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Undermanaged employees get just as frustrated as overmanaged ones

Timing is critical as intervention by a manager on a task late in the day is seen by workers as unhelpful



Managers who leave employees to their own devices on a project only to intervene at a late stage can expect to meet resistance. Photograph: iStock



[Olive Keogh](#)

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Ask employees what drives them nuts about their bosses and micromanagement usually gets mentioned as a pet peeve. There is a fine line between keeping tabs on people and breathing down their necks, and one of the most frustrating aspects of the lockdowns for those working from home was being constantly checked up on.

So, people don't like to be overmanaged. But it turns out they don't like being undermanaged either and their dissatisfaction with a more remote approach often manifests itself as a reluctance to accept what is being said when the manager finally gets around to discussing their work.

"Many managers who take a more hands-off approach are surprised when employees push back at any feedback they do eventually receive," says Bruce Tulgan, author and founder of management research and workplace consultancy, Rainmaker Thinking.



Bruce Tulgan, founder of Rainmaker Thinking

“These employees, particularly younger employees, are often labelled as overly sensitive. However, their resistance is typically less about the feedback itself and more about the timing of that feedback. Why give a direct report the freedom to create their own plan and timeline only to derail that plan with your thoughts and opinions late in the process? That information would have been more valuable before the employee started going in the wrong direction.

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“This type of leadership comes off as careless at best and manipulative at worst.”

Tulgan adds that while the goal for many managers is to have self-starting employees, the reality is that this is something of a pipe dream. There will always be a cohort who are very good at managing themselves but they are in the minority. And at some point all employees will require input from someone who is closer to the top of the business and more privy to its priorities.

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“It’s not feasible to have everyone making their own decisions when there are overarching business decisions to be made,” says Tulgan. “Employees need someone more experienced to guide them and remind them of the goals, deadlines and ground rules applying in that business.

“Self-managed employees may feel they are the authority on their own work but, if they exist in a vacuum of self-accountability, they will struggle to feel engaged. Employees today want to know that their efforts are effective and will result in a final product that is valuable to the right people – not just themselves.”

There can be an illusion that because people are sitting together and working the same hours, they share common goals and priorities. That’s a pretty lazy way to look at things

Some employees have turned avoiding their boss into an art form because they fear an interaction will add to their workload or undermine a task they have already completed.

However, while someone can run, they can’t hide as the boss will always have a level of power, control and authority that can affect an employee. As such, it’s better to bite the bullet and talk to your boss to make sure you know what they think should take priority and what are the concrete actions expected of you. If you don’t, there’s a good chance you’ll end up totally frustrated when you discover later on that you’ve been singing from what, in your manager’s eyes, is the wrong hymn sheet.

“If you’re not getting direction from your manager, you should go ask for it and, in turn, your manager should be asking what support, resources and guidance you need so you don’t run into unnecessary problems,” says Tulgan.

As the debate about remote versus in-person working rumbles on, Tulgan says one of the myths about having everyone together is the assumption of an alignment of purpose that may not in fact exist. “There can be an illusion that because people are sitting together and working the same hours, they share common goals and priorities. That’s a pretty lazy way to look at things from a managerial perspective,” he says.

“A good manager is actively interested in what everyone is doing and how they can help them to do it better. In my view, managers who say ‘I don’t want to hold their hands or to micromanage them’ is fooling themselves. We’re working in a complex environment. Everything is going faster than ever before and even the simplest of jobs is now more complex than it used to be.

“Keeping it together means managers talking to their people regularly – every day, every few days or once a week – to make sure they’re aligned. If they don’t, they will end up doing most of their managing when things go wrong and they have to step in to fix problems that shouldn’t have arisen in the first place. At least that’s my take on it after 30 years of talking to half a million people in the workplace and working with over 400 organisations.”

Tulgan says hovering over someone while they work is not good management and if a manager is telling someone to dot this i and cross this t, that’s effectively two people doing the one job. Where the manager’s skill comes in, he says, is in how they calibrate their interventions.

Some people simply need more guidance than others. Some tasks require more oversight than others. When someone is new to a job, they will need more input than when it’s a familiar routine.

“What the manager needs to figure out is how much direction and feedback someone needs with the task in hand right now because it’s often a moving target,” says Tulgan. “Managers should make decisions based on what people need and if you’re not talking to your people, how do you know what that is?”

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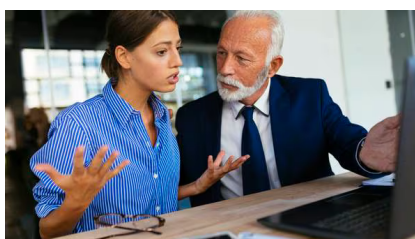
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