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Case Report Open Access

Unleadership: A Case Study in Destructive Micromanagement

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Introduction

"Unleadership" is a term the authors have coined for an especially insidious phenomenon, destructive micromanagement, which indeed is the polar opposite of efficient management, a combination of incompetence and ill intent. Some may ask if "destructive micromanagement" is not a redundancy, in that "micromanagement in itself is a pejorative. However, the authors view "destructive micromanagement" as a justifiable pleonasm, emphasizing not only the damaging effects on the individual supervisee but the collateral harm to co-workers and the achievement of the organization's goals.

As an analogy, in ordinary micromanagement, a football coach might rush onto the field, grab the ball from the quarterback, and still score a touchdown. The quarterback is demoralized and his talents wasted, but still achieves the organizational goal. However, in destructive micromanagement, the coach would deny the quarterback any decision-making authority, belittle him to his teammates (demoralizing both), refuse to accept the quarterback's input or offer him support. The coach would then sit on the sidelines and wait to blame the quarterback for failing to score. The coach has thus actively worked against the organizational goal. Such a destructive micromanager is worse than no manager at all; he is a negative vector, an *unleader*.

Clearly, it is important to recognize unleadership, and if possible, correct or eliminate it. Enlightened managers understand that it is possible to do *well* by doing *good*. The same holds true with all stakeholders, and especially those supervised, whose efforts unleadership should not sabotage, but instead acknowledge and encourage through individualized reward, "cognizant compensation" [1].

The concept of unleadership is relevant to a variety of settings, including education. As a prime example, SUNY Empire State College's model of mentoring puts a premium on mutual respect and interactive learning between mentor and mentee, with the mentor empowering the mentee through guidance, encouragement, and support--- in short, the antithesis of unleadership.

Mentoring is akin to the central concepts of servant leadership [2] and the Common Good [3], attaining organizational goals through the ethical treatment and engagement of all stakeholders. Of course, as monitoring is one of the foundations of management, effective managers can profit from sensitizing themselves to the pitfalls of unleadership, as through analysis of the following case study, and bear these in mind when conducting formative evaluation and self-evaluation [4].

The Case Study

Prefacing remark

Mr. Supervisor frequently states, "I hate to micromanage. I'm not good at it." Only the second statement is true. This case study illustrates, point by point, how a manager can destroy the effectiveness and morale of an employee through destructive micromanagement of all phases of the policy-making process, from planning and organizing to leading and controlling, to the detriment of the employee's co-workers and the organization at large.

At the beginning of planning for a major project, Mr. Supervisor tells Mr. Report that Mr. Report is to be the "contact person" for the project and that if it succeeds, Mr. Report will receive credit, but if it does not Mr. Report will shoulder the blame. Mr. Report tells Mr. Supervisor that that would not be fair, as Mr. Report has no authority to make the decisions for the project, but Mr. Supervisor pays no heed.

Mr. Supervisor sees that Mr. Report is not attending an organizational meeting in the room next to Mr. Report's office. Greeted cheerfully in the photocopy room by Mr. Report., Mr. Supervisor says nothing but glares apoplectically. After the meeting, Mr. Supervisor sends Mr. Report an email asking Mr. Report to explain what he was doing that was so important that he did not attend the meeting. Mr. Report responds in an email that he was preparing materials for the following day's important project event, and says had Mr. Supervisor inquired when they met earlier, Mr. Report could have explained then. Mr. Supervisor replies that he wishes advance information. At a planning meeting for a project event, Mr. Report points out that it would be significant for the receptionist to be present promptly at 8:30 a.m. in case individuals should arrive early for the 9:00 a.m. event. Mr. Supervisor replies that Mr. Report should be there at that time. Mr. Report says that perhaps he would be present that early; Mr. Supervisor snarls, in the hearing of all at the meeting, that Mr. Report *will* be present at 8:30.

Mr. Report submits, to the entire project team, all data requested by Mr. Supervisor, and reports weekly, or more frequently, on the data obtained. The data to which Mr. Report has access does not include important particulars available from a computer system that Mr. Report has never been informed of or used, data that he was never asked to obtain and distribute. The lack of such data creates the need for last-minute changes in the project schedule. Mr. Supervisor excludes Mr. Report from the group deciding on the required changes, and later sends Mr. Report an abusive email (with copies to Mr. Supervisor's supervisor and Mr. Supervisor's co-administrator) castigating Mr. Report for not having provided the data beforehand. R. replies, copying the same individuals, explaining why he was not at fault. At a subsequent meeting with Mr. Supervisor and Mr. Supervisor's supervisor, Mr. Report asks to address the issue. Mr. Supervisor's supervisor says that would not be the appropriate occasion because there were specific procedures in place to address the issue. The supervisor does not explain what the procedures are, and the matter is left unaddressed.

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Mr. Supervisor requests that Mr. Report submits a pre-conference (mid-year) self-evaluation regarding his fulfillment of items on his performance program. Mr. Report sends a 4-page document, about which Mr. Supervisor makes no mention until asked when he meets with Mr. Report. Mr. Supervisor says only, in a flat voice, "Well, you *did* everything you said you did." His instruction to Mr. Report is to read the organizational manual cover to cover.

At the time for Mr. Supervisor to submit Mr. Report's annual evaluation, Mr. Report is required to attend a meeting with Mr. Supervisor and Mr. Supervisor's supervisor. At the meeting, Mr. Report is told that Mr. Supervisor is immediately assuming Mr. Report's duties and Mr. Report would transfer. At the new location, Mr. Report would report to a sub-supervisor and work on documents and databases. The duties were of a support-staff individual who was on indefinite medical leave. Mr. Report asks to remain in his current location because of medical reasons, and because he could perform all the new duties from there. The request receives no consideration. Eventually the Director of Human Resources, petitioned by Mr. Report, orders that Mr. Report remains at his current location.

Mr. Supervisor submits an "Unsatisfactory" annual evaluation for Mr. Report, alleging that Mr. Report tried to pass his work to colleagues and supervisors and that Mr. Report regularly misadvised colleagues on policies and procedures. Mr. Supervisor also criticizes Mr. Report for requesting approval before taking action in most cases, despite the fact that Mr. Supervisor has repeatedly shown displeasure when Mr. Report has acted autonomously. The evaluation also claims that Mr. Supervisor's mandating the greater part of Mr. Report's workload to the creation of databases and data entry (the support staffer's duties, at which Mr. Report is a novice) is the same as having Mr. Report use technology in the course of his professional activities.

At the first organizational meeting of the year, Mr. Supervisor announces the success of the project, omitting any reference to Mr. Report.

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