In Praise of Micromanagement

The subject of micromanagement came up in a recent Dilbert comic strip.

"I can't wait to see the changes I asked you to make on the interface," Dilbert said.

"I haven't started yet," his colleague replied. "I had a few questions. In the meantime, I only did work for people who yelled at me every day. Micromanagement has a bad reputation, but I'm not too proud to say I need it."

I think some of the people you work with may need micromanagement too.

What Is Management?

Setting "micro" aside for the moment, what is management anyway? I read recently that *management is the process of setting and achieving organizational objectives*. OK, that's an eloquent, high-level definition, but I'm not sure it addresses most managers'—and most employees'—day-to-day needs. Something else I read recently is *if you can't set goals, you can't manage.*

I agree with that statement, but its author was talking about long-term strategic goals, and very often, the real issue is short-term operational management. Here's what I think is a better definition anyway: *Management is making sure that everything from the big things to the little things gets done and done right.*

Micromanagement may have a bad reputation, but I'm not sure there's a better word to encompass that definition. So with that in mind, I want to attempt a change in attitude via a change in language. Micromanagement is a good thing. *Overmanagement* is admittedly a bad thing. But anything less than the right amount of management is *undermanagement*, and that's a bad thing too.

The Underside

In my experience, most printing salespeople are undermanaged. They're allowed to set their own schedules and their own priorities. They're expected to set their own goals, and to motivate themselves to reach those goals. And, boy, it is ever not working!

I routinely ask printers to rate their salespeople on a scale of 1-10. The most frequent answer is 7 or 8, which is good-but-not-great, and I also worry that many of those 7's and 8's are overly generous ratings. Beyond that, I hear a lot more 5's and 6's than 9's and 10's, and obviously, a 6 or below needs a lot more management—or a pink slip! But let's not talk about fixing "bad" today. Instead, let's talk about taking "good" closer to "great," because that's where you're likely to get the best return on your investment of time and energy.

The Plan

I suggest a simple plan. Schedule a meeting with your salesperson for tomorrow, first thing in the morning. Ask one question: "What is your plan for today?" Then talk about that plan, putting most of the emphasis into three areas: (1) Does your salesperson's plan represent a full day of business-building activity? (2) Do you agree with his/her priorities? (3) How can you help your salesperson to deal with any problems that he/she is likely to face today? Those can be sales problems; for example, how to convince someone to set an appointment or how to close a sale. They might also be internal/production problems. You may not always have all the answers, but two heads are usually better than one, and if nothing else, you want to know about the problems.

The second stage of this plan is to do it again the day after tomorrow, and every day after that, adding one more element. After the first meeting, you start each subsequent meeting with a different question: "How did yesterday go?" Specifically, you want to know if your salesperson followed the plan you agreed upon the day before—in other words, whether *everything from the big things to the little things got done and done right!* This is an opportunity to talk about how the previous day's problems were resolved, or not resolved. Then you continue into the plan for the current day.

In my experience, that most salespeople need this sort of micromanagement, at least until they prove to you that they're capable of producing at a 9 or 10 level without it. Some of your non-sales employees may need it too.

Bottom Line: Micromanagement is a good thing. *Overmanagement* is a bad thing. *Undermanagement* is a really bad thing!