

Five Tips for Avoiding the 'My Way' Trap

Micromanaging. You have probably done it. And if you think you have not, ask your team. You may be surprised to learn that despite your good intentions to never do *that* to anyone, you have stepped into the 'my way' trap more than once.

According to Diana Zarnoch, BlessingWhite's Director of Educational Services, no one wakes up in the morning thinking, "I'm going to micromanage my team today." Many well-intentioned leaders exhibit this behaviour because they are smart, are achievement-oriented and have years of experience figuring out the best way to do things. They enjoy problem solving and want to help. They want to ensure high-quality, customer-centred results.

Hazel Thomson, Scotland-based Talent Manager for global semiconductor manufacturer Freescale, concurs. She frequently observes micromanaging tendencies in *new* leaders. She explains, "Some have the impression that now they will need to manage the details of their own work as well as everybody else's on their team. They don't realise that their new role is completely different — as a coach and leader of people, not a super-manager of multiple projects or tasks. Others try to control more because they're not yet comfortable in their position."

Unfortunately, micromanaging damages employee engagement, sapping the initiative of even the most motivated team members. It undermines confidence, squashes innovation and often produces disappointing results. Leaders who micromanage may become exhausted and embittered. (It's a hard, thankless job thinking for other people!) The practice may even drive the most talented team members to look elsewhere — for an environment where their expertise is appreciated and they can make a more meaningful contribution to their employer's success.

Giving your employees more say in their projects and getting out of their way requires patience and self-control, but it is worth it says Laura Wood, Director of Compensation & Leadership Development at Semtech Corporation, another global semiconductor manufacturer based in California. "As leaders we may have fabulous ideas, but when we bring individuals into the conversation and provide the framework in which they can contribute their ideas and control their work, our job actually gets much easier. Things get done with passion and commitment. Once leaders experience that level of employee engagement, they understand the power of effective delegation and coaching."



It isn't easy to do, so here are five points to keep in mind as you work to unleash, not limit, the potential of your team.

Remember you're a leader first, expert second. When you coach your team members to best apply *their* knowledge and skills, you're leading. After all, they are experts too. You don't need to have all the answers. Shift from being an expert to an *expert leader* of people. Thomson quotes The Leadership Pipeline as she emphasises the importance of this transition for new leaders: "The most difficult change for first time managers is to learn to value managerial work rather than tolerate it. They must believe that making time for others is a necessary task and their responsibility."

Keep to the *what*, not the *how*. As a leader it's your job to assign a problem or task (*what* has to be done) by clearly describing the desired outcome and all the parameters or constraints that your employees need to work within (e.g., scope, timing, resources, decision-making authority, internal politics). Your team members need to process the information you provide and explore ideas to determine the best course of action. Let them apply their creativity and expertise. Wood suggests

advance planning as a way to keep to these boundaries: "One Vice President at our firm realised that by thoroughly planning the *what* — all the background information he thought his team member needed to know to be successful — it's much easier for him to let the employee own *how* the work gets done." Zarnoch agrees with the recommendation, explaining, "A common mistake is that managers think they're being clear about what they want only to find that they're not. When their team member says 'I get it,' they actually don't. It's a frustrating situation for the manager and the employee. Working on the *wrong* things when you think you're working on the *right* things is incredibly demotivating."

Provide context. Employees also need to understand why their assignment is critical, explains Zarnoch. "Our research indicates that people want to be part of something bigger. That connection to customer and organisational benefits motivates them to do their best work. In addition, when employees understand the business context they make better decisions."

Ask open-ended questions and listen. Since you're not directing employees on the *how* of a task, you need to explore ideas with them. And despite your best intentions you might find yourself talking a lot about *your* ideas. Wood's advice for redirecting the conversation is to ask open-ended questions. She says, "Tell yourself, 'let me stop my mouth, ask a question, and then listen.' Your team member will immediately re-engage. It doesn't have to be an awkward situation."

Know when to tell. There are times when there may not be a lot of options or room for new ideas. Zarnoch cautions, "If there are regulations that restrict the solution or you're faced with a situation where you absolutely must be directive, don't waste your team member's time exploring ideas. As a leader you need to ask when you can, but tell when you have to."

Micromanaging is a loss for the organisation, a frustration for employees, and a waste of your time as a leader. So remember that the best way to achieve results may not actually be *your* way.

For more information on how BlessingWhite can help your organisation's managers avoid micromanaging mishaps call +61 3 9889 5687 or email info@blessingwhiteap.com.

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