The negative impact of micromanagement

How millennial employees are likely to respond

Type of leadership exercised by managers has been subject to considerable scholarly attention. However, empirical research has largely addressed characteristics associated with positive leadership styles.

This is despite plenty evidence of leadership described as ‘abusive’ or even ‘toxic’. Micromanagement is high on any list of leadership styles that observers view unfavorably. It is variously regarded as dictatorial and overbearing for subordinates. Others point to its destructive capabilities that ensure a negative impact on employee motivation, job satisfaction and output. Firm performance suffers accordingly.

Surveys have indicated that micromanagement is deemed an undesirable trait and responsible for many employees quitting their job. Nonetheless, evidence suggests that micromanagers largely remain blissfully ignorant of any harmful consequences. This is attributed to the fact that such individuals might be driven by the desire to feed their ego. Or perhaps dominating others is viewed as necessary to the goal of constantly attaining high performance standards? Whether perfectionists or something more sinister, their behavior largely remains the same.

The Millennial cohort

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, this leadership style has become more prevalent in organizations. With remote forms of working becoming the new norm, managers’ direct control has diminished. Notwithstanding this, it is possible that the harmful impact of micromanagement has intensified. Now this is especially significant for the age cohort labeled as ‘Millennials’. Born between the late 1970s and the early 1990s, this group accounts for half of the global workforce. Some analysts predict that this will rise to 75% by 2025.

Millennials are seen as naturally creative and thus eager to enjoy a participatory role in the workplace. They value trust and opportunity to contribute to the decision-making process. Being empowered to decide how to complete job tasks is equally important to them. Work then becomes more meaningful and fulfilling. In their eyes, autonomy signals appreciation and worth repaying in kind with optimum levels of commitment, work engagement and performance.

Of course, this runs counter to the control inherent in leadership styles like micromanagement. There is often a significant gulf between what Millennials desire and what micromanagers deliver to them. For the latter, it amounts to compliance without question. This is a far cry from leadership deemed a ‘relational process’ that mutually benefits leaders and subordinates alike.

One theoretical approach defines subordinates as ‘followers’ and purports that different types of followers exist based on how they relate to their leader. Hence, followers of micromanagers are described as ‘alienated’ in view of being frustrated at being controlled.
so zealously. Throw in frequent condemnation and it’s little wonder that employees become anxious and fearful. Over time, this negatively affects enthusiasm for work and their input.

For the Millennial cohort, an environment where work enables experiential learning and personal development is ideal. Conversely, disproportionate control serves to stifle their creativity and make them discontent. The inevitable resentment of micromanagers ensures that this leadership style is likely to prove detrimental to company goals.

But some Millennials might react positively to being micromanaged. According to various studies, experiences during their developing years provide the foundation. Reports point to ‘helicopter’ parents prone to interfere in school and work contexts. As a result, these Millennials remain heavily reliant on guidance from others and become socialized into believing that following any leader is natural. Micromanagers essentially take the role of surrogate parent whose controlling behavior mirrors that held in memory about their upbringing. According to the minority of scholars who advocate micromanagement, this creates ideal conditions for optimum performance among certain Millennial workers. It is argued that these employees value centralized decision-making, not least because it eliminates the need for risk-taking on their part.

**Study evidence**

To investigate further, Ryan and Cross (2024) conduct a survey of respondents aged 24–41 recruited from several virtual platforms. Females accounted for the majority in the final sample of 117 participants.

Responses broadly mirrored evidence from the literature. Millennials here appreciate manager trust and being empowered to assist in decision-making. While discontentment is the norm when they aren’t permitted to contribute, some take no further action. But others are inclined to withdraw their support for the manager. And in the overwhelming majority of cases, participants respond unfavorably when micromanagers are critical about them voicing their opinions.

Feeling valued and autonomy regarding task performance is likewise important to these employees. When such empowerment is not forthcoming, frustration sets in. Respondents also are less than satisfied when managers are distrustful.

Some Millennials who reported having ‘over-zealous’ parents credit micromanagers when they perform well. However, praise was less forthcoming among those who admitted relying on parents to make decisions. In their view, such managers lack trust and are too critical. In essence, the authors conclude that upbringing was not responsible for the largely negative views of micromanagers.

Open communication, manager trust and freedom to make decisions and to voice opinions are top priority for this age cohort. Instead, many get domineering managers who refuse to delegate any meaningful responsibility. A few take no action. But far more are prepared to have their say. A possible explanation offered for this is that the largest band of respondents here were in the 24–27 age brackets. As relatively young workers, they still possess plenty of fire and do not simply conform like many of their older counterparts. In the latter case, worry about additional condemnation is deemed a key factor.

Research here further illustrated how micromanagers can prompt uncooperative behaviors among subordinates. Lack of discretion in task performance limits scope for self-learning and hinders creativity. When followers are unfulfilled, it is the perfect recipe for levels of motivation, commitment and satisfaction to plunge. Lack of trust in them from managers has a similar effect.

Given the potential damage of micromanaging, firms should seek to eliminate such characteristics. Effective actions might include:
• carrying out personality tests during the recruitment process to identify controlling tendencies or other less desirable traits;
• coaching sessions for the purpose of alleviating any harmful effects of this managerial style; and
• developing and enhancing interpersonal skills among managers.

The latter will hopefully encourage supervisors to involve others in the decision-making process by welcoming their views and sharing knowledge and information.

With luck, such actions will help prevent occurrence of the aforementioned aspects of ‘unfavorable followership’ among subordinates that ultimately has negative repercussions for overall firm performance.

Comment

The review is based on: “Micromanagement and its impact on millennial followership styles” by Shona Ryan and Christine Cross, published in Leadership & Organization Development Journal.

Reference


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