

What to do if you're being micro-managed

Micro-management isn't new, it's been a challenge for employees forever. But in this age of remote working, we're seeing a rise in the stress levels of our boss, our colleagues and ourselves. In the case of our boss, this often shows up as an increase in micro-management.

Autonomy needs to be fine-tuned

Obviously, the degree of autonomy that makes sense for a team changes depending on the situation.

As the pace of change increases, the boss has less and less time available to figure out what everyone else should be doing and hand out lots of directions. If the level of autonomy is too low, the boss becomes a massive bottleneck and slows everyone down. And, unless they're an expert in everyone else's jobs, they don't know enough to make good decisions anyway. This means not only is it slower to be overly reliant on the boss, it's also likely to result in far worse performance for the team and the organisation.

If the level of autonomy is too high, however, chaos is likely to ensue. If people never check anything they're doing with the boss, they will be oblivious to important context and connections with the work of others and make terrible decisions about what work to do with whom and when.

The boss knows lots of things that the team members don't know, and the team members know lots of things that the boss doesn't know. Getting this balance right, and constantly tweaking it as things change, is one of the most important aspects of effective teamwork and creating a positive culture.

When 'checking-in' becomes 'checking-up'

Your boss keeps calling you to 'check-in'. The conversation starts with 'how are you doing?' and quickly moves to 'what are you doing?'

First, let's understand why this is happening. Imagine for a moment that you're the boss. You're being asked to achieve more with less and are being held accountable for everything that your team does, whether you can control it or not. Imagine being blamed for a mistake that wasn't

yours. That would be uncomfortable right? Your boss faces that possibility every day.

Human brains are threat detection, pattern recognition machines that keep us alive by looking for threats everywhere. Social threats, such as being blamed for something, are just as real as physical threats and we all avoid them as much as we can.

So, our bosses are seeking to reduce the possibility of that kind of threat by trying to be ready to answer any question that is thrown at them from above. And many of them don't even realise they're doing it.

So, what can you do about it if your boss keeps 'checking-up'?

Your action plan

First, try not to take it personally. Understand what's driving your boss's behaviour and try to meet their need for reassurance by giving them the information they need. When needs are met, behaviour typically calms down. Bosses are people too.

Second, have an explicit conversation about it. This might seem risky, but no problem was ever solved by ignoring it. Schedule a time to speak to them and ask them directly why they have increased their questions – there may be something behind the increase that's nothing to do with you.

Third, try to get ahead of the curve – if you update your boss more regularly, they will start to relax and stop asking you so many questions.

Fourth, schedule a regular check-in time that is specifically designed for you to update them on progress. That way you'll be ready to answer their questions and they'll know they're going to get answers.

And if you manage a team, ask yourself if your own check-ins have become check-ups.

Culture is always changing and never more rapidly than right now. If it's happening by accident, now is the time to make it deliberate. We can all play an important role no matter whether we're the boss or a member of a team. Unless we're in the CEO role, we're always both.



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