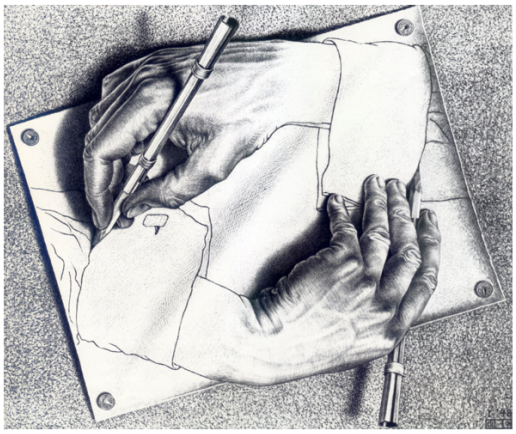
Micromanagement 101 and Other Recent Adventures

Published on Aug 22, 2016 by Niko Canner



After publishing Beyond the Holacracy Hype in the July-August issue of Harvard Business Review, we've followed up with two digital articles in HBR: How Self-Managed Companies Help People Learn on the Job (co-authored with Ethan Bernstein and Charlotte Dobbs), which lays out some personal learning experiments people can try whatever kind of environment they work in, and Why Is Micromanagement So Infectious? (co-authored with Ethan).

As I've explored in an earlier piece on this blog, I believe that hierarchy has more features than bugs. Most companies that are drawn toward self-management should also consider an approach that combines **strategic coherence** (commitment to objectives at the enterprise level, then aligning on a set of core concepts that shape how the objectives will be achieved) with **autonomous execution** (people at all levels are able to shape their own path to the specific objectives they own).

Many of the frustrations that people experience in hierarchically structured organizations stem from leaders who don't have a clear, practical grasp of what micromanagement really is and how they can avoid it, without incurring the risks they're afraid will bite them when they let go.

An exercise I'd recommend to all managers is to recognize when we're drifting into micromanagement and to call out that we're doing it. For instance, several days ago, I found myself worried that a team member, who has stepped in as acting CEO of one of our portfolio companies, wasn't going to connect in sufficient depth with IP counsel on an important imminent decision about a response to our patent examiner. I intervened, asking her to make sure she talked live with counsel to make sure they had a meeting of the minds on outstanding questions, rather than just confirming the path by email. **I acknowledged as I sent the note about this that I was micromanaging.** This explicitness was not only an acknowledgement that I was stepping outside our general way of operating, but also was helpful to me, in that I could check myself to ensure I thought there was a good reason to cross this line. In this case, my reasoning was that any error would be costly, there wouldn't be a chance to fix it, and all of us involved with this company had

communicated poorly on some other IP-related issues in the past.

Two things happened as a result of my note. One was that I learned my concern was misplaced. My colleague and counsel had already connected and discussed everything that I'd thought might be glossed over. The other is that my colleague tested whether I wanted to be closer to some other current issues with the companies, and I was able to clarify why I was reaching into tactical detail on this one point, but had full confidence in her managing her brief more broadly. This one acknowledged instance of micromanagement (in fact, unnecessary!) inoculated us against the risk of slipping into a pattern.

Micromanagement must be a rare exception to one's general way of managing, or one isn't conferring ownership at all. By explicitly calling out when you are micromanaging, rather than just slipping in and out of it without acknowledgement, you'll start to build a clearer sense of what it looks like, see more clearly the effect that it has on your colleagues, and notice the patterns of how and when you descend into that mode of operating. That's an important step toward the ultimate goal: ensuring that your team can own what they need to own, and that you can rely on achieving the outcomes that matter most.