

How to Help (Without Micromanaging)

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Summary. Extensive research shows that when employees get hands-on managerial support, they perform better than when they're left to their own devices, but unnecessary or unwanted help can be demoralizing and counterproductive. So how do you intervene... [more](#)

“Micromanagement” is a dirty word in today’s workplaces. Bosses who intervene too often or too extensively in their subordinates’ activities get a bad reputation, and most forward-thinking organizations have come to value employee autonomy more than

oversight. Research shows that people have strong negative emotional and physiological reactions to unnecessary or unwanted help and that it can erode interpersonal relationships. Even the U.S. Army general George S. Patton, a leader in one of the most traditional command-and-control groups in the world, understood the danger of micromanaging: He famously said, “Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity.”



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Managers shouldn't be completely laissez-faire, however, especially when subordinates aren't colocated, as is the case for many during the global Covid-19 pandemic. People doing complex work often need more than just superficial advice or encouragement; they need assistance that is both well-timed and appropriate to their issues—and providing it can be challenging without opportunities for serendipitous encounters in a physical office. Extensive research indicates that pervasive helping in an organization correlates with better performance than letting employees go it alone does. So how can you give subordinates the assistance they need without undermining their sense of efficacy and independence?

Over the past 10 years we've been studying how leaders effectively offer help without being perceived as micromanagers. We have observed and talked to people inside various companies, including a prominent strategy consulting firm (we'll call it ConsultCo) where we interviewed partners who were named by top management as exceptional hands-on leaders. At a design consultancy that's well-known for its helping culture (pseudonym: GlowDesign), we conducted a large-scale qualitative

study using daily diaries and in-depth weekly interviews with help givers and receivers. And we've run two behavioral experiments in the laboratory, exploring how 124 groups responded to differently timed interventions when asked to make decisions about opening a fictitious restaurant.

Together those projects have yielded important insights into how managers can better assist their employees. As a starting point, your employees need to know that you're willing to offer help—and they must feel comfortable asking for it. Additionally, you need to have a baseline understanding of their work and its challenges, as well as time and energy to give. But just how and when should you roll up your sleeves to get involved in employees' work? We've uncovered three key strategies for being a hands-on boss without micromanaging: (1) Time your help so it comes when people are ready for it, (2) clarify that your role is to be a helper, and (3) align the rhythm of your involvement—its intensity and frequency—with people's specific needs.

Time Your Help Wisely

When involving yourself in your employees' work, timing matters, but not in the way you might expect. Conventional wisdom suggests that heading off potential issues is the best strategy (recall Benjamin Franklin's famous adage "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure"). We've found, however, that the leaders who are viewed as the most helpful don't try to preempt every problem or dive in as soon as they recognize one. Instead they watch and listen until they believe their subordinates see the need for help and are ready to listen receptively. They understand that people are more willing to welcome assistance when they're already engaged in a task or a project and have experienced its challenges firsthand.

GlowDesign, where we spent two years studying leaders' helping behavior, offers some illustrative examples. In one case, a manager checked in on a shorthanded team and discovered what he felt were fundamental issues with the project's scope. But rather than jump in right away with assistance or advice, he simply told the project lead, Violet, that he was available. (All names in this article are pseudonyms.) "I offered help," he told us, but "it took a while for Violet to figure out how she could use me." She ultimately asked him to weigh in on several key matters.

Those known as great helpers at ConsultCo were similarly careful about the timing of their help. One of the firm's partners, Adriana, described her approach when some of her people were struggling with their work. She told us that even before she met with them, "I thought the team was on the wrong track. [But] when I got in the room, I listened. I limited my questions to clarifying questions to make sure I understood what they were saying. There are two reasons I did this. One is that these are smart people, and I have enough respect for them—even the most junior-tenured people in the firm—to know that the work they do is very valuable....Second, I thought they would be more willing to rethink [their ideas] if they had a chance to first explain what they were doing." By the end of the meeting, the team seemed ready for Adriana to offer suggestions, so she did.

Our experimental research—studying those 124 groups making entrepreneurial decisions—confirmed the importance of lending a hand at the right time. We found that when advice was given in the course of teams' work, *after* problems had emerged rather than beforehand, members understood and valued it more. This led them to actually use the help, improve their processes, share more information, and make objectively better decisions than did groups that received more instruction at the start of their discussions.

What prompts employees to welcome assistance may vary from situation to situation. But we'd counsel managers not to provide input without first allowing those they supervise to gain knowledge of the task and express their views on it. In many cases, a well-timed cure may be better than that ounce of prevention.

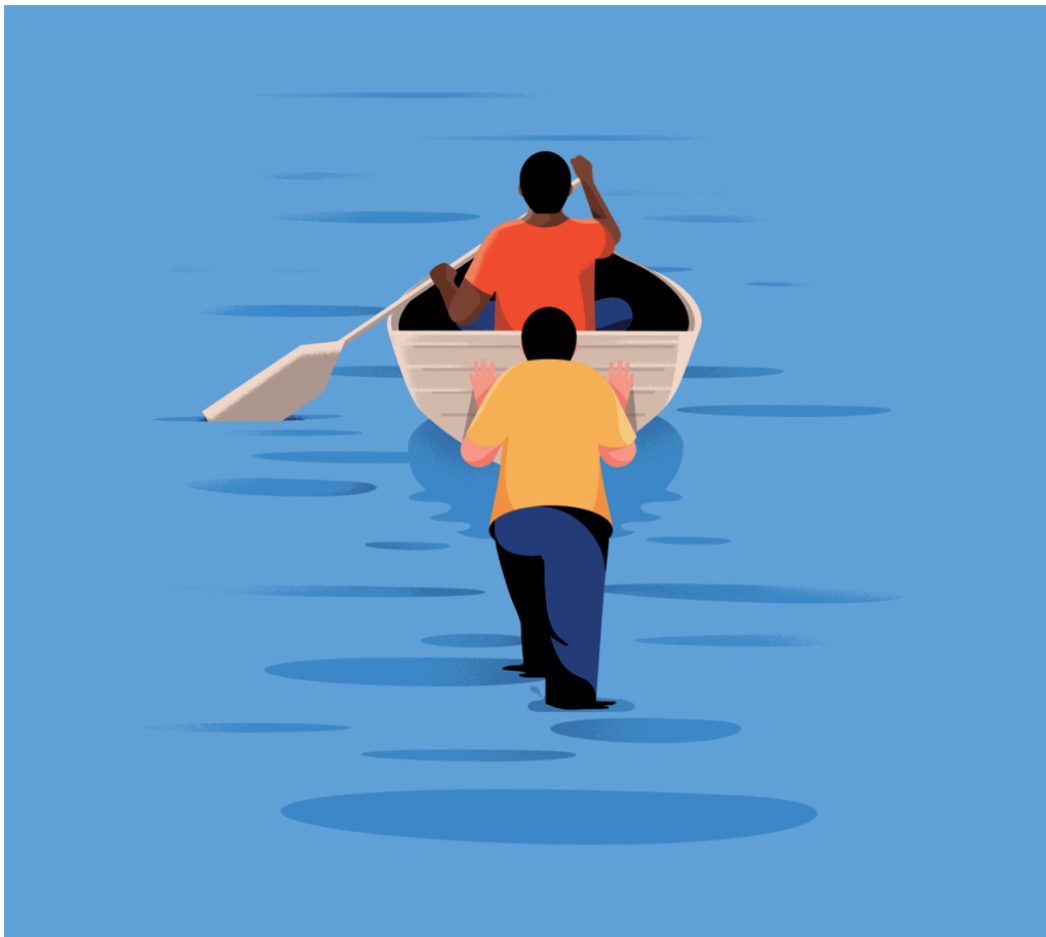
Clarify That Your Role Is to Help

Even if the timing is right, intervening can go wrong when it isn't clear why you are getting involved. Managers play a lot of different roles, and their responsibilities include evaluating employees and doling out rewards and punishments. This power dynamic can get in the way of effective help. When bosses step in, their involvement can imply that people are messing up in a big way. That's why employees often hide or downplay issues and fail to solicit guidance. They can become unreceptive to the assistance, defensive, or demoralized, which hinders creativity and performance. Therefore, as a leader at GlowDesign told us, managers must be careful "not to go in there and create so much anxiety that you're in a worse spot....It can be like 'Here's the boss, and gosh, he's really unhappy with what we're doing.'"

Because seeking and receiving help can make people feel so vulnerable, managers need to clarify their roles when intervening in employees' work. They should explain that they are there to help, not to judge or take over. They need to foster what Amy Edmondson, a professor at Harvard Business School, calls psychological safety—an environment in which interpersonal risks are encouraged.

The importance of this framing was evident at GlowDesign. We found that leaders rated as particularly helpful took pains to persuade subordinates that they were stepping in for only one reason: to support their employees' work. Consider what happened when a team tasked with one of the firm's biggest

projects was hobbled by several members' personal issues. The project leader, Aaron, emailed one of Glow's senior partners, Gary, for advice. Gary was the client's main contact at the firm, but Aaron knew him only slightly and was surprised when he volunteered to fly from Chicago to New York to help. Many people would balk at accepting such an offer, worrying that top managers lacked confidence in them. But Gary was careful to emphasize that he would not supplant Aaron as the person in charge. "I'm not here to change the project," he said. "I'm just here to help you...to be your crutch."



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Across our research, we found that when managers clarified their intentions, as Gary did, employees were more candid about the problems they faced and more willing to accept help and work collaboratively to solve them. Don't assume that employees concerned about performance reviews and pay can accurately

discern your intentions. No matter how supportive you are as a boss, they won't forget that part of your job is to monitor and assess them. So when you start taking a stronger hand in their work, assure them that you're there as an adviser, not an evaluator. Be explicit about what you are trying to accomplish with your intervention.

Align the Rhythm of Your Involvement to People's Needs

To give people useful help, leaders must take the time to fully understand employees' problems, especially when the issues are thorny. If the work is complex, creative, and cognitively demanding, you'll need to engage deeply. But that means more than delivering help with the right content. It also means allocating time and attention in a pattern that works for receivers. We call this the rhythm of involvement, and it will vary depending on whether employees need intensive *guidance* in the short term or intermittent *path clearing* over a prolonged period.

Concentrated guidance is required when employees encounter hurdles that can't be overcome with quick feedback or a few hours of input. In such scenarios, leaders collaborate closely with subordinates in long sessions tightly clustered over a few days. That might sound like the definition of micromanaging. Indeed, bosses who assisted in this way without ensuring that their people were ready for it and without clarifying their helper roles were perceived as taking over. Employees felt undermined, with morale and performance suffering as a result. But when managers instead began with the other strategies we've described, this kind of time-intensive deep help was heartily welcomed.

For example, Hazel, a senior manager at GlowDesign, successfully guided a team as it moved from the research phase of a project to the design phase. Though she had attended a brainstorming session early on, she had been hands-off until the team leader asked for help. She obliged but spent the first day listening and

asking questions to better understand the project and ensure that the team was ready for her input. On the second and third days, she suggested a framework to help everyone identify and communicate their key insights, articulate ideas, and move forward. Her intense involvement over a short period wasn't viewed as a threat or a commentary on the team's performance; instead it eased the pressure enormously. Moreover, it marked a turning point for the project: The work done during those three days became the foundation of the client presentation, which led to contracts for several additional projects.

In the second form of help, path clearing, leaders offer assistance in briefer, intermittent intervals when employees face ongoing problems. For instance, if your team is short-staffed, you might stop by every few days for a half hour or so, to help with whatever needs doing—whether it's participating in an important client call or simply ordering lunch during a long work session.

Path clearers maintain enough general knowledge about the project to understand emerging needs but seldom dig into the core work. Rather, they look for smaller ways to give relief to their subordinates. That's how Kaya, a partner at ConsultCo, helped the members of one team who were so busy struggling to meet client demands that they barely had time to update her on what was happening. She found ways to take pressure off them in short, scattered bursts: by talking to individuals about their concerns, cleaning up the team's shared calendar, and handling meeting logistics with the client.

Leaders trying this approach shouldn't underestimate the importance of staying informed about the work. Those who fail to do so can provide only shallow criticism or vague advice when they drop in—interactions that Glow designers derisively referred to as “swoop and poops.” So keep abreast of the issues your employees are facing, and step in when you see roadblocks you can remove.

Our research suggests that leaders can help their employees in hands-on and meaningful ways—without being accused of micromanaging—if they pay careful attention to timing, articulate their helping role up front, and match the rhythm of their assistance to receivers’ needs. These guidelines are especially important when teams are physically separated, as so many have been during the ongoing pandemic. When workers aren’t colocated, managers are more likely to either check in too frequently and interrupt their colleagues’ flow or fall out of touch and leave employees adrift. People working from home or from any separate location can easily feel isolated, confused, or even abandoned. Thus being a hands-on manager in such situations is critical; it not only improves employees’ performance but also lets people feel supported and connected.

However, intervening in your team’s work while ignoring any one of our guidelines can render your help ineffective or even harmful—potentially worse than doing nothing. Offering preemptive advice can keep people from seeing its value. Failing to frame your role can allow subordinates to feel threatened and undermined. And using the wrong rhythm—especially not allocating enough time to be an effective guide or path clearer—can lead to superficial or off-target feedback or be perceived as an invasion, engendering cynicism rather than gratitude. You can easily avoid these micromanagement traps, however. Follow the three strategies we’ve outlined and become a boss who truly comes through for employees when they need it most.

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