Micromanagement in IT teams:
how to avoid it and when is it needed?

Micromanagement takes place when a manager treats his subordinates unreasonably, unfair and harsh. Proactiveness, creativity, ownership and rational thinking are out of the loop, and the range of responsibilities given to these subordinates is reduced to the mechanical fulfillment of minor tasks. Needless to say, this attitude is not very effective when it comes to guiding development processes.

The aim of this document is neither to look at micromanagement as a character trait of individuals with a certain psychological mindset, nor to consider IT companies where the processes are not yet built at all.

Micromanagement is quite time-consuming and exhausting from a team cohesion point of view. To some extent micromanagement is acceptable, but if communication isn't clear and transparent, it becomes annoying.

Signals of micromanagement in your organisation

Micromanagers usually display a lack of proper personal leadership. Micromanagement can usually be recognized by a couple of clear signs.

- Micromanagers are often very reluctant to delegate work. These leaders act like control freaks and leave little room for proactiveness, creativity or self-responsibility in their dealings with their subordinates. They are also likely to discourage others from making independent decisions.
- Managers regularly immerse themselves in tasks that are actually assigned to other people within the organization or get involved in the work of others without consulting them.
- Leading figures within the organization tend to look at details instead of at the bigger picture.
- Managers and employees don't use the experience and knowledge of talented or seasoned colleagues.
- Managers lose loyalty and commitment within the organization because of their leadership style. The result is a team that lacks motivation.
- People focus on the wrong priorities. This attitude often results in subpar business policies.

Why micromanagement takes place

- A manager doesn't rely on the competence of subordinates, or the competence is low.
- An IT resource that is allocated for a project has no "out of the box" way of thinking. Also, time requirements are very abstract or absent.
- The manager doesn't have a solid plan and, instead of moving on with planning, is deliberately occupied with progress reviewing.
- Team intercommunication is weak, and coordination of each team member is required.
- It's also hard to distinguish perfectionism from micromanagement.

When is micromanagement acceptable?

- **In crisis situations**
In order to keep the trust and confidence of a customer or product owner, IT managers need to diligently investigate a reason for a problem and describe how to avoid it in the future. The manager must therefore chase and control all the details.
- **On earlier phases of prototyping, exploration and analysis**
Prototyping, exploration and analysis may frequently require a rapid change of opinion, concept, direction and development plans, and a "situational change of mind". That means a manager needs to interact into the process constantly and react as early as possible - even if the subordinates think that they still need to continue with his proof of concept, details of prototyping, or finishing of a task.
- **If a specialist works with sensitive data**
When a team works with sensitive data, projects have increased dependencies despite other factors, systems, or regulations, and the IT manager needs to control that the rules are followed to the tee. He should always be on alert. If some deliveries are highly time-sensitive, it is better not to rely on urgency comprehension by a subordinate.
- **During trial periods**
During trial periods and when setting up of a professional relationship with new team members, the IT manager should first get a proof of reliability and build intercommunications.

Consequences of micromanagement in IT teams

- It shows lack of trust in a team. Therefore subordinates aren't motivated to learn and make progress. As a result the speed and quality of development decreases.
- In IT it is important that each new project expands the expertise of a single specialist: technical, analytical or management. The employee's experience contributes to the corporate portfolio. Therefore micromanagement eventually kills corporate growth.
- Micromanagement stifles innovation. Any savvy business owner will know that, especially in today's highly-competitive, often internationally-orientated IT marketplace, innovation is key to the success of a company. Sadly, under the rule of a micromanager, the process of innovation and creation tends to come to a halt. Employees (the people who generally make or break a business) quickly become stagnant when they cannot come up with new ideas or procedures of their own. This process usually goes two ways. People with big ideas, ample skills and a lot of talent remove themselves from the decision-making process, whilst the others become glorified zombies who blindly follow the orders of the micromanager.
- Micromanagement has a hugely negative impact on core business factors like employee morale, overall engagement and productivity. This often results in higher turnover rates, recruiting problems and a significant drop in talent retention.
- Micromanagement creates a culture that is often described as 'wait to be told'. In this kind of situation people don't work ahead of time anymore but passively await the instructions of the managers.
- Micromanagement implies a lack of trust in employees. In return, employees are less likely to trust the micromanager, a vicious circle that eventually leads to less feedback and a serious lack of shared ideas.
- Emotional strains, stress or fatigue due to verbal or emotional abuse from the manager, which negatively impacts the self-esteem of employees and also hurts business productivity.

How to deal with micromanagement in IT teams

The main rule here is to **"Set clear goals and deliverables, then review a result not a process"**. To stick to this rule on a daily basis you need to build strong communication processes within the team, work out very clear requirements (at least for a Sprint or phase or similar) and plan ahead.

Help employees understand the goals and vision of the business, what values you offer to a customer and what you want to improve. People will then have a better understanding of the scope of their responsibility. They will be able to compare whether the result of their work coincides with the expectation of the company and/or client.

When you just establish relationships, micromanagement will be unavoidable, but by being proactive it can be reduced.

As competence grows, it's vital to intercommunicate in terms of decisions and solutions, architecture and contracts and intentions and brainstorming. This becomes easier if a team is familiar with each other and follows a strategy of knowledge sharing throughout the entire project.

Do's and don'ts with micromanagement

If you want to hone your management skills and aim to get the best out of your business team, it is important to recognize the do's and don'ts when it comes to micromanagement. The first step is reflection on your behaviour. Why do you micromanage? Where does this tendency to dominate and control come from? Micromanagement is often a form of overcompensation rooted in a conscious or subconscious form of insecurity.

The next step is to get feedback and talk things through with your team. What is their opinion on your leadership style? And how significant is your issue with micromanagement according to your employees? Based on this feedback, you can prioritize what matters and - where necessary - adjust your management style. By doing that, you have the opportunity to step back slowly and acknowledge the growth opportunities of the other team members.

To summarize the aforementioned lines of advice, we will have a quick look at the most important do's and don'ts when it comes to dealing with issues regarding micromanagement.

- Ask yourself the question why you tend to micromanage and reflect on your need for control in an honest way.
- Prioritize the tasks and processes within the company that matter most to you. Focus on these matters and let the other employees do their jobs.
- Have trust in your team and their capabilities and let this shine through in your approach towards them.
- Don't overreact when things do not go exactly as you would like them to go. Take a breath and figure out a way to correct the situation if this turns out to be truly necessary.
- Don't go too far when it comes to implementing a laissez-faire approach. A certain degree of direction and authority is necessary to smoothly manage day-to-day business processes.

Conclusion

Micromanagement is not effective. It slows down processes, makes employees insecure, and limits the result that the micromanager strives to achieve. Therefore, you need to address and battle these issues.

Proper communication, good planning and setting clear tasks for employees are extremely important in the fight against micromanagement.

In some situations, micromanagement may be necessary as it can help to train and mentor newcomers, make strategically correct decisions and create a good start for an IT product.

About the author

Having worked with a range of European and American companies, Veniamin has got extensive IT experience in project management. He is the chief consultant who drives the technological aspects of our business solutions. He is highly enthusiastic and passionate for his work and most important he is a result-oriented manager. As a CIO, he demonstrates bold leadership qualities & interpersonal skills. He possesses strong technical & analytical expertise and has excellent and effective communication.

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