What is Micromanagement and What Isn't?

**BOARD CAFE • CATEGORY/TOPIC/BOARD CAFE • BY JAN MASAOKA • NOVEMBER 15, 2010 • PRINT/EMAIL**

Micromanagement: whatever the board is doing that the executive director doesn’t like. :)

From an executive director: "The board is micromanaging! They’re driving me crazy!"
And from a board member of the same organization: "Every time we make even a suggestion the executive director flies off the handle and accuses us of micromanaging! Aren’t we supposed to be guiding and leading?"

Wryly, we might say that "micromanagement" is whatever the board does that the executive director doesn’t like. For example, let’s imagine a board reviewing a budget that has $10,000 included for lighting fixtures. Some board members don’t see the point for new fixtures at all, but the executive director believes the expense is important -- for giving a positive sense of the organization to visitors, and for supporting staff desire for better light. And the ED also feels that office equipment purchases are staff decisions, and that interference by the board is micromanaging.

Who’s right? If only there were a measuring stick that would make scientific decisions. The unexpected, hidden reason for micromanagement is a lack of confidence in the executive.

Imagine you are supervising two grantwriters. One gives you a great first draft, and you tell him: "Make these couple of changes and send it off." The other gives you a terrible first draft, so you say to her: "Make these changes and let me see the next draft." She protests: "Why do you have to see two drafts me but only one from the other grantwriter? You’re micromanaging me!"

The answer (of course) is that when we have confidence in someone we step back and let them do their job. (Sometimes boards have so much confidence in their executive directors that they step back all the way off the map.) When we lack confidence, we step in closer. And closer.

Board members typically don’t get much direct evidence on whether they should gain or lose confidence in the executive director. So if the board packet is sloppily put together, the budget wasn’t controlled last year, or thank-you letters to donors were late, board members start to step in closer. Frequently individual board members are all over the map in terms of what kind of oversight they think is appropriate. And sometimes there’s a board member who, out of sync with the rest of the board, wants to take every decision up to the board level.

Remembering that while the board chair is not the individual supervisor of the executive, he or she MUST organize the board so that the executive is not beset with conflicting orders. A simple way (often useful temporarily) is for the board chair to act as a gatekeeper between the executive and board members, deciding what should come to the board and what shouldn’t. But because the board as a whole DOES oversee the executive and board-staff relations, the board as a group should review the gatekeeper decisions to bring the board into alignment on the level of confidence in the executive. In short, the board as a whole “draws the line,” not any one board member.
In short, if, as an executive director, you think the board is micromanaging, ask yourself and the board chair what signals the board is getting to make them wonder about your ability to lead and manage the organization. Tackle the real issue -- such as budget control or donor recognition -- rather than argue over whether the purchase of light fixtures is a board or a staff decision. Pick your battles -- picking the ones that are meaningful, not symptomatic. And don't forget to give the board direct feedback too, by saying, "I appreciate the confidence you have in me as demonstrated by your agreeing that this decision was a staff decision," or "Is this input to my eventual decision or are you saying this is a board decision?" or "Since you're questioning a decision I think is a staff decision, should we take a look at the board's overall assessment of my performance?"

Jan Masaoka is editor of Blue Avocado, and author of Best of the Board Cafe, a field guide for nonprofit boards. She is currently on the board of New America Media, a national network of ethnic newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations. She is more interested in microbreweries than in micromanagement.

See also in Blue Avocado:

- Who is Responsible for the Board Doing a Good Job? (http://blueavocado.org/content/who-responsible-board-doing-good-job)
- What’s the Point of a Nonprofit Board, Anyway? (http://www.blueavocado.org/content/whats-point-nonprofit-board-anyway)

Comments

As an ED, I agree that trust is important, but I would not be satisfied with the chain of accountability that is described here.

A board that has clearly stated ends which describe on whose behalf the organization exists, what difference it will make on their behalf, and at what cost can then lay out the means of accomplishing those ends. In Policy Governance, it's done through limitations. That is, the board states what means cannot be used to achieve the ends. This allows the board to ensure its concerns are addressed while not limiting the creativity of the ED. The board may have more or less detail in these policies, depending on how much power they, with one voice, choose to give away.

The ED then reports on each policy on a schedule. For example, a policy outlining the executive limitations for staff relations may state that the ED shall not fail to pay all employees in a timely manner. The ED reports annually on this policy about how he/she is or is not in compliance with the policy.

These reports are what is used to judge organizational performance and, by extension, the job performance of the ED. The ED is clear about the board's expectations, and policies cannot be changed without consent of the board.

There are also policies for the board's process which are monitored regularly by board members.

I'm not trying to sell Policy Governance. It's just the clearest system of monitoring organizational performance that I have found. Any system that offers clear direction to the ED in a written form and lays out a clear and logical chain of accountability and insists the board speak with one voice will make micromanaging a non-issue.

– submitted by Anonymous on November 16, 2010 at 02:42:39 PM.
Is the "Carver Method" an example of "Policy Governance"?
– submitted by Anonymous on November 18, 2010 at 05:45:57 AM.

John Carver, who has sparked some very interesting conversations in the nonprofit sector about boards, has developed his thinking into a school of thought he calls "Policy Governance" and which everybody else calls "the Carver method." I'm afraid that I think Carver's critique is much better than his prescriptions. The Carver method works for situations where there's a strong, terrific executive, but not in any other type. And of course, pretty much any method works when there's a strong, terrific executive.

– submitted by Jan Masaoka on November 20, 2010 at 12:55:08 AM.

I agree - and in fact, in my experience the Carver method also only works when the relationship between the board and the ED is already characterized by trust and amity. Cynthia Freeman
– submitted by Cynthia Freeman on February 9, 2011 at 09:56:00 PM.

What if the gatekeeper (board chair) is micromanaging the Executive, but the rest of the board is blissfully unaware that this is happening because the board chair is in charge of communicating with the board and the chair doesn't think the board needs to be bothered? So the communication structure is theoretically set up, but there is only one person not trusting.
– submitted by Anonymous on November 16, 2010 at 05:14:27 PM.

Sadly, I experienced this first hand. I had been the ED in our company for about 8 years and everything was going very well between the board and myself. Then, a new member was elected as board president, who had not been on the board long, and was a control/power "freak." She decided that all communication between me and the board should go through her and that I shouldn't bother the board members with unnecessary information (albeit, no one had ever told me I was "bothering" them with unneeded information. About a year passed and the board president became ill and she took a leave of absence for three months. During that time the vice president asked me what was going on, that I didn't communicate with them like I used to. I was unsure of whether to be truthful and spill my guts, or play it close to the vest, not knowing whether he was checking me out. Our lunch meeting moved along hesitantly until he finally blurted out what the whole board had been feeling and "knowing." Thereafter, the board members challenged the president at every turn. I was still in the middle and walked the tightrope for another three or four months when the president decided she had had enough and submitted her resignation. It was a long, long, long, long...year.
– submitted by Anonymous on November 16, 2010 at 09:45:25 PM.

I only hope that's the result I get, because I've been dealing with a similar situation here - and it's painful each and every day!
– submitted by Anonymous on November 16, 2010 at 10:12:27 PM.

A good Vice Chair, other officers and term limits are key.
– submitted by Anonymous on April 5, 2011 at 05:12:31 PM.

Micromanagement may arise from other issues besides lack of confidence in the ED. For example, it may arise from the board's lack of attention to essential underpinnings for the board and/or staff decisions and authority: strategic plan, policy manual, board & staff job
descriptions, orientation and training, effective board-committee structure, ED performance review, board performance review, and overall organizational structure. It is possible that the board also has developed -- in absence of any or all of these key organizational underpinnings -- bad habits, such as micromanagement. The board may not have the competence to serve effectively or may not understand how the mission is operationalized -- they may focus on minor issues they can get their hands around because they are not prepared to or knowledgeable about tackling larger issues, like fundraising, etc. Or, the board may not understand where the board role ends and that of the staff begins -- something that often happens when hiring the organization's first ED or when the part-time ED becomes full-time or when additional staff positions are created and filled. Or the organization may have outgrown an old board model. Well defined roles and a well-developed and open decision-making process (with clearly developed lines of authority and responsibility) are the responsibility of both the board and ED. In the example of the $10K for new lighting -- this expenditure should have been part of a facility upgrade plan arising out of strategic planning process -- complete with a timeline and budget. Dropping an unplanned capital acquisition/expenditure on the board (and without going through the appropriate committee review) indicates that the ED needs more guidance and oversight. However, in this same example, if the $10K purchase is part of a carefully developed facility upgrade plan reviewed and adopted by the board, then the board doesn't need to revisit the purchase -- UNLESS additional issues are now in play, such as an unexpectedly budget shortfall, etc. - and the ED should bring all of this to the board for the revisit. And then there are the folks who just don't accept/understand their board role. These people want to out their oar in no matter how well the lines of authority are delineated and nor matter how well the organization plans and allocates resources to meet its mission. These are the people who should only serve one term on the board so that they don't continue to waste other board members' time (and staff time) nitpicking over non-essential issues.

-- submitted by Anonymous on November 16, 2010 at 05:19:54 PM.

Thanks for bringing these other considerations into the discussion. As an ED, I found myself in conflict with our board and these were the underpinnings that were clearly at work and attributable to micromanagement in our situation.

-- submitted by Anonymous on November 18, 2010 at 06:31:51 PM.

I just clicked on the article, "Who is responsible for the board doing a good job" after reading the micromanaging article. I'm fascinated with the responses to your article on board/ED relationship. I agree with Drucker's premise that the ED needs to be on top of everything. Here is a fine point. The ED is responsible for building relationships that benefit the organization whether it is with the board president, outside constituencies or partners. Therefore, I never thought it was much different coaching/working with the board than with the staff. The lines of authority may differ, but it's about the need to build and manage relationships - managing up and down and sideways. And it is exhausting! That being said, having a good set of board policies is essential, but doesn't substitute for also building relationships with each and every board member to the extent possible.

-- submitted by Anonymous on November 16, 2010 at 05:37:00 PM.

The difficulty with this, of course, is that the balance must be struck differently depending on the size of the staff and the organization. In small non-profits, board members are often asked to take on tasks that in larger organizations would be handled by a staff member. Thus board members become both overseers of policy AND directly responsible for implementing those same policies. It takes a very disciplined and self-aware board member to keep their roles as board members and staff volunteers distinct. For small non-profits whose ED is the only (under)paid staff, these theoretical distinctions between oversight and management are quite abstract and difficult to implement.

-- submitted by Anonymous on November 16, 2010 at 06:09:10 PM.

Wow, hot topic! Thanks Jan for getting this discussion going. It's a fascinating and multi-layered issue. As a nonprofit executive that works with many boards and that sits on nonprofit boards as well, I have many perspectives on micromanaging, and yes, as one anonymous person added, size of nonprofit has much to do with this topic. And, I do think that lack of trust is another key reason that micromanaging occurs.
I try to encourage boards to stop and ask themselves whether the thing they are focusing on has to do with resources. Resources, as we know, are people (time), money and assets. Board’s should focus on resource discussions, but they should also ask the following questions. Does this meet mission? How are we going to pay for this in an ongoing manner? Who will benefit from this? How will be measure the outcomes?

There will always be mix-matched cultures too. Board’s do not do enough work to be clear about the “type” of board they are when recruiting. I often see board members recruited to mature, governing boards that micromanage because that was the culture of the last board they were on.

Anyway, thanks for the discussion topic Jan!
Diana Kern, VP NEW(Nonprofit Enterprise at Work)

– submitted by Anonymous on November 16, 2010 at 07:26:56 PM.

Having served as a board chair and as a board member for many years, I think you have hit on a major issues for non-profit governance. I would like to give a little perspective from the board’s side. As board chair I felt I was being very careful not to micromanage the ED who worked for us. I felt the board’s role was well defined and tried very hard to get our board to understand that role and to allow our ED the authority to do her work. However, when I asked the ED for more information or for her to explain why she had made the decisions she had, her first response was always to push the “you’re micromanaging” button. She unilaterally launched a program of ”shared leadership” which boiled down to the board sharing leadership with the ED, but the ED did not share any leadership with the board or with other staff. Talk about a long, long, long year and a half. I have not again served on a board since my term ended.

The point about building relationships is an important one because no matter how well the policies are written or how well the board and staff understand their role, there will always be instances when we all feel a particular decision falls under our authority. It is important that the board and ED remember that they are all on the same side. If there is a conflict over who’s in charge, both sides need to reevaluate their position and work together to find what is best for the organization. Try not to get tangled in the trap of defending your right to decide. Does it really matter who makes the decision? Isn’t it the point to make the best decision possible? ED’s also have to trust the board’s insights, knowledge and skills. If your board is at odds with you over what is being done, why? Did you not give them enough information on the issue? Are you overstepping? Is there a history of conflict? If this is a membership organization, are members complaining to the board about something? Are board members being accused of not doing their job by someone? Have you made decisions that have created problems for board members in the public or with members? Are other employees unhappy and taking their grievances to the board? Have you used the "micromanagement" button too many times?

ED’s can never win in a battle over authority. The board, if pushed into a corner, always holds the trump card—they are the employer. The relationship should never get to that point. Fighting over who is overstepping or micromanaging is never productive and always leads to a breakdown in relationship and either the loss of good board members (the micromanagers rarely quit) or the ED’s leaving.

– submitted by Anonymous on November 17, 2010 at 08:44:54 PM.

Anonymous, thank you for some smart comments. Jan

– submitted by Jan Masaoka on November 20, 2010 at 12:56:03 AM.

I agree with these comments, but would simplify them for EDs and invite reactions: Any Board member should be able to ask any employee or member any question, be briefed on any matter or see any document produced in the organization at any time. This is not micromanaging. Micromanaging begins when Board members start giving directions to staff or members. The Board has only one employee: the ED or CEO. Individual Board members have no authority: the Board has authority only when they act AS A GROUP. Individually, however, they must have the authority to ask any question and understand any organizational action or policy.

– submitted by Anonymous on August 29, 2011 at 12:06:40 AM.
I concur with the lack of trust being a potential underlying issue to the micromanagement symptom. But I also want to underscore that, sadly, micromanagement also happens when well-intentioned board members have no idea what their job is as a board member. Board training is a crucial ingredient to avoid having well-meaning board members “jumping in and trying to help” with what they think needs to be done.

– submitted by Anonymous on November 18, 2010 at 06:03:26 AM.

This article does a good job of sorting out the surface tension between board and executive, but avoids the deeper issue of unhealthy organization structures. The ditch digging photo is a funny way to capture most nonprofits. But it also does a good job of illustrating my overall concern with accepted nonprofit governance structures. We all need to ask: Is this really the best way for these people to dig this ditch? Another example in this article struck me as holding more illustrative power than the author tapped. The grant proposal draft metaphor doesn’t work for “group responsibility.” Each and every board member would (and should!) have a different opinion about that draft. So how could these individuals respond effectively as a group to that draft, or any decision, if they are not supposed to act as individuals? Besides avoiding the inefficiencies of group responsibility, this article also misses the dangers of groupthink. The horror stories described above all fall into groupthink where one charismatic group member learns the group system and manipulates the others to act as a group towards his or her goal, consoling each of them that it’s a group decision, not their individual responsibility. In fact, a deeper look at this photo might show us how extraordinary it is that many nonprofits actually dig their ditches (accomplish their missions), as a team, with honor and grace. Unfortunately, most board members are perched at the edge of their ditches with nothing better to do than look for ways to disrupt the work, knowing they will have no individual responsibility for their disruptions. Thankfully, my organization One Street, was founded by people who suffered through group disruptions of nonprofits so our bylaws are written to prevent groupthink and ensure that each individual leader thinks critically and takes personal responsibility for their decisions. And because this principle is entrenched in our bylaws, we have no need for stacks and stacks of patchwork policies as described above. I hope someday we can offer our healthy model to many more nonprofits who are eager to dig their ditches efficiently, and as a team. Sue Knaup, Executive Director www.onestreet.org

– submitted by Sue Knaup on November 23, 2010 at 06:45:00 PM.

One of the commenters stresses the importance of relationships, and I would go one step further in saying that one lesson that I have learned over time is the importance of the chief executive establishing relationships with individual board members as well as the board as a whole. If a chief executive only interacts with board members at board and committee meetings, I think they run the risk of not creating individual relationships that can be very valuable in all sorts of ways: tapping individual board members’ strengths and skills, allowing for more thorough communication and understanding...all leading to increased trust and the ability to use meeting time more productively and creatively. It takes time and planning, but I liken it to cultivating major donors - a chief executive who does not know what makes his/her board members tick is not likely to tap the individual’s and the collective board’s full potential. Bill Musick Tower Hill Resources Honolulu, HI

– submitted by Bill Musick on November 26, 2010 at 09:31:00 PM.

This a great thread! As a former E.D. of a small non-profit, I found the greatest governance challenge to be the constant need to re-prioritize with the board. Micro-managing became an issue when it was focused on non-essential activities, or when new initiatives crowded out core activities. This proved to be a constant challenge. If the board and staff are engaged on key activities that will directly result in sustainable mission delivery, then they are on the right track. If they are focused on the details and the “how” things are working (e.g. the time of day something is done, the type of paint used at workdays, the colors on a brochure, budget questions for items under $100, etc) then an organization is at risk of both failing to achieve its core goals and de-motivating staff. Additionally, this was the single greatest difference I encountered from my tenure in the for-profit sector, where performance and outcomes were always paramount. To be fair, staff are just as likely to get into the details without constant attention to the strategic plan. Regarding policies -- good policies are like good laws, they work as long as people follow them! Megan Thomas

www.firsthandcoaching.com

http://blueavocado.org/content/what-micromanagement-and-what-isnt
Agreed with "Anonymous" on Nov. 16. Policy Governance is a great, holistic system for establishing clear criteria for success for both board and staff. It has the board establish clear expectations -- based on engagement with the ownership plus good information and the board members' values -- and then the board checks in a regular, evidence-based way to see if those criteria were met. One of the beauties of this system is that when this level of clarity around expectations is achieved, everyone -- board members and staff -- can really focus on achievement and performance (as opposed to politicking, red tape, micromanaging, etc.). I can't emphasize enough how cool and happy-making it is when you're able to maximize accountability AND freedom at the same time!

Sure, Policy Governance boards will want an Executive Director who is competent. And... don't all boards want that? (Videos on board/staff role clarity at http://www.youtube.com/user/BrownDogConsulting)

Excellent subject - needs repeating every so often.

If a Board is clear on the governance model that is in place and the ED is very clear on his or her executive limitations and the problem lies with the Chair micromanaging; how can the ED safely bring this to the attention of the board when this is an issue? Micromanagement by a Chair can easily turn into harassment of the ED when this problem stewes for too long. If the ED has clearly followed the exec limitations and is clear that this is only a battle of personal opinion of how things should be done what choice do administrators have? Many ED's are scared to come forward when this is an issue and often things just get swept under the carpet. How can an ED safely address this without fear of retribution? Should non profits not address this major issue then administration will always be in a state of flux however staff never feel safe enough to bring this to light. In the end nobody wins and often you lose very good staff because of it.

In my 35 year career as a female ED in various areas of the country, I left two of six organizations for which I worked for many years solely because of a "power hungry" board chair who essentially wanted my job. In both cases, the chairs were also female. So I am always tentative when a new female chair steps into her role until I get a feel for her frame of reference.

The difference between staff and board is significant. Staff eat, sleep, dream, worry, and plan our lives around our organizations. Board members float in and out of an organization, at will. Some more committed than others, but essentially they all have lives outside the organization and given time, will eventually move on to other things, even when we beg them to remain.

Building the relationship help cement the postive strides a good chair/ED team can make on behalf of the organization. If it is not working... continue to work hard, smart and effectively, stay under the radar and don't cause the chair to target you...... and eventually they too, will move along. If not.... it's time to get a new pair of walking shoes.
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