

Critical leadership and set-up-to-fail syndrome

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Abstract This paper focuses on the issue of the so-called “set-up-to-fail syndrome” which is a situation when employees perceived to be ineffective and weak performers by their managers start living down to their low expectations. We argue that set-up-to-fail syndrome can be caused both by the lack of motivation and skills on the employee’s side but also by the lack of critical leadership skills on the side of the manager.

In addition, the paper tackles the problem of micromanagement in business companies or public institutions. We show that micromanaging employees might become one of the leading factors for poor performance and failure. We conclude that a successful manager should learn how to steer her or his subordinates and develop effective leadership skills in order to become a trusted leader instead of a bullying and controlling boss. It is apparent that it takes time and effort to build such skills as communication and team collaboration, but many examples show that they can be acquired. Becoming a critical leader, not a micromanager, would considerably contribute to enhancing the quality of work and interactions at any workplace.

1 Introduction

Dealing with unproductive employees and subordinates in various types of organisations, business or public alike, represents a serious issue that often creates a certain barrier many good managers cannot cross. Surely, one way to deal with such unproductive employees is simply to let them go. However, a good and experienced manager always knows that dismissing employees is expensive and training new employees can be even more costly.

Moreover, in a large number of cases, seemingly unproductive or lazy employees turn out to be people who lack proper guidance and decent motivation. One research shows that about 44% of business professionals state that unclear leadership is one of their top work issues (Sindell and Sindell 2016).

Managers and their subordinates might become victims of the “set-up-to-fail syndrome”, a situation when employees perceived to be weak performers by their managers start living down to the low expectations (Manzoni and Barsoux 1998). As a result, human resources potential is wasted, and work performance goes down. It requires a critical leader to save the day and to improve the atmosphere and the relations at a workplace.

One of the proper ways how to start solving this situation is open and clear communication with the troublemakers in order to find out what their problems really are. When a team member gets involved in disturbing behaviours or loses tasks, entrepreneurs and managers need to consider this as a problem and take action to do something about it. In many cases, it can be helpful to talk to the employee, but the only solution is to replace the lazy employee with one that is more productive every day.

This paper focuses on such issues as “set-up-to-fail syndrome” and micromanagement that might lead to the decreasing performance and lacking motivation amongst employees. We analyse these issues with a special focus on the phenomenon of leadership. The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides the overview and the description of critical leadership. Section 3 tackles the issue of micromanagement. Section 4 provides a

distinguishing analysis of the leader and the boss. Finally, Section 5 comes with some overall conclusions and discussions.

2 Critical leadership

In general, being a critical leader might involve learning how to clearly communicate one's tasks and goals to their subordinates, how to create accountability and document their performance, how to be ready to face the work-related problems and to talk it out, and, if worse comes to worse, to be prepared to make unpopular decisions (such as firing the problematic employees not matter what) (Luo et al. 2016). Even though getting rid of one's subordinates might seem as a very extreme measure, it might have a positive effect on the remaining employees and improve the relationships and the working atmosphere at a workplace. There are proofs of that – for example a research conducted at Johns Hopkins Carey Business School showed that misconduct by one team member serves as a threatening example and makes other team members work harder (Gunia and Kim 2016). Thence, a good manager should learn how to motivate and offer incentives but she or he also needs to be fully prepared to make hard choices as well as to take full responsibility for these choices (Meng and Boyd 2017).

One would probably agree that even the slightest discord between two employees at a given organisation can cause the entire team to suffer and adapt to the ultimate organizational success. As a human being, each employee has a different opinion and is inclined to achieve their personal goals as well as achieving the goals of their company. Therefore, it is important that the working relationships between different employees are friendly and cordial. A good manager should be the leader who would not be afraid or ashamed to ask the problematic employee if she or he knows how her or his work fits into his team and how it affects the entire organization (Chuvikov 2017). In addition, the manager should be able to explain clearly what the company wants to achieve and how it fits into the mission (Dumitru et al. 2016).

In many cases, it might be that a misbehaving employee is extremely talented, and it would be in the best interest of the organisation to keep her or him, some employee development strategies can be helpful. For example, it might be useful to pair them with effective mentors. In general, mentoring can be of tremendous value to those who benefit from interacting with influential colleagues. The difficulty is to find the perfect match between an experienced employee with the willingness and openness to look after someone and an employee who respects that mentor and seeks to incorporate the knowledge (Allen et al. 1997). If more culture of management could be devoted to people in these industries, significant benefits for the motivation and commitment of employees could be expected. As such, it would be advisable for the manager of this group to have many opportunities for learning and progression.

All in all, a critical leader is a manager who thinks and act rationally but who is not afraid to make unpopular decisions and take responsibility for these decisions. These decisions need to be holistic and balanced – one can clearly see that deciding about everything might lead to the problem of micromanagement that is a subject of the next section of this paper.

3 The problem of micromanagement

Managerial techniques and approaches can affect communication, innovation, problem solving, and employee motivation in the workplace (Birdi et al. 2016). However, it often happens that many managers struggle to overcome their micro-management bias. Micromanagement is generally not the preferred method for a manager to lead her or his team (Pandya 2017).

Non-dedicated employees invest time but not effort or creativity in the work in which they are deployed. The effects of this phenomenon are worse in situations where work is transferred from one specialist to another. In such a situation, indifference among the upstream employees affects not only their own productivity, but also that of their downstream counterparts. After all, the adverse effects of micromanagement may go beyond the company itself, especially if the behaviour becomes so severe as to displace qualified employees of value to competitors (Skiba et al. 2016). This is because the bad manager focuses on controlling employee behaviour and performance rather than managing their growth. It can have a cascading effect on the entire organization, and staff upset each other. Research has shown that supercritical superiors hinder collaboration by making employees more critical and aggressive towards their peers.

On the other hand, good managers are the leaders who focus on the bottom line (Trevino et al. 2000). The same applies to other departments and internal processes, such as the training of new employees, the updating of systems, the implementation of changes, etc. Proper micromanagement can therefore not only have a positive impact on overall results but also on morale, productivity and culture.

In general, each leader dreams of having people to trust and rely on, who have an eye for details, who can pay close attention to what others do, and do things perfectly. In companies and industries of all sizes, managers are responsible for motivating employees and providing them with opportunities to improve their productivity. Unfortunately, executives often develop bad habits and forget about their leadership, which puts them in a state of

micromanagement. The destructive habits of a micromanager can cause employees to look for other jobs in other departments or with other employers.

Employees who communicate regularly with their supervisor experience a much stronger relationship between their leaders and themselves. An environment in which managers and employees form a symbiosis leads to a much more agile and innovative work environment. Leaders who care about the well-being and professional development of their employees can eliminate roadblocks in the workplace more quickly and continuously. A visionary leader communicates a purpose and direction that their employees believe in, which convinces their team to work hard to achieve their vision (Manning and Robertson 2002). When people work on tasks that they have more control over, they feel happier and more motivated to get them done. In order to better realize their vision, visionary leaders should be the managers who give their employees a lot of feedback about their performance and praise them when their performance meets or exceeds expectations. This is because employees who work in micro-management lose confidence in their own ability to perform well at work.

A good leader is one who supports his team and is willing to give up control by getting employees to take matters into their own hands. One has to remember that employees were hired first because of their skills and ability to execute. Managers should pay attention to the features which are cornerstones of effective leadership. As team performance remains low or continues to decline, employees are becoming afraid of their positions, careers, and their future.

In addition, reduced morale, combined with the other effects of micromanagement, might further reduce team performance (Podsakoff and MacKenzie 1997). The leader has to make quick assessments and accept the persistent shortcomings, resulting in the employee being fired from the position. In return, the upper management (chief officers and stakeholders) should take swift action to recognize that great efforts and achievements are justified.

Moreover, one can see that accountability is also important here. A supervisor should not have to spend lots of time micro-managing an employee and can be stopped very promptly, depending on the level of involvement, improvement, and accountability, as well as the overall attitude and commitment of the employee. An employee who is promoted to the new manager but has no leadership skills is afraid of failure and tries to keep everything under control. An experienced manager may not know how to delegate, and in the end, she or he will do everything himself for fear of failure. Helping someone understand why they are micromanaged is the first step in changing their behaviour. Coaching a micromanager to strengthen her or his leadership is the second step in his transformation. It does not mean running away from an ivory tower as an absent landlord who comes by at the end of a project, design concept, or planning cycle to insist that things be done in his or her own way. It means letting go of the idea that a manager is someone who leads a team and recognizing that you need to lead a team. Sometimes this means leading the indictment out of the trenches, and sometimes it means developing a comprehensive strategic vision.

4 “Leader” versus “Boss”

Managerial literature presents a clear distinction between the “leader” and the “boss” (Xu et al. 2015). In general terms, a boss can be anyone who takes an authoritarian role over others, while a leader is someone who may or may not have an authoritarian role but is committed to using his influence in the current role to help others join theirs best to develop even. A boss takes on the role of expert, a leader leads the learning and is open to the possibility of different perspectives. In addition, the leader is someone who makes critical (even unpopular) decisions and takes responsibility for her his actions (Sendjaya et al. 2016).

Of course, many people need strict guidance and deadlines. This is especially relevant in our age of digitalisation and globalisation. Many people, especially young ones, are not capable of concentrating on one single task due to the flow of information that overpowers them. In fact, we have so much information that pours on us from everywhere that our brains are not capable of absorbing or processing it. Thence, some strict and simple orders with a concise description of steps, tasks and duties might be very helpful for some (especially younger employees) who were born to the era of electronic gadgets and Internet. However, this might also end with employees doing what their managers ask but not liking to work with their managers. On the contrary, the leader has the heart to serve and the instructions to her or his team are not always what she or he wants, but also what helps the team and the company to flourish. For a good leader to make it to the top, he has to deal with everything that prevents her or him from getting in touch with the holdouts in his team, so everyone has the feeling that they are heard in decisions and speak up to be able to, when it matters. One needs to think long term and focus on the future as well as how teams fit together to achieve goals. After all, executives at this level must give up any ego committed to remaining the boss and putting their own interests into service, helping others to shine.

The research literature confirms that it is very important that each team member has focused, professional, individual and organizational goals (Cacioppe 1999). Even the slightest discord between two employees can cause the entire team to suffer and adapt to the ultimate organizational success. As a human being, each employee has a different opinion and is inclined to achieve their personal goals as well as achieving the goals of their company.

Unlike the boss who ignores personal setbacks to prioritize the task at hand, the leader understands that a company cannot operate in a vacuum and throw Curveballs life when you least expect it. Above all, executives understand that a team is made up of people who have their own unique personalities and needs. They feel in times of need in the team members and show respect and consideration. Leaders give orders and watch while executives are in the midst of the effort, working hard, encouraging their colleagues, solving problems, and taking responsibility. Executives stand out from the inside, fostering teamwork, recognizing great work and engaging with critics for the team. It gives them the power to issue orders, but a good leader realizes that their role involves much more than giving orders and watching the results. When a manager becomes angry and harasses others, it sets the standard of behaviour in the team.

When a leader openly thinks that everyone outside his team is incompetent, this becomes the predominant team attitude. A happy boss is a better role model because he cares about the impression he makes. However, decoupled leaders are more likely to show less care as they lead others.

While effective leaders are responsible for the failures, they will not be successful but will share with the team. Experts admit that certain qualities can be required for a great leader (Ford et al. 2017). They say that true leaders are always ready to develop talents and aspiring leaders. Executives ask employees to reflect on and analyse their own work process to find room for improvement, and executives ask the people they hired for their expertise for input. A good leader knows that their employees are better at their work than they are and should regularly ask for their opinions and ideas about the company's growth and development. A good leader asks because a good leader respects the opinions, ideas, and values that her or his employees or subordinates are capable of and what they bring with them.

5 Conclusions and discussions

Overall, our results show that it may not always be feasible to tailor management approaches to specific individuals. However, when it is known that a particular group of employees is more demanding, job tasks and associated management approaches can be set for the entire team. It would be impractical not to hire legitimate employees, and it could cost a good company valuable staff for the team. On the other hand, it also becomes obvious that in any of those cases good leadership approach might be very helpful. Leadership principles are universal and with some finetuning might be applied at workplaces at many non-standard situations.

Similar to any other management situation in which employees are monitored and managed, an in-depth understanding of the problem and a willingness to address it effectively can lead to better outcomes. Managing difficult employees takes time, but it is still worthwhile avoiding extra hiring costs. Many highly talented people may have behaviours that require judgment to help managers manage these people. Knowing how one's employees react in stressful situations or how they fit a particular leadership style will provide the management with valuable information that helps to deal with problematic employees.

All in all, managers should prioritize clear rules and responsibilities for the required work outcomes and then give individuals the opportunity to perform tasks at their own discretion. A good manager is a leader who makes clear expectations about when and how performance reviews will take place but leave enough time between performance feedback episodes to make employees feel autonomous in their work. If supervisory communication or performance feedback is too common, psychologically empowered individuals are likely to be upset and bothered. Skilled managers should give authorized employees more freedom and independence in their work in order to avoid the appearance of the "set-up-to-fail syndrome".

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