

leadership instalments

Power as Control

By Dan Gaynor

ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL EXPRESSIONS OF LEADERSHIP power is found in the way leaders exert control. While appropriate control is essential to every team, many leaders control too much, many others too little. Excessive control creates significant problems, insufficient control creates equally significant, if different problems.

Learning when to control and when to release is a cornerstone of leadership development. Career progression for many leaders stalls because they are unable to release the control of front line duties to step into more senior leadership activities, like shaping corporate culture, promoting vision or building key external relationships. If you cannot release control as a front line supervisor, you won't be able to do it as a middle manager or vice president, so entry-level leadership is really an apprenticeship for the big job some day.

Excessive control comes with a label - we call these leaders micro-managers. We've all worked for one at some point, and it's not a very satisfying experience. Whenever a leader controls what no longer needs control, he or she creates problems. The rule of thumb is teach and control until a subordinate is competent, and then release and start teaching something new. When no one ever seems to reach competence, it's a good bet the leader is a micro-manager. Micro-managers control in the extreme. They send two damaging messages: I don't trust you, and I don't believe in you. When people feel we don't have confidence in them, they default to doing what they've been told to do and nothing more. All initiative disappears. Initiative, by its very nature, entails risk, and people don't take risks when leaders don't believe in them. Micro-managers kill initiative. And smart people won't stay in a workplace where they don't get to exercise initiative. Too much control doesn't work.

Leaders who don't exert enough control can set people up to fail by allowing them freedom they are not yet ready for. This can break confidence in a different way and set back professional development. Without appropriate control, values and accountability can also suffer. Too little control doesn't work.

The skillful leader adjusts control for the individual and the situation, always working to develop more independent team members. People with less experience need more control, but as



their skills develop good leaders provide increasing freedom. Freedom is a productivity multiplier and a confidence builder. In this way, leadership is a lot like parenting. The goal of good parenting is to teach our children what they need to know to become capable productive independent adults. The goal of leadership is to develop confident capable increasingly independent team members.

Situationally, times of crisis also demand more control. When the stakes are high, people want leaders who can and will lead with a firm grip. At these times, tightening control is evidence of the strength we all look for in leaders.

Every leader has a bias, some tend to be more naturally trusting and less controlling, others tend to be less trusting and more controlling. Want to know where you are on the spectrum? Consider where you make your mistakes. When I make a mistake, it's almost always because I have given someone too much freedom too soon. I have to be mindful of this. Learn how to exert appropriate control for the situation and you've taken another important leadership step.

Discussion Questions:

1. Think about the last micro-managing leader you worked for. How did this leadership style affect the way you felt about your time at work?
2. When you make a mistake, is it exerting too much or too little control?

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