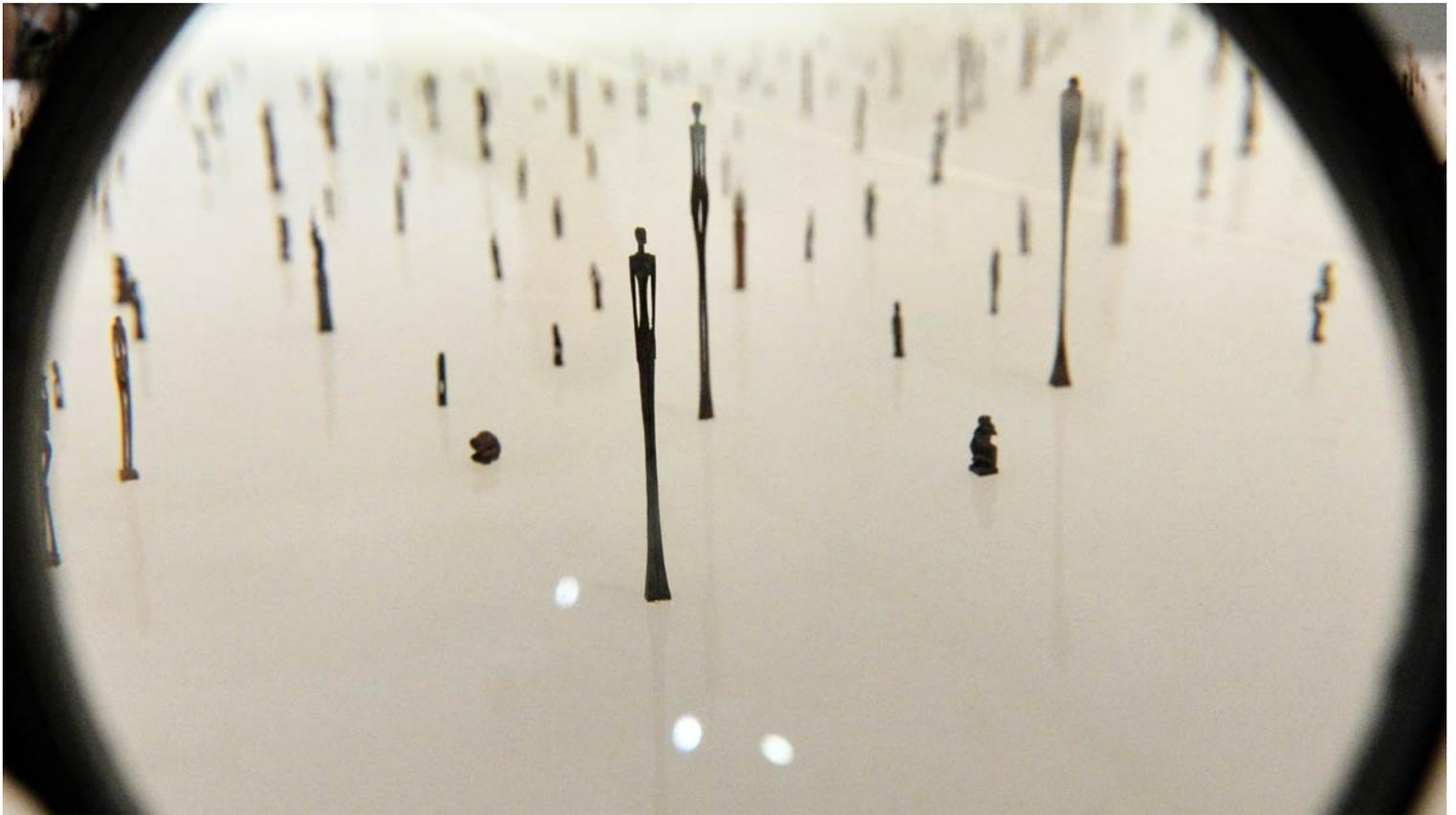


MANAGING UP

# Stop Being Micromanaged

by Amy Gallo

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No one likes a boss who excessively scrutinizes work and constantly checks in. Not only is this micromanaging behavior annoying, it can stunt your professional growth. If you have a controlling boss, you don't have to suffer. By assuaging a micromanager's stress, you may be able to secure the autonomy you need to get your work done and advance your career.

## **What the Experts Say**

Micromanagers abound in today's organizations but typically, it has nothing to do with performance. "It's more about your bosses' level of internal anxiety and need to control situations than anything about you," says Jenny Chatman, a professor of management at Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley who researches and consults on organizational culture. The bad news is fighting back won't work. "If you rebel against it, you will just get more of it," says Jean-François Manzoni, a professor of management at INSEAD and co-author of *The Set-Up-to-Fail Syndrome: How Good Managers Cause Great People to Fail*. So you can't change the way your boss leads, but you can change the way you follow using these tactics.

## **Evaluate the behavior**

Manzoni cautions that all controlling bosses are not cut of the same cloth. On one end of the spectrum you have managers who have very high standards who like some degree of control. They may regularly send you back to rework something that doesn't measure up. Manzoni offers Steve Jobs as an example of this kind of boss. They pay a great deal of attention to detail and exercise some degree of control but they don't stifle those who work for them. In fact, you may be able to learn a great deal from them.

At the other end of the spectrum are people Manzoni describes as "pathological micromanagers who need to make it clear to themselves and others that they are in charge." These are the bosses that give you little to no autonomy, insist they be involved in every detail of your work, and are more concerned about specifics, such as font size, rather than the big picture. "Micromanagers are obsessed with control. You know you are working with one if he or she gets involved in a level of detail that is way below his or her pay grade," says Chatman.

## **Don't fight it**

Both experts agree that it's counterproductive to rail against micromanagement. "If you push back in one way or another – passively or aggressively – your manager may conclude you can't be trusted and get more involved," says Manzoni. It may be tempting to complain but it

is not advisable. “If I sense disdain, I’m going to be encouraged to show you that on my forehead it says ‘boss’ and on yours, it doesn’t,” says Manzoni. Instead, try to understand what is causing your boss’s behavior. Is he under immense pressure? Is this his intuitive way of managing? Does the company culture encourage and reward this kind of behavior? By recognizing the underlying reasons, you can figure out how to respond.

### **Increase trust**

According to Chatman, micromanagement is usually “based on a general view that the world’s standards are not up to what they should be.” You therefore need to make a conscious and honest effort to earn your manager’s trust by succeeding in the dimensions that he cares about. “You absolutely, positively must deliver and deliver in a way that doesn’t increase your boss’s stress. In fact, identify things that reduce your boss’s stress,” says Manzoni. He suggests you say to your manager, “I see you’re under unbelievable pressure, how can I help?”

### **Make upfront agreements**

Another tactic is to talk to your boss – before a project starts – about how she will be involved. “Try to agree on standards and basic approach,” says Manzoni. Explain what you think the ideal plan of action is and then ask for her input. “Be sure you understand upfront what the guiding principles are for the work – not just the tactical elements. These principles are what you should be discussing with your boss,” says Chatman. For example, if you are working on an internal marketing campaign, be sure to talk about the message you want to send, not the font you should use. If the discussion becomes overly focused on detail, try to bring it back to the principles and approach you agreed on. Flattery can also work. Remind your boss that she is better off not getting involved in the minutiae because her time and effort are more valuable to the big picture.

### **Keep your boss in the loop**

Remember that micromanagers are often motivated by anxiety. “They are nervous about anyone else being able to do things as well or in the way they would do them,” says Chatman. You can often address that concern by keeping your manager informed of the project’s

progress. You can schedule regular check-ins that help her feel part of the process. Or you can send unprompted emails that share important information. If she has made it clear that she wants to know about detail, don't hesitate to get specific. While annoying now, it may save you the effort of redoing work later on. Most importantly, Manzoni says, if you have questions or need clarification, don't wait until the last minute. That will only amplify her worry.

### **Give feedback, only if appropriate**

Telling a micromanager that you don't appreciate his controlling behavior may only trigger more of it. But some well-meaning managers may be open to hearing your input. "Try to catch your boss in a moment of openness," says Manzoni. He suggests using the time in a scheduled performance review. Then try something like, "Look, I like working with you but there is one thing that would make things better." You can also involve a trusted third party, such as an HR manager, who can help you get your point across.

Be careful though, if you have a manager who enjoys showing he has the power and you don't, this could backfire. If none of the above strategies work, ask yourself: Do I really want to work here? "If it's pathological, you should consider transferring to another part of the company or finding another job," says Manzoni.

### **Principles to Remember**

Do:

- Do everything you can to gain the micromanager's trust
- Know what motivates and worries your boss and try to assuage her concerns
- Provide regular and detailed updates so your boss is apprised of your progress

Don't:

- Label anyone who exercises a degree of control as a micromanager

- Defy the micromanager – that often triggers the behavior you are trying to avoid
- Try to tell a boss that he is overly controlling unless you know he may be open to hearing it

### **Case Study #1: Keep the micromanager informed**

Harry Barkley\* worked as a fundraiser for an Austin-based non-profit for four and half years when Sandra came on as his boss. He was considered the office expert when it came to fundraising and his coworkers regularly turned to him for advice. While he expected some changes when Sandra took over, he did not anticipate she'd be such a micromanager. "She wanted to see everything I produced and approve it before I moved on to the next task, right down to the e-mail responses I sent to donors who had questions about what types of in-kind donations we took," he says. Sandra's second-guessing even extended to issues like the amount of postage needed for mailings and how to load stationary into the office printer. "No matter what task I was performing and what my level of experience was with it, I always felt as if every aspect of my work was considered 'suspect' until it had been verified," he says.

Harry attempted to keep Sandra's behavior at bay by keeping her fully informed. He sent her regular updates on projects: once a day for high priority items and once a week for ongoing initiatives. He kept the notes brief, listing the task he had just completed and his proposed next step, which was always something he could complete before he sent the next update so she could see clear progress. This approach eased Sandra's anxiety.

However, the constant updates added to Harry's workload. "The pile-on meant that my work suffered and that things weren't done as fast as Sandra was expecting them to be done," he says. He was concerned that Sandra wouldn't be open to hearing how her behavior was affecting his work so he talked with the HR manager, who agreed to host a meeting. As Harry suspected, Sandra was unreceptive. In fact, she defended her actions. Harry ultimately left the organization.

### **Case Study #2: Be attentive to her concerns**

In 2006, Marcy Berke\* worked for an insurance company with offices throughout the US. Her boss's boss was a woman named Barbara\*, who was responsible for 10 agencies in her region.

Barbara was passionate about efficiency. At one point, she asked all of the agents in her region to produce a time report, accounting for the number of minutes each of them spent on various tasks each day. “She was concerned with keeping her own production figures up, and burnishing her image with senior management,” Marcy says.

Marcy recognized what mattered most to Barbara. “If I were heading up a project, I would make certain to email Barbara, early and often, with any questions I might have about what her expectations were, and give her an outline of what my team was working on and the anticipated date of completion,” she says. If her team was having difficulty meeting the deadline for any reason, she would let Barbara know as soon as possible, providing both a reason and a revised end date. As much as possible, Marcy supplied the information Barbara needed without being asked first, so that Barbara could learn to trust her.

Since Marcy knew that Barbara was so preoccupied with time, she arrived at least 2 or 3 minutes early for meetings. When Marcy needed to set up a meeting with Barbara she would make the request by e-mail, clearly stating the reason for the meeting, listing the questions she would be asking and indicating how long the meeting would last.

Above all else, she tried to keep out of Barbara’s line of sight. “As I didn’t report to Barbara directly, I took pains to avoid becoming any more visible to her than I needed to be, and frequently used my direct supervisor to run interference,” she says. This approach worked well for Marcy. She was able to thrive at the company for four years, despite Barbara’s micromanagement, before she left to start her own firm.

\*Not their real names

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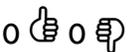
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**lashinskynick** 10 months ago

Having been in this situation more than once, it is very difficult for the person being managed, as well as the manager. It's destructive to morale, productivity, and is all too common. In Silicon Valley, as the influx of venture capital creates new entrepreneurs, a growing group of software developers and management consultants are finding themselves newly minted managers. And they often feel under immense pressure to recruit teams and have them deliver Apple/Google quality, in every thing that they do.

Some have a higher tolerance for it than others, and will cope by heading off concerns and anxieties as the author suggested. I have a feeling though, that most just quit and move on to a role they won't be stifled in.

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