

MICROMANAGEMENT: THE ENEMY OF STAFF MORALE

BY JOHN A. SHUFORD



Staff morale is a major concern in corrections (see *Corrections Today*, March/April 2019).¹ A major contributing factor to low staff morale is micromanagement. Employees do not like to be micromanaged and most supervisors do not want to be known as micromanagers. Micromanagement disempowers, demotivates and disengages staff. It causes a rift between management and staff resulting in staff resisting any changes administration wants to make, which often leads to frustration and stagnation. Consistently, staff have reported that the three most common reasons for leaving the correctional service are conflicts with co-workers, poor supervision and feeling that management does not support them; all of which are significantly impacted by micromanagement.

Low staff morale is contagious and results in a lack of trust and respect, high callouts and no-shows, favoritism, poor/ineffective communication, high turnover, procedures not being followed, excess use of force and corruption. This results in high stress and can lead to suicide, depression, sleep disorders, anxiety and other mental health conditions. High turnover is especially troubling because it usually means working short-staffed and with inexperienced co-workers. The bottom line is that micromanagement is a serious issue; it is the enemy of staff morale and should be addressed as a serious security issue.

Identifying micromanagement

A micromanager is a manager who exercises excessive and unnecessary control over staff, gets involved in the details of their work, often overrides their decisions and is not open to feedback from them. They strongly believe in a top-down decision-making process and feel they know how to do their staff's work better than staff does. They frequently ask for updates, demand to be copied on correspondence and may enjoy correcting what they see as mistakes. Ironically, this need to exercise control eventually leads to less control, because the important tools of leadership become less available, i.e., motivation, two-way communication, staff creativity and ingenuity, and collaboration.

With micromanagement, "morale suffers as subordinate employees feel the administration does not trust their ability and competency as corrections officers, effectively driving a wedge between management and subordinates. This causes 'disengagement' of the employee as he or she feels controlled and not led. Productivity and creativity suffer as the subordinate employee tends to only do what is necessary to get by and consider their work as only a job and will not make suggestions on any improvements that could be made. An employee puts in time but little else, and his apathy affects not only his own productivity, but also that of his colleagues. Micromanagement tells an employee that you do not trust their work or judgment."²

Micromanagers lack leadership skills and tend to:³

- Resist delegating work
- Immerse themselves in the work assigned to others
- Look at the details instead of the big picture
- Discourage others from making decisions
- Get involved in the work of others without consulting them
- Monitor what's least important and expect regular reports on miscellany
- Push aside the experience and knowledge of colleagues
- Lose loyalty and commitment
- Focus on the wrong priorities
- Have a demotivated team →

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Some examples of micromanagement are:

- A warden sent an email to staff, without any discussion with the department head, indicating that he had observed them spending a lot of time talking to each other and that this was an office setting and not a social gathering. He requested they remain in their offices, working. The department head had been successfully working with her staff to improve morale and this memo devastated her efforts. It also undermined her position as department head. (Note: the warden complained about not having enough time to get all his work done.)
- One unit manager had an in-out board in his office, which was in a separate building one mile from the office of one of his sergeants. He required his staff to stop by his office so he could see them and move their markers on the in-out board every day they came to work and left. One day, the sergeant reported to the unit manager's office and spoke with him but forgot to move his marker on the in-out board. When he got to his own office, the unit manager called him and said he forgot to move his marker and demanded he drive back to the unit manager's office and move the marker, which was five feet from the unit manager's desk.
- A classic example of a micromanager is reported by a CO with many years' experience and very competent to handle all situations in his job. The supervisor "wants to be involved in every nut and bolt of the solution process of tasks he has given me to complete. He demands that you keep him informed of every step you are taking to solve the problem and he will give his input at each step. I even told him several times that he was wasting both our time. It would be easier for him to take care of it than to have me chasing back and forth to him detailing step by step what I was doing. He would not budge at all."

There may be any number of reasons a supervisor micromanages:

- Lack of a role model: their previous supervisors lacked leadership skills and were micromanagers, or they have not had a supervisor in their previous positions.
- The work culture does not support leaders: toxic or hierarchical power-based management; supervisors are undermined by management, politicians, union or a few powerful staff or inmates.
- Lack of trust in staff: staff are unknown to the supervisor or are known but have a history of corruption or ineptitude.
- Lack of training: little or no orientation; no employment position to prepare them for promotion to supervisor (like a team leader or corporal); or no soft skills training.
- Low self-esteem: they need to be in control and always right.
- Lack of confidence in their own abilities or they feel more comfortable continuing to do their previous job. They may have been promoted



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before they were ready for the authority and responsibility.

- Fear of looking bad or being disconnected and uninformed about the actual work at a CO level.
- Feel everything is too important to delegate; they cannot prioritize.
- Poor promotion process: inadequate assessment; no feedback-informed process; or favoritism.

To understand the negative impact of micromanagement on staff morale, it is helpful to consider the psychological needs of staff (see *Corrections Today* March/April 2019).⁴ There are four basic psychological needs of staff: connection or belonging to a group; meaning or being recognized for what you have contributed; control over one's life and circumstances; and fun or engaging in enjoyable activities. Micromanagement defeats all of these by disempowering, demotivating and disengaging staff. I have heard staff say they used to feel like family, but all of that is gone now with the changing work culture. A significant reason for the negative change in work culture is that policy decisions are being made reactively rather than proactively (i.e., looking at what we want to prevent rather than where we want to go). We need to stop looking in the rearview mirror and plan where we want to be in the future by developing a strategy and goals. Reducing or eliminating micromanagement can be one of the goals.

Limiting or eliminating micromanagement

Micromanagement is not easy to eliminate, especially when it is supported by an authoritarian work culture. It usually is not a conscious choice, but a learned behavior, even though micromanagers will quickly rationalize/justify why their behavior is necessary. Micromanagers lack empathy, which makes it very difficult for them to be leaders or team players. The reason for this is that they feel a sense of power, so they no longer have to depend on input from others

and can make decisions based on their own "correct" perceptions. This leads to them being less and less able to perceive people's traits and understand their motivations, resulting in them relying more and more on stereotypes and their own vision for navigation. This is difficult for an individual to change because it is not a cognitive process but a subconscious one. It generates from the limbic system in the brain, where emotions also originate. There is an actual physical change in the brain that occurs over time. Researchers found that it was difficult, if not impossible for people in power to change their behavior simply by thinking their way to change.⁵ It is especially difficult in an "us vs. them" environment, which increases anxiety, depression and decreases empathy. Further, "where there is less empathy in a culture, there is less democratic process and more totalitarian governing."⁶

The shift to seeing others not as different but as similar seems to be the strongest way to influence empathic resonance or insight.

In "Assessing Empathy," Segal, et.al, state that, "Experiential learning that taps into one's empathic neural system seems to be the most effective way to change one's feelings toward those who are perceived as different. The shift to seeing others not as different but as similar seems to be the strongest way to influence empathic resonance or insight. Moreover, the relationship is circular and mutually reinforcing increased empathic resonance with others induces increased understanding of others, and increased understanding of others seems to induce greater empathy for others. Thus, perhaps the starting point is increasing empathy, because that

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opens one up emotionally to understanding, and not just intellectually. It suggests a stronger way of learning.”⁷ This speaks strongly to the current corrections environment with its “silos” and the general feeling of a lack of connection.

Improving staff morale

In order to increase staff understanding of each other, they need to know each other beyond their roles. In the example above where staff used to feel like family, but now feel disconnected; they were previously encouraged to get together outside of work, but now are prohibited from doing so out of fear it would damage discipline. This myopic and unhelpful attitude needs to change, and more trust needs to be shown to staff. There may be a number of ways to bring the staff together, but one of the most effective and cost-effective ways is the Teambuilding Attitude Conflict Transformation (TACT) trainings, where staff learn important skills and learn about themselves and others in a way that enhances security and safety.⁸ This training is experiential, so it directly impacts the limbic or subconscious part of the brain. The training model is easily taught to line staff or training academy staff for use in orientation and in-service.

Another important step in combating micromanagement is that we need to acknowledge that we want more leaders and fewer managers. A leader leads people while a manager manages tasks. A leader realizes it is less about being in charge and more about empowering those in their charge. A leader coaches, generates enthusiasm, develops people and gives credit where a manager directs people, inspires fear, uses people and takes credit. A leader sees people with human needs while a manager sees positions to be filled. A useful concept is that of the servant leader. Some examples are: a lieutenant who is respectful and available to listen and answer questions; a captain who helps subordinates secure training that enhances their skill sets; a CO who treats inmates fairly, mentors new COs and helps coworkers pull things together in their areas; a warden

who shapes the facility’s culture for the benefit of both employees and offenders; a retired director who volunteers his time to set up a program that improves the character development of both staff and offenders.⁹



**When you see someone
without a smile,
give them one of yours.**

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We also need to prioritize staff training, especially supervisor training and preparation. Staff training should be a primary focus of our mission and not just an afterthought that we must comply with as inexpensively as possible. The level of sergeant may be the most important position in the institution, and it needs to be empowered. Currently, with a hierarchical focus, power resides at the top and by the time it gets to the sergeant, there isn’t much left. If we take a lesson from the military; they train and train and train. They put a lot of resources into their training capacity. Supervisors, at a minimum, should be trained in the following areas: listening, motivation, self-awareness, empathy, teambuilding, leadership, problem solving, negotiation, mediation, de-escalation, assertiveness, feedback and specific, measurable, appropriate, realistic, timely (SMART) goals. These are soft skills and are essential to emotional intelligence for being an effective leader. One three-day training that focuses on soft skills development and includes all the above areas is the Effective Supervisor Skills training.¹⁰

One of the soft skills that is especially important for minimizing or eliminating micromanagement is empathy; the capacity to identify and understand another’s situation, feelings and motives. It is essential for developing trust and creating and maintaining healthy

relationships. Without empathy, there cannot be any teamwork or leadership.

Some practical suggestions for developing empathy:¹¹

- Listen: truly listen with your ears, eyes and heart. Body language and tone are more reliable than words.
- Do not interrupt and pay full attention without any distracting behaviors like looking at your phone or the clock.
- Use people’s names as well as the names of significant others in their lives.
- Smile: when you see someone without a smile, give them one of yours.
- Encourage people, especially the quiet ones, to speak up at meetings.
- Give genuine recognition and praise: catch them doing something right. Do not gossip and never take credit for someone else’s work.
- Take a personal interest in people and show them you care.
- Imagine if you were “in their shoes.” What would that feel like?

If a supervisor feels they are getting too much “in the weeds” and micromanaging, the first step is to acknowledge this and try to understand what insecurity is motivating this behavior. Get feedback from staff to better understand what the team is actually experiencing. Next, prioritize your tasks to determine what you actually have to be involved in and what you can pass on to other staff. Then delegate those tasks, giving clear guidance on what you expect, including how you want to be kept informed. Let them decide how to accomplish those tasks and back away giving them enough space to accomplish them. Let them know you trust them and their abilities and if they make some mistakes, don’t get upset, but together plan how to correct them.¹²

When security is viewed from the long-term perspective and staff physical and psychological safety is in focus, staff morale must become a high priority. Currently, many DOCs are experiencing low staff morale and

much of this can be traced to inadequate preparation and training of our supervisors resulting in micromanagers. Micromanagement leads to a toxic work culture, which in turn promotes more micromanagement. We need to learn from the military and make training our priority, both in orientation and in-service. This will not only take more money, but a refocusing of our vision of what corrections can be — a profession serving the public good that is highly respected and valued.

ENDNOTES

¹ Shuford, J. “Empowering Staff; the Path to Improving Morale.” *Corrections Today*, March/April 2019

² Lt. Bob Bramblet, www.corrections.com, March 5, 2018

³ Martin Webster, “10 Signs of Micromanagement,” *Leadership Thoughts*, www.leadershipthoughts.com

⁴ Shuford, J. “Empowering Staff; the Path to Improving Morale.” *Corrections Today*, March/April 2019

⁵ Unseem, J. “Power Causes Brain Damage,” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2017 Issue

⁶ Segal, E. et. Al. “Assessing Empathy.” Columbia University Press 2017, pg. 101

⁷ *Ibid.* pg. 96

⁸ TACT is a program of Collaborative Resolution Services, Inc. Contact info@teamcrs.org

⁹ Spinaris, Caterina “Servant Leadership.” *Correctional Oasis* Vol.6, Issue 12. Desert Waters Correctional Outreach

¹⁰ Effective Supervisor Skills training is a program of Collaborative Resolution Services, Inc. Contact info@teamcrs.org

¹¹ Martinuzzi, Bruna. “What’s empathy got to do with it?” *Mind Tools* www.mindtools.com

¹² Knight, Rebecca. “Stop Micromanaging Your Team.” *Harvard Business Review*, August 21, 2015



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