

When I wrote my first post on micromanagement, I didn't know there would be a Part 2. I argue that micromanagement and leadership are a finer line that people willingly admit. Thus, you will likely cross that line as a leader if you are engaged in impacting lives. However, using three skills leaders will cross that line less frequently and recover quicker if they do: establish boundaries, operate with ambiguity, and ask questions. These skills will help a supervisor trend towards leading rather than management by cloning. Help develop and empower employees, as opposed to recreating oneself and one's ideas in another thus simultaneously denying their experiences, perspective, and creativity.

Establish Boundaries

A leader must help define the role their employee plays in the organization. Establish boundaries by communicating your vision and philosophy often. Remind your employees until they can anticipate occasions where you would. Utilize staff meetings, one-on-ones, and acknowledgements to expound upon the mission of the organization, the department, your leadership philosophy, and how individuals fit within the team. If your leadership philosophy or vision is unclear, your employee likely misunderstands what success looks like for them. As a result, leaders compel a micromanagement culture in which employees request your constant approval and guidance to accomplish tasks exactly as you would prescribe. This can be frustrating for both parties and significantly slow productivity. Boundaries are as much for their sake as they are for yours. It keeps them metaphorically "in" so you can focus on your role as a leader.

Once the mission and roles are clearly defined and mutually understood, provide your employees with the tools to perform. Allow your employees ownership of their jobs, projects, and the authority to meet your clear expectations. Continue to frame expectations, especially regarding timelines, but once you've given your task and intent, allow the employee to proceed as they see fit. Often, this approach means offering your suggestions and giving them the freedom to reject your preferences for their own. It may also mean requesting progress updates while trusting and considering their judgement even with the important decisions. You can significantly increase an employee's buy-in, initiative, and drive when you allow them to have stake in the decision-making. Boundaries are a way to help both of you maximize the best from each other.

Operate with Ambiguity

Take risks for your employee's development. Own your responsibility to coach and mentor your them. Allow your employee to learn, which implies that you do not give them all the answers. Establish a sensible rhythm in which your employee must report to you what their primary tasks are and how they will accomplish them. At the same time, create an environment where feedback is a dialogue that goes both ways. That requires self-awareness to recognize how your words or personality can easily, even unintentionally, shut down conversation necessary to ensure your employee is heard, taken seriously, and understood. You will have to hold your tongue, you will even disagree with their approach, you may even have to allow them to fail. However, the team will be stronger as they learn to work together in unity.

Have high expectations and demand excellent performance yet be realistic about the growth that must occur for employees to succeed. Do not let their growth be more frustrating than it needs to be, it is a part of the process. Think "farming and nurturing" vs "factory and assembly line" mentorship. Plant a seed, water it, watch it for a season, prune, and be amazed by the ripe fruit that is produced. Your employee is not a robot where you can download software, attach some enhancements, and expect immediate functionality. There is risk and ambiguity involved with farming. There will be risk and ambiguity in your coaching and mentorship as your relationship acclimatizes.

Ask Questions

If your employee does not feel empowered, it may be because you are micromanaging. You cannot assume that you are leading well. Use the “one-thing” question technique: What is one thing I can do to help you on this next project? What is one thing that would make work more enjoyable for you? What is one area I can improve on in our communication? Good relationships are built on genuine curiosity and it shows that you care when you request feedback on your leadership.

Your employee may be coming into your office looking for you to fix their problem. Don't let them corner you into micromanagement because of their lack of initiative and vision. Ask them to come up with 3 alternative solutions. Ask questions that challenge their conclusions. “What led you to choose...?” “What will happen as a result of the different courses of action?” “Why do you prefer this versus that?” View each conversation as an opportunity to shape the direction and add your personal influence on the outcome. (Notice the word choice of ‘shape’ versus conform, submit, or rearrange.) Involving your employees in important decisions and planning will help you develop a critical thinker who becomes less dependent on you and more mission capable. Your conversations become implicit and communication happens faster and more natural. Asking questions creates dialogue that leads towards mutual understanding and purpose. The unity learned from dialogue, friction, and recalibration creates a bond with your team members and within the team as well.

Finally, most organizations, no matter how task-driven, have a significant relationship-oriented influence that serves as a more accurate gauge for the morale and culture of your team than the bottom line. There is an implied task underlying all three skills that is, ‘get to know your employee.’ You have no choice but to manage by cloning when you do not ‘know’ your people. Know what motivates your employees, why they respond to certain things the way they do, and what is their ‘why.’ How do they prefer to brand themselves? What is their purpose? Know your employee’s job, what they are going through to accomplish it, and what it means for them when you add on additional tasks. Establishing boundaries, operating with ambiguity, and asking questions fosters a cooperation beyond mere coexistence. Rather, a bond forms that unites a team who builds itself up in love like the body of Christ. The bible describes this beneficial, symbiotic teamwork as oneness. There is a huge opportunity to nurture and impact another being made in God’s image, to develop the team, to lead versus manage by cloning.