

Resisting the Micromanager in You

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When I started running my first company, I sat across from my mentor at breakfast and asked, “Is it important for me to tell employees how they should be getting their work done, or should I set goals and trust them that they know the best way to accomplish their work?” Her answer was unequivocal: give your employees freedom and control over their own work. Throughout my time at that company and during all the time since, I have seen the way this wisdom plays out - with happier employees and better work production.

Importance of Autonomy in the Workplace

Particularly in Western cultures, choosing your own path is an important part of psychological health. Simple choices such as working with the door open or closed allow employees to express their values and preferences through their actions. When employees feel in control over activities and events in their lives, it prevents feelings of helplessness which can lead to higher turnover rates, psychological illness, and lower quality work. As a manager, you may not be able to fabricate total employee control, but you can promote an overall feeling of control through frequent, small decision-making opportunities in the workday.

Two Types of Autonomy

The first aspect of autonomy in the workplace is the opportunity to choose your own behavior. By giving employees the opportunity to conduct themselves as they wish, you bolster their psychological health. Some examples of allowing employees to express their values and preferences through their choices might include encouraging them to decorate their workspace, providing flexible work hours, and not micromanaging the process of reaching goals.

The second aspect of control is the relationship between employee behaviors and the consequences that follow. Have you ever had a boss, friend, or partner who was erratic and responded unpredictably to your actions? When behaviors result in unpredictable outcomes, employees may feel that their actions do not matter and that the outcome is arbitrary. By controlling your own emotions and other forms of rewards in response to employees' successes and failures, you can "train" employees to act well while showing them that they can shape a positive or negative reality by choosing positive or negative behavior.

Workplace psychological health is an important part of a productive workforce. By investing in the happiness of your employees, you not only show respect for their humanity but you also invest in the sustainability and productiveness of your workplace. The best leaders do not control their subordinates' actions but guide their direction and develop employees into the best possible versions of themselves. So resist that micromanager inside you! You will show respect for your employees by giving them a measure of control in their work experience.

References: Muchinsky, Paul M., and Satoris S. Culbertson. *Psychology Applied to Work: an Introduction to Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. 10th ed., Hypergraphic Press, 2016.

About the Author



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