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When Your Boss Is a Micromanager

Is There Hope For Ending Micromanagement and Building Trust?

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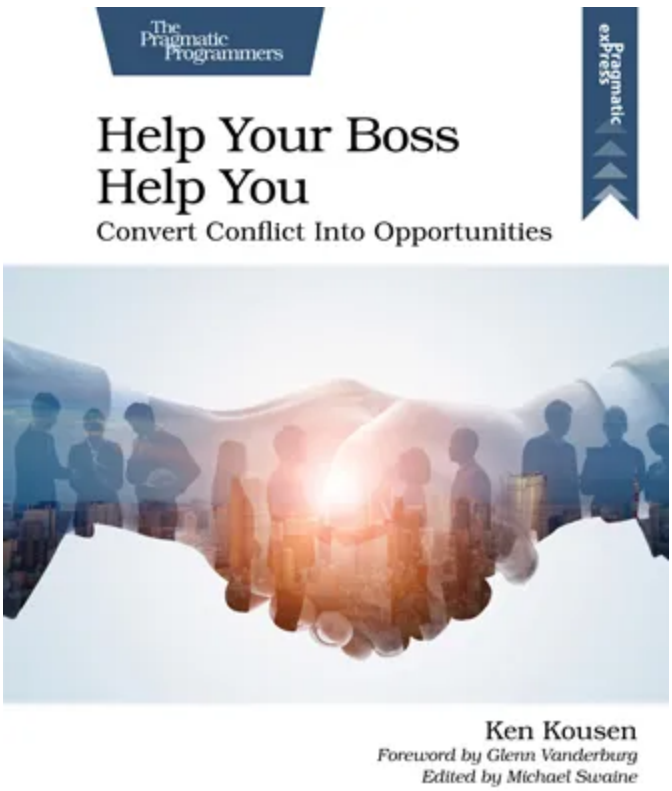
The bad news is, you can't fix micromanagers, because you're not the problem. So what's the good news?



This article is one of a series about how to build a relationship with your manager that gets you what you want on the job when you want it.

The content is based on Help Your Boss Help You by Ken Kousen, published by The Pragmatic Bookshelf. Hint: read to the end of the article for a promo code.

> **Micromanager.** A micromanager wants to do your job as well as theirs.

The Formerly Technical Micromanager

> *P***eter Principle.** People in a hierarchy tend to rise to their level of incompetence.

Photo by Agni B on Unsplash

When a technical person is good at their job they are often promoted into a totally different job. Colloquially, we call this phenomenon the *Peter Principle.*

The promotee eventually reaches a level where they are no longer productive because the nature of the new job is so different from the old one.

In technical jobs, the promotion track to new technical roles runs out, so to continue to making progress, technical people feel obligated to go into

management.

Unfortunately, these newly promoted managers face uncharted territory like:

- Financial planning
- Strategic planning
- Political conflict
- Interpersonal battles

The newly minted manager never cared about these issues and probably doesn't enjoy handling them now. Time for technical work vanishes and valuable technical skills start leaking away and becoming obsolete. So, if an opportunity to do a technical job presents itself, they tend to jump on it.

Bad News

The bad news is that you can't fix micromanagers, because you're not the problem.

Let's say you convey the technical steps you were going to take to reassure the manager. The manager agrees but sees it as validation of their approach, so they jump into the technical work to be *right* again.

Let's say you present a different plan. Now the manager leaps at the chance to teach you the so-called *right* way, thereby demonstrating how good they were in the technical role. In either case, the approach is not about you — it's about them.

Good News

The good news is the problem is self-correcting. The boss doesn't have time to do both your job and their job well. The more time the boss spends on your job, the worse they'll do on the management job.

Chances are, the boss's peers (friends at the same level of management) will explain that rookie management error. "If you do the technical job," they'll say, "the managerial job will suffer. You're being evaluated on the managerial job."

Neglecting management duties is a bad look, and will eventually attract the wrong kind of attention. In the end, that's what breaks a manager out of this pattern.

> *It's much easier to hire a low-level manager than it is to find a good technical person. A good technical person hired into management may forget that their new position is more precarious than the old one.*

Sooner or later, the boss's boss will call them aside and have a rather blunt conversation with them. "I hired you to do this management job," the boss's boss might say. "If you can't do it, let me know and I'll get somebody else."

A simple reminder from their boss may get their attention. Your boss will probably stop trying to do both jobs at once.

On the other hand, such a reminder could spark an epiphany that they shouldn't have left the technical ranks in the first place. Your boss may decide to move back to a technical role. *Either way, the problem is solved.*

The Fear-Driven Micromanager

Photo by Marek Piwnicki on Unsplash

If your boss is afraid that a particular task isn't going to get done, they may feel compelled to take over. Suddenly you are reduced to the equivalent of an intern or student assistant. The boss taking over a task may feel like a slap, as it directly questions your ability to get the job done.

A fear-driven micromanager has trouble letting go. When questioned, they say they were forced to take over; otherwise, the task would have failed. That may even be true on occasion. The problem is that the adrenaline rush of

problem-solving in a crisis becomes addictive. Micromanaging one task turns into micromanaging many.

Fear-driven micromanaging will also be corrected by the boss's boss. It may take a while though, especially if the boss is politically well-connected. It's hard to work for a boss like that.

One way out is to reduce the boss's fear by making it clear that you can handle the situation. The message you want to send is "I got this." That's not an easy message to convey, especially if you're struggling.

> **Don't Push Back Now**
>
> In Pushing Back: Lessons from the Prisoner's Dilemma, I advised you to push back when your boss does something you don't like. You can't do that in the middle of a crisis. After the crisis is over, make it clear that would prefer to solve your own problems. As you grow in your technical ability, it becomes easier to argue in favor of your own expertise. Beware: the level of confidence required to make that argument can be undercut by a controlling manager.

So push back after the crisis has passed. Hopefully, your manager gets the message that taking over tasks hurts your career.

Working For a Fearful Manager

I spent four long years working for a highly experienced but fearful technical manager. Whenever he got scared — which was often — he tried to take over. As a result, I stopped warning him about possible problems, waiting instead for the problems to become serious enough for him to intervene before letting him know. That attempt to manage his fear didn't work very well.

Eventually, we started meeting every other week, and I was able to report on potential difficulties while they were still small enough to fix. He was able to provide advice rather than taking over. We successfully reduced his fear by addressing issues before they became crises. I got the time to figure out how to handle problems myself. As my manager built more trust in my abilities, he resisted his temptation to push me out of the way. Plus, he knew he'd hear about it later if he did so.

The conclusion? Your best hope is to report on progress frequently enough that the problems you discuss are still small. As you get better at handling the problems, you'll be in a better position to assure your manager that you can do the tasks without interference.

Want to get in touch? Reach out to Ken Kousen at ken.kousen@kousenit.com, or on Twitter at @kenkousen. Be sure to sign up for his *free* weekly newsletter Tales from the jar side.

Through August 31, 2021 you can use promo code **boss_35** to save 35% on the ebook version of *Help Your Boss Help You* by Ken Kousen, published by *The Pragmatic Bookshelf.* Promo codes are not valid on prior purchases.

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