelled by insecurity, says a top management coach.

It's seen as micromanaging by staff and is often the result of a lack of good management training, says Iain McCormick of the Executive Coaching Centre.

"The real difficulty for a new manager is that they have to learn in public, which can be a difficult and potentially painful process," says McCormick. "What typically happens is that a manager new to a department will say to themselves, 'If I'm going to understand what's going on and if I want to be successful at this job I'm going to have to control it. Therefore, I want to know what the staff are doing and for them to come to me for my approval before they do anything!'"

And while there may be a good argument for a manager to tick off every decision made by their team, and to know and understand exactly who is doing what – and why, it can make for an office devoid of creativity and autonomy.

"The problem is that as our economy develops, and as we go into the knowledge economy, companies will increasingly require more creative solutions from their people," says McCormick. "What companies should look for in their staff are distinctive, different and exciting solutions – not people who just shuffle papers around.

And that is especially true in creative environments where managers can't hope to control the process of being creative."

It is different in places such as factories where a set of routine procedures obtain a set outcome, he says.

Some managers make a career out of micromanaging their staff with obvious consequences.

"What happens over time is that those people who can handle working in that environment stay, and the creative people leave," says McCormick. "But the people who do stay will get less creative and their output will decrease and the quality of their work also decreases."

But while the concept of empowering staff – to leave them to their own devices to get jobs done – is popular, McCormick says the "whole empowerment area is overblown."

"It's a wonderful theory," he says. "To think that if you let people do what they like that they will do the right thing. It's almost democracy at work and that can translate into tyranny at work.

"The best management theory says that your leadership style should relate to the circumstances you are

in. So, if you are with someone who has a very low skill level, and where the job is quite routine, then you can ask them to go do it and off they will go.

"But if the task is highly complex then the best style is not abandonment and 'come back to see me when it's done'. The aim of a good manager should be to help people attain their goals. It's the middle ground that managers should aim for.

"And that can be found by a manager doing something as simple as saying 'Well, you come back to me with a solution, let's all discuss it and if I'm happy we can do what you want to do – if not, we'll do it my way'."

But there are some tell-tail signs a manager can watch out for that should offer them a hint as to the success of their style of management.

"The most typical is that staff just withdraw and get into what we call a passive aggressive mode. That means they won't do what the manager asks but they won't fight it either – they listen and then just go off and do their own thing. And that's very frustrating for a manager and difficult to deal with.

"The other way is that staff just openly question and argue with their manager."

There are plenty of examples of good companies who freely empower their staff to act in the best interest of themselves and their employer. Among them is travel firm Flight Centre. The company has been named Best Place to Work (large workplace) in the 2006 Unlimited/JRA Best Places to Work survey – an annual nationwide workplace survey looking at the country's top employers.

Flight Centre's human resources director Sue Matson says the award is an endorsement of the company's value it places on its staff.

"Our philosophies and the culture are the backbone of everything we do, which is what makes our company such a great place to work. It comes from such a good foundation," says Matson. "Staff are empowered to make decisions and to learn from them in a true entrepreneurial spirit. It is a leap of faith that you have employed the right people and that they will do right by you."

Matson says 40 per cent of the salaries paid to Flight Centre staff is linked to performance and meeting targets.

That even applies to Matson as a part of her pay is directly related to staff retention.

It's in her interest to hire the right people and even try and convince staff not to leave.

"At Flight Centre it starts and ends with the fact that we employ people who we believe in and we tell staff that they are responsible for their own success. We develop and train them and tell them how we like things to be done and then let them get on with it."

She says the tight labour market is the perfect time for workers to demand a high level of support from their employer. Having identified the biggest stressors outside work as being money and health, Flight Centre set up Moneywise and Healthwise to help their staff achieve their goals.

"We place a strong emphasis on developing our people's abilities, fostering leadership skills and identifying future leaders," says Matson.

"We also believe there are no limits to what our staff can achieve. As a result, our salaries are uncapped and we are always in search of new ways to further the personal and professional development of our staff."

The company's general manager Rick Hamilton says Flight Centre's focus on maintaining a team atmosphere and rewarding staff successes has long been an integral part of the company's

philosophies.

When it comes to managing staff, Flight Centre says it believes that 'what gets rewarded, gets done'.

"We are a strong believer in setting goals and targets, and in turn rewarding and incentivising our team members to achieve them," says Matson. "One of our philosophies is if your work isn't fun you shouldn't be doing it'.

"Our egalitarian philosophies, strong leadership, systems, processes and our spiritual and physical commitment to empower ourselves personally and professionally makes us unique."

How to empower yourself at work

- * Determine what's really important to your boss and work with them to achieve it
- * Don't wait to be asked for information. Find out what the micromanager needs to feel confident and comfortable, then get it to them.
- * No one fears inertia more than the micromanager. Show that you're in motion on priority projects by communicating in three specific terms – awareness, reassurance and timelines.
- * Clarify your agreements in emails.

The micromanager loves to impose deadlines. Be the first to talk – offering a timeline for when you can do a task (not when you can't).

- * The micromanager enjoys catching people in the act. Avoid being an easy target and play by the rules.
- * The micromanager backs off with some people more than others. Watch those people to learn the secrets of their success.
- * The micromanager will go to war on every issue. Don't try to match him. Instead, choose the battles that are most important to you.

Source: *The American Association of Management*

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