

# Why Boards Micro-Manage and How to Get Them to Stop

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If we were to ask organizational leaders for their top three complaints about boards, micromanagement would absolutely make that list. Both board members and CEOs talk about board micromanagement as if it were the weather - they complain about it, but they assume there is not much they can do about it.

Unlike the weather, there is something you can do to stop a board from micromanaging.   
The first step is to see micromanagement for what it really is. Only then can you determine how to get boards to stop.

## The Problem:

In our experience, micromanagement is not a problem unto itself. It is a symptom of several problems. These are listed in no particular order, and they are NOT mutually exclusive. As a matter of fact, they are often interrelated.

**Problem #1: The board has no clear sense of its role in the organization, and no systems to guide that role. Board Members think this is what they should be doing.**

Board members are generally chosen because they are movers and shakers - they know how to get things done. Without a clear understanding of the role of the board, Board Members simply assume their job is to roll up their sleeves and do what they do best - get things done.

And so they scrutinize the accounting and the level of activity of the line employees; they talk directly to clients and employees, and then take up those client/employee concerns at board meetings. Everywhere they look, there are things that could be done better, and because they think that's what their job is supposed to be, they pitch right in to help get that job done right. Very often, board members micromanage because they think that's what they should be doing. And there are no systems in place that guide them to do anything differently.

**Problem #2: The board has no policies or procedures delineating appropriate roles for staff vs. the board.**

This is related to the first problem, but extends it further. Boards that micromanage generally have no clear set of procedures to define which decisions belong to the staff, and which belong to the board. With neither guidelines nor any discussion of these issues, board members venture into the staff's area of responsibility, simply because there is nothing telling them not to.

**Problem #3: Most people have no experience in "leading." Our real-life experience is mostly "doing."**

Most of us don't "lead" in our everyday lives. Most of us "do". The laundry and the dishes don't get done by leading; the report doesn't get written, the engine rebuilt. The customer isn't served by our "leading" but by our "doing".

When people serve on a board, they assume "doing" is how they will help the organization. They feel proud to share what they are so good at, until they are reprimanded for doing it, at which point they are confused. "Why is everyone complaining, when 'doing' is why they asked me here in the first place?"

Which leads to Problem#4.

**Problem #4: Board Members are recruited to perform tasks, not to lead.**

We've all heard it, and you may actually have said it. "We need an accountant on the board, or an attorney, or a PR person, etc." Organizations invite folks on the board to perform pro bono staff roles. Then when they start doing what they were invited to do, they are accused of micromanaging! The accountant on the board is asked to review the books, and before you know it, that accountant is critical of everything the bookkeeper does, including where she keeps her pencils! (Don't laugh - we've actually experienced this.)

Remember: if you invited board members to serve as volunteer staff, they are doing exactly what you asked them to do.

### **Problem #5: Remnants of Crisis**

If your board has just experienced (or is in the midst of experiencing) a crisis, they have had to jump in with both feet to get the job done and make sure the organization survives. Perhaps the CEO has just quit with no notice, or was in a car accident. In times of crisis, the board may have to act outside its role, as they may be the only ones left to do so. (That is one of the reasons we have boards - to provide the organization with continuity.)

Once the crisis time is over, though, if the board doesn't have a clear sense of its own role vs. that of the staff, it will be VERY hard for that board to stop its management role. The danger here is that the memory of crisis becomes institutionalized, lingering long beyond the memories of just the current board members. These residual behaviors will likely be inadvertently taught to new board members, as they learn from watching. The board continues to act as if there is a crisis long after the crisis is over, micromanaging from some cellular level that is handed down over time until no one knows where it came from - it is simply the board's culture - the way things are done.

### **Problem #6: Fear**

At the root of virtually all micromanagement is fear. Fear that if they don't do it, no one else will (or no one will do it as well). Fear that the organization will fail, will have horrible things happen to it. Fears about money, about bad press. When individuals behave badly it is usually because they feel their comfort or security is threatened in some way. When boards behave badly (and micromanagement is just one symptom of this), they are usually concerned about the health and safety of the organization. If you can keep in mind that boards micromanage because they care and therefore have fears and concerns, and NOT because they are power hungry control freaks, then you will be better equipped to get them to stop.

## ***Solving Problems, Or Moving Forward?***

Once we acknowledge that micromanagement is a symptom of one or more of these problems, our natural tendency is to try to solve the problems. Typically, organizations work first on creating policies that clearly delineate the role of the staff from the role of the board. To accomplish that, the group may seek a consultant or workshop to teach the board about its own role, to help the board understand what it should and should not do.

This problem-solving approach, while well-meaning, typically has one of two effects:

1. Nothing much changes, or
2. Everything changes. Unfortunately those changes are often followed by the unintended consequence of a swing to the other end of the spectrum: The board becomes disengaged, as their new governance system was designed almost entirely in reaction to their initial micromanaging ways.

## ***One Part Compassion, One Part Wisdom***

In our experience, problem-solving cannot solve complex problems. Yes, that seems counterintuitive. But the reality we have seen in the prior section is that problem-solving approaches tend to be narrowly focused, when the problems themselves are inter-related and complex. Problem-solving tends to aim at the symptom (micromanagement) in a vacuum, rather than addressing everything that relates to causing that symptom. Because of its narrow focus, problem-solving tends to lead to unintended consequences - like the disengaged boards noted above.

So then, what can work? The answer is to look beyond the situation you do NOT want (the problem), and instead aim your efforts squarely at achieving the situation you DO want. **Instead of aiming to solve the problem of micromanagement, you will aim at creating an effective, high functioning board.**

To accomplish that will require one part compassion, and one part wisdom. The compassion will help you ease board members through their own well-meaning reasons for micromanaging. This will require not just that those micromanaging board members change, but that *you* change *your* assumptions about their reasons for doing what they are currently doing.

From there, wisdom will guide you to proactively create situations where the board will simply have no reason to micromanage.

## **Compassion: Why Boards Micromanage**

As we noted in Problem # 6 above, at the root of virtually all micromanagement is fear.

Fear, concern, and worry (and all the other words we use for this emotional reaction) are all responses to feeling threatened. They arise from our natural instinct for self-preservation. Board members could be afraid that the finances are shaky. Or that the finances are ok now, but you never know. They could be unsure about a surge in organizational growth, or a sense of stagnation.

The fear could be personal - an individual may be afraid that his/her position of authority on the board will be threatened by a particular action. Or they could simply be feeling unsure of their own role within the organization.

Regardless of the cause, as a general rule, when folks act badly, you can pretty well guess they feel threatened in some way, either personally or on behalf of the organization.

Consider what the "best practice" in governance dictates boards should be holding themselves accountable for - legal oversight, operational oversight, financial oversight.

Those internal oversight functions, done in the way most boards handle them, all tend to be reactive, primarily aimed at limiting risk and liability. These are the functions current standards and practices instruct as the main role of a board.

They also are functions that virtually drip with fear. No wonder boards micromanage!

Boards are right to be concerned that the organization may be financially unstable. They are right to be concerned that the CEO has no succession plan in the event she wins the lottery and heads to Tahiti. They are right to be concerned that they aren't paying their staff what they can get by working in the private sector. These are important issues, and the board is ultimately accountable for all of it.

So the first step is to stop treating micromanagement as if it is a disease that comes from a few control-freak board members. The first step is to be compassionate. Boards that micromanage are not evil demons sent to make your life miserable.

Compassion leads us to realize: ***Board members micromanage because they care, they are scared, and they don't know what else to do.***

If we can be grateful for the fact that they care; if we can compassionately acknowledge that none of us acts well when we're scared; and if we can compassionately encourage them to learn how to be more proactive than reactive - their micromanagement will go away.

That is where wisdom comes in.

## **Wisdom: Creating Engaged Boards Who Govern Proactively**

As noted above, if we aim at solving the micromanagement symptom, we will only get so far. However, if we look beyond the problem we do NOT want, and aim our efforts instead at the positive situation we DO want, we will solve our problems on the way to creating something positive.

What would that positive scenario be for your board? What would you like them to be?

Engaged? Energized? Passionate about the mission and passionate about making your organization's vision a reality in your community? Perhaps a board that knows its role, and understands how to do its job? A board that communicates well? Engages others in the work of the organization? A board that is more proactive than reactive?

You can already see that if that described your board, they would not be micromanaging. You can see that their micromanagement problem could be solved as they reach for the best possible end result.

The following approaches will help you create that positive, community-focused, proactive board in a way that is honest and compassionate about their current fears.

## Encouraging the Board to Want More

If boards micromanage in part because they think that is what they are supposed to be working on, how can you encourage your board to want more than that minimum level of fiduciary oversight, especially if they think that is not their job?

The following exercise will help your board want to learn more about how to lead and govern for the board's highest potential. Its purpose is to inspire and encourage the board to want to learn a different way, rather than prescribing that they must. It will do that by helping board members see that there is important and exciting work they are NOT doing because they are spending their time on the day-to-day.

### Exercise:

Have board members review all the board's agenda items for the past several meetings. For each agenda item, mark which category it fits:

- |                                 |  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>S (Staff)</b>                | Is this activity a duplication or review of a task staff already does or has done? Is it a rubber stamp of a staff recommendation / staff initiated item?  |
| <b>P (Past)</b>                 | Is this a review / discussion of something that already happened? (This will include staff reports, committee reports, financial reports, etc., most of which review PAST actions.)  |
| <b>V (Values)</b>               | Does the item pertain to the organization's core values? Is it a discussion of how decisions are made, how actions are determined to be right or wrong, how the board ensure the organization is walking its talk?                                     |
| <b>M (Vision &amp; Mission)</b> | Is this a discussion of the effect the organization has in the community? A discussion of the impact the organization will create for individuals and for the community? Is it an item about how you will make more of a difference in people's lives? |

Tally up the time your board spends on each of these items. What percentage of your time are you spending discussing things the staff is primarily responsible for? What percentage are you spending on things that have already occurred?

What percentage of your time are you spending talking about the impact the organization is making and has the potential to make in the community? What percentage of your time are you spending on the values and ethics that guide your decisions?

Once the board sees both what it is spending its time on, and (most importantly) what it has the potential to spend its time on, you can begin to shift the agenda to spend more time looking forward than looking back. The board can begin to consider the proactive leadership function of governance, in addition to the reactive oversight functions. They can begin to govern for what is possible, rather than governing for what they are afraid of.

[\(This article may help to explain the leadership role of a board.\)](#)

## Addressing Fear through Proactive Planning

The board does its work in two places - in annual planning sessions and at the board table during regular meetings. First let's consider how boards can plan proactively. That will turn your annual planning session into the first step in preventing the reactive fear that can lead to micromanagement.

In a proactive plan, the board (working with key staff) proactively determines what they want success to look like in the community they serve. "As a result of your efforts, what do you want to be different in the community?" (Note that this is not reactive planning that looks to "solve community problems" but instead looks to proactively to create the community you want, solving problems along the way.)

To ensure the organization is healthy enough to accomplish its community-driven goals, the board and staff will also review all the organization's internal operational functions. For each and every operational function of the organization, the group asks:

- What do we need to have in place to be successful in achieving our mission?
- What liability issues do we fear might harm our chances for success?"

Personnel and finance. Facilities and regulatory issues. Cultural competence and administrative support. The group will answer those two questions for every single operational function of the organization.

That simple step within the larger planning process will get both the board's fears and their aspirations out on the table, under the planning banner that says, "If we are to create a better future in our community, our organization must be strong."

From each item on that list, the board and staff can then create a plan to proactively encourage what they DO want, and to proactively prevent what they do NOT want. In this one step, the board and staff will have worked together to eliminate the fear that feeds the micromanagement beast.

This planning process is described in detail in The Pollyanna Principles (pages 136-184) [CLICK](#)

### **Addressing Fear at the Board Table**

At board meetings, the conscious ear will begin to notice the uncomfortable signs that precede micromanagement - the signs of fear. Listen for the following phrases as signals:

- I'm concerned about...
- What will happen if we don't ...
- I'm worried about...
- Shouldn't we look into that?
- Shouldn't we do something about that?

When you hear fear arise, proactively address the issue as follows:

- 1) *Issue:* Identify the real issue. What are you afraid might happen?
- 2) *Preventative Action:* Identify an action that can be taken to prevent that bad result from happening
- 3) *Assignment:* Assign responsibility for that action. Remember, the board has one employee - the ED. So the board can only make assignments to
  - a) the board itself,
  - b) the ED, who in turn can assign to other staff, or
  - c) a committee.
- 4) *Monitoring:* Determine how you will monitor whether the action was taken, to evaluate what to do next.

### **For example:**

- 1) *Issue:* We are afraid because the state is about to cut our funding. We have only a few months of cash reserves.
- 2) *Preventative Action:* We will create a plan that aims at making the organization financially independent within the next X years.
- 3) *Assignment:* The staff will form a committee of board, staff and outside supporters. The committee will be formed by X date. The final plan will be provided to the board for review in X months.
- 4) *Monitoring:* The staff will report every X months on its progress, with those updates automatically included in the board's agenda.

The balance in these 4 steps will provide the board and staff with a framework that does two critical things. First, it will prevent micromanagement of these tasks themselves (assigning, monitoring), modeling a format for all the board's decision-making in the future. Second, it addresses the real issues that can cause micromanagement in the first place (identifying and taking preventative action).

## ***Conclusion***

The end result of this process is a board that is proactively working to take as much proactive control as possible over the things that very rightfully cause fear and concern.

The approach takes the anger out of the work, by approaching these legitimate fears with compassion rather than blame. And by creating systems that proactively address the root causes of those fears while moving the organization forward, the board will have plenty to work on that is not day-to-day.

They will be working on the reason they joined the board in the first place - to make a difference. And that is where the fun is!