

MICROMANAGEMENT: A Project Management Tool in Crisis

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses micromanagement and its value to a Project Manager when the project is facing difficult circumstances and is near slipping on schedule, budget and/or scope. In an increasingly results focused operating environment, the Project Manager (PM) must be cognizant of the teams ability and progress. In normal circumstances, micromanagement is considered a poor method of management and one that does not foster long-term results. However, despite careful planning and execution, an issue can arise that has the potential to derail the entire project and hinder business case for completing the project. In such a situation when other approaches have failed, the Project Manager may find some resolution using carefully planned and conducted micromanagement.

1. MICROMANAGEMENT

Micromanagement is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as:

“...to manage especially with excessive control or attention to details”

However the concept of micromanagement is not defined in terms as complimentary when discussed by leadership students and especially workers. A micromanager is seen as antithetical to a good leader - a beast and bully who is an HR manager’s biggest headache.

1.1. *Management as a Science*

Peter Drucker is considered the father of studying management as a science. Drucker "...was the creator and inventor of modern management," said management guru Tom Peters. "In the early 1950s, nobody had a tool kit to manage these incredibly complex organizations that had gone out of control. Drucker was the first person to give us a handbook for that" (Business Week, 2005).

“After witnessing the oppression of the Nazi regime, he found great hope in the possibilities of the modern corporation to build communities and provide meaning for the people who worked in them. For the next 50 years he would train his intellect on helping companies live up to those lofty possibilities” (Business Week, 2005).

While the study of management is arguably considered a “soft” science, it is based on the fundamentals of the scientific approach – experimentation, study and revision. In an article from Business Week in 2005, shortly after Drucker's death, the following list of management pillars were attributed to him. These pillars, while mostly drawn in the 1940's, 50's 60's and 70's, have passed the test of time, and continue to be the basis of “good” management even today:

- “It was Drucker who introduced the idea of decentralization -- in the 1940s -- which became a bedrock principle for virtually every large organization in the world.
- He was the first to assert -- in the 1950s -- that workers should be treated as assets, not as liabilities to be eliminated.

- He originated the view of the corporation as a human community -- again, in the 1950s -- built on trust and respect for the worker and not just a profit-making machine, a perspective that won Drucker an almost godlike reverence among the Japanese.
- He first made clear -- still the '50s -- that there is "no business without a customer," a simple notion that ushered in a new marketing mind-set.
- He argued in the 1960s -- long before others -- for the importance of substance over style, for institutionalized practices over charismatic, cult leaders.
- And it was Drucker again who wrote about the contribution of knowledge workers -- in the 1970s -- long before anyone knew or understood how knowledge would trump raw material as the essential capital of the New Economy." (Business Week, 2005)

1.2. What is considered "good" managerial behaviour

Building upon Peter Drucker's foundations, we can formulate the following facets of "good" management behaviour:

- Managers trust the employee's ability to deliver the results expected of her, and offering the training and coaching necessary to build that ability
- Managers and employees must have a customer-centric approach, where all deliverables are measured by their value to the end-user
- Employees should not be just considered "doers" while managers are the thinkers and planners to minute detail. This master-slave type relationship hinders employee growth, undermines the employee's ability to become problem solvers, and greatly reduces employee engagement. Many studies have shown, that workers simply handed a list of tasks and how to perform them quickly consider the work to become mundane and become disengaged.

1.3. Why is micromanagement so bad?

Micromanagement is essentially watching, or making employees feel that their every move is being watched. Excessive attention to detail, planning tasks to minutiae, and obsessively tracking the time employees spend at their desks, on their breaks, etc are some of the more extreme activities associated with micromanagement. While this may seem to some like the work managers *should* be doing, in fact these behaviours are detrimental and take the managers focus away from the bigger picture.

Furthermore, a study in the Journal of Experimental Psychology by DeCaro et al (2011) showed that employees, who felt they were being watched, consistently performed at a lower level.

2. WHAT IS PROJECT MANAGEMENT?

2.1. Definition

The Project Management Institute (PMI), the leading proponent of the science of project management defines it as:

"...a temporary group activity designed to produce a unique product, service or result.

A project is temporary in that it has a defined beginning and end in time, and therefore defined scope and resources.

And a project is unique in that it is not a routine operation, but a specific set of operations designed to accomplish a singular goal. So a project team often includes people who don't usually work together – sometimes from different organizations and across multiple geographies.

The development of software for an improved business process, the construction of a building or bridge, the relief effort after a natural disaster, the expansion of sales into a new geographic market — all are projects.

And all must be expertly managed to deliver the on-time, on-budget results, learning and integration that organizations need.

Project management, then, is the application of knowledge, skills and techniques to execute projects effectively and efficiently. It's a strategic competency for organizations, enabling them to tie project results to business goals — and thus, better compete in their markets." (Project Management Institute (PMI), 2012)

2.2. *A Project Manager's Focus*

Based upon the above definition, a Project Manager is tasked with leading a team to ensure the project deliverables are completed, on time, on budget, and within scope (i.e. only the work agreed to by stakeholders is delivered, with additional pieces subject to stakeholder approval of the incremental cost and impact to schedule).

2.3. *Implications*

The implications of this activity-based focus include:

- As the nature of a project is temporary (i.e. not an on-going operation), the project team may not directly report to the Project Manager
- Due to the focus and constraints on the Project Manager, she must be cognizant of all risks that could impact schedule, cost or scope
- Overall accountability for the successful or failed delivery lies with the Project Manager
- With all the work involved in managing scope, schedule, risk and cost, the Project Manager must be proficient at delegating work and monitoring performance

As per the earlier discussion of good management behaviours, the Project Manager should keep a high-level view of the project and be able to see the entire initiative from end-to-end. To accomplish this, the Project Manager must empower and delegate to the project team, all the while ensuring accountability.

3. **WHY THE NEED TO MICROMANAGE?**

While in a perfect world and on the perfect project (a very rare occurrence), the Project Manager would just plan the work, delegate, and report success. In reality, when risks are occurring (including those that are planned for and those that are surprises), schedule and cost are generally the first to slip. If not managed properly and mitigated, scope is the next to suffer.

By recognizing the need to micromanage and using this tool as a last resort and in a timely fashion, the focus and intensity of the team can be raised and deliverables possibly salvaged.

4. **HOW SHOULD A PROJECT MANAGER RECOGNIZE THE NEED TO MICROMANAGE**

4.1. *Status Reporting*

While there are many methods of tracking and communicating status, for the sake of this discussion I will use a simple method, where status is indicated with a color:

- Green: All deliverables are on schedule, costs are as expected and planned, and no imminent risks on the horizon
- Yellow: There is a risk that may impact schedule or cost. For example, a critical project team member has been re-assigned. Unless this role is back filled by a certain date, there will be an impact to delivery
- Red: Schedule or Cost is impacted, and the project may not be able to recover.

4.2. *Deliverables slipping*

Completing status reports as above, allows one to monitor and report the progress of the project towards achieving the goals set at kick-off. This will also expose when deliverables are slipping. If this becomes a constant occurrence, the PM may consider stepping in by first calling a team meeting to discuss why this is happening. Perhaps the scope and effort has been underestimated, or resources are being inundated with other requests that take away time from the project. In these situations, the PM can resolve the issues by engaging more resources or instituting a policy that filters all requests through the PM or the Team Manager in a matrix organization, before reaching project staff.

On the other hand, deliverables always slipping and impacting the schedule could indicate issues with internal team processes. For example, perhaps there is a significant vendor component to the project, and the vendor is not providing deliverables in a timely manner. Or, external enablement teams like Server Systems Administrator's, etc are not giving the project the priority it needs, or are slow in completing their tasks. In these situations, it may be acceptable for the Project Manager to step in, and begin micromanaging through implementation of daily status calls, or setting objectives for the day each morning and then a status report at the end of the day to ensure everyone knows what needs to be done that day, and how much progress was made.

Obviously the above micromanagement cannot go on for too long of a period (e.g. a few weeks at most), so it is necessary to ensure that during this micromanagement period, behaviours and practices are changing.

4.3. Stakeholder angst

The Project Management Institute (PMI) defines a stakeholder as:

“A Guide to the Project Management Body of Knowledge (PMBOK® Guide) breaks down a stakeholder as a person or organization that:

- Is actively involved in the project
- Has interests that may be positively or negatively affected by the performance or completion of the project
- May exert influence over the project, its deliverables or its team members”

Based upon the above, a stakeholder may be affected by one or more of the following:

- “Interest: To be affected by a decision related to the work or its outcomes
- Rights: To be treated in a certain way or to have a particular right (including legal or moral) protected
- Ownership: To have a legal title to an asset or a property
- Knowledge: To possess specialist or organizational knowledge needed for the work
- Impact or influence: To be impacted by the work or its outcomes, or have the ability to impact (or influence) the execution of work or its outcomes
- Contribution: Relating to the support or assets including the supply of resources, the allocation of funding, or providing advocacy for the objectives of the project” (Bourne, 2009).

With the stakeholders ability to influence the project positively and negatively, their voices hold a considerable amount of weight. If stakeholders are feeling that the project is not progressing as it should, or there is not enough attention being paid in certain areas, they will voice their concern and demand resolution. This is another time when the Project Manager may have to roll up his sleeves and get into micromanagement. This would include well-timed status communications to stakeholders and displaying other behaviours to alleviate their angst. Often, a stakeholder will see their Project Manager deeply involved in all aspects of the project, and take comfort in that.

The importance of managing stakeholders and their expectations can be seen from this quote by John Kotter from the Harvard Business School in CIO Insight Magazine:

"I've seen too many technology projects get dumped on project teams and task forces that simply don't have enough clout, enough credibility, connections, you name it, to be able to do a difficult job, and so, surprise, surprise, they start getting frustrated and the powerful people in the company just ignore them or do what they want to do anyway. ...Also, on a lot of the IT projects, if you go up to the typical line manager and say to him, 'You've got this big thing going on here. What's the vision? Paint a picture for me. How's the company going to be different in 18 months when this is all done?' They can't even see it. So of course they haven't bought into it. And if they haven't bought into it, are they going to cooperate?"

4.4. Apathetic Team Attitude

An apathetic attitude in a team member is one where the person does not care about the work and is indifferent to the results. Often, this attitude can spread within the team if expectations are not being met, successes are few and far between, or some other cause of team disharmony. A team member with this sort of attitude can be a detriment, while additional apathetic individuals can be a project killer.

The apathetic attitude does not always stem from a team member being incompetent at their work. In fact it is the opposite – the team member is extremely knowledgeable, but has become disengaged for reasons ranging from boredom in their role, to feeling overlooked, unappreciated and taken for granted.

Since a project is limited in the time allotted to complete (i.e. by definition, a project cannot be an ongoing activity), a Project Manager often does not have the luxury to replace team members with new ones, and still retain the knowledgebase and skill set necessary. For this reason, a distinction needs to be made between an apathetic and incompetent team member vs. an apathetic but knowledgeable team member.

The apathetic incompetent team member will most likely need to be micromanaged for a longer period of time. The Project Manager will need to hold their hand through critical tasks and provide mentoring and coaching. This attention can often turn the apathy to energy, especially if the team member is garnering success and accolades while gaining confidence in her abilities.

On the other hand, a Project Manager will most likely not want to micromanage the apathetic team member who is competent yet disengaged. With this resource, the Project Manager should try to understand the underlying issue. If the resource has been underappreciated or had others take credit for her work, you will want to ensure she is properly applauded when doing well. The Project Manager will also want to get this person involved in the project by bouncing ideas of her or providing some sort of "stretch" opportunity, where she can gain further knowledge. Such tactics can help a disengaged worker reengage, bolster their self confidence and achieve positive results for the project.

5. CASE STUDY – GETTING YOUR PROJECT BACK ON TRACK

Ray Saito is the Project Manager for a multi-million dollar project in a large telecommunications firm. The company employs a matrix team structure, where employees report to a Team Manager, and are loaned to enterprise projects and Project Manager's. Ray's project consists of five team members from across the organization, as well as a vendor for a new data warehousing tool to be introduced within the organization.

Due to the nature of the project, many teams and divisions within the organization are affected by this project. Based upon the severity of impact, a stakeholder Steering Committee is set up, and Ray reports to the Steering Committee every two weeks.

Further to the Steering Committee, Ray submits a weekly status report that is reviewed by his direct manager, director and vice-president. This is a simple status report, indicating the color of the project based on status (as per section 4.1)

As per the firm's project management methodology, the project follows the below high-level stages:

1. Analysis / Planning
2. Design
3. Build / Implementation
4. Quality Assurance (QA)
5. Stability Monitoring and Project Closure

The above phases are not mutually exclusive, and Ray decides that breaking the deliverables up into smaller modules and performing QA on each module before moving on to the next module is the best approach.

Ray exercises good management practices, and delegates work to the team members, while empowering them to offer their insights and be involved in key decisions. The project is consistently green through the Analysis/Planning and Design phases. Scope, Schedule and Budget are on track and within the planned limits.

However, during the combined Build/Implementation and Quality Assurance phase, a high-severity defect arises in the first module. The project cannot move on to the next module until this defect is resolved and cleared. The project team with support from the Vendor work together to understand and troubleshoot the issue. At that week's Steering Committee meeting, Ray reports that this defect has arisen, and is currently being worked on. Based on current estimates, the defect will be resolved within the next 7 days. While this will eat into some of the buffer in the plan, the overall schedule will not slip. The Steering Committee is satisfied with this explanation.

While confident that the issue will be quickly resolved, Ray downgrades his status to Yellow on the weekly status report, and provides an explanation of the issue and resolution steps.

A week goes by, and the defect is still outstanding. The team and vendor have applied fixes that they thought would clear the issue; however it is still a problem. Ray explains this in his weekly status report and remains at Yellow, anticipating a breakthrough.

The following week, Ray presents to the Steering Committee that the issue is still not resolved, and that the project buffer is now essentially consumed. While the vendor is working closely with the team and feels the issue is close to resolution, there is now a significant risk to the project schedule. In that week's status report, Ray downgrades the status further to Red. Another two weeks go by at Red status with no resolution.

At the next Steering Committee meeting, stakeholder angst is high. During the heated discussion, one of the director's from a highly affected team speaks up and says that his team will not be able to achieve the in-year project benefits that were projected, unless the project finishes on schedule. With these risks, a further risk is emerging of going over budget. Ray feels the heat and pressure at this meeting, and is directed to pull out all the stops and ensure this issue is resolved by the next Steering Committee meeting.

Ray decides that he must now step in and take a greater leadership stance. He immediately sends an email to the vendor account manager strongly requesting they make further resources available to him until this project is resolved. He also states that these resources should be dedicated to this task and not working on anything else in the meantime. Since the feeling is that the issue is with the vendor's application, the project will not fund these resources. The vendor account manager agrees with the escalation and promises to do his best.

Next, Ray sets up status meetings between his team and the vendor occurring daily, twice a day. First the groups meet in the morning to discuss the plan for the day, and then at the end of the day to assess results.

This goes on for a week with no resolution. It is also identified that other technical teams are needed from within the organization to watch the issue end-to-end. While Ray already feels uncomfortable with the micromanagement he has performed over the last week, he understands that with one week left before the next Steering Committee, they must once again step up the urgency and intensity.

Ray then adds assigns a dedicated conference bridge to the project team, to be open with all involved team members, including the vendor, on the bridge from 8am until at least 5pm. While many team members are distributed in offices around the country, those that are in the same office are asked to co-locate with each other until resolution.

Ray's next step is to add another component to the morning status meeting, where a plan will be devised for each hour of the day, with the task detailed in minutiae, including how long it will take, and approximately what time the next resource can begin his task. Naturally, the team members are not comfortable with such micromanagement, but Ray explains the urgency of the issue and that thanks to the Steering Committee, their manager's have agreed to the current steps.

For the next few days, this model is followed. While stress levels are already high and increasing, progress is being made. A number of potential root causes are tested and ruled out. Since everyone is on the conference bridge together, there is no lag in communication and minimal turnaround time for the tasks. Finally, the root cause is found, and tested in a number of environments. To resolve the issue, the vendor will need to develop, test and install an urgent patch to their application.

At this point, Ray decides to take his foot off the pedal a bit. He emails the Steering Committee with the news of the breakthrough and the vendor's commitment to have the patch ready within 48 hours. While the pressure is alleviated a bit, Ray still keeps the twice-daily status calls to ensure the vendor is progressing. However the co-location and conference bridge requirements are relaxed.

Within 48 hours, the urgent patch is installed and tested. The issue is resolved and Ray happily reports success, while giving all credit to the team. After the amount of stress and pressure the team has been exposed to over the last weeks, Ray takes the team out to lunch, and sends small gift cards to all the team members involved in the resolution.

At that week's Steering Committee, Ray reports the resolution in detail, while also breaking the news that despite their best efforts, there will be a small one week delay to the overall project schedule. The Steering Committee accepts that all efforts were made to resolve the issue, and the delay is accepted and approved.

The Steering Committee also praises Ray's efforts over the last week. They acknowledge that while no one likes to work under that amount of supervision, it was necessary to break the trial-and-error cycle and increase the intensity to drive to a solution.

6. CONCLUSION

Micromanagement has been proven to be a stressful management style that achieves results only in the short term. Micromanagement can be extremely taxing on both team members and management. While there are much better ways to lead teams and achieve long-term results, there are situations where micromanagement becomes essential. With this knowledge and an understanding of how much pressure the team can handle, micromanagement can be used as a short-term tool to achieve results when a project is slipping and all other methods have failed.

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