

A Cure for Control Freaks

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We all like to feel we're in control, and a healthy modicum of control is essential for leadership. But a person who runs an organization cannot be a control freak. For too many people, control takes the form of an unhealthy need. As an industrial psychologist with more than 30 years of experience, I have counseled a large number of executives as they wrestled with issues of control. Those who became successful found appropriate, productive ways of exercising their control of the planning process without undermining their subordinates' autonomy. Those who did not compulsively nagged their subordinates about unnecessary things.

To understand how managers develop control neuroses, consider a phenomenon known as the Zeigarnik Effect. Psychologist Bluma Zeigarnik observed that people tend to remember incomplete tasks better than completed ones. Why? A task left undone causes tension, which facilitates memory and which is dissipated when the task is finished.

A company can't function unless management tasks are completed. So seasoned executives must have a limited tolerance for ambiguity. Yet no boss can control, much less undertake, every detail performed by his subordinates. Executives concerned about maintaining their authority without going overboard should ask three basic questions:

- **Which subordinates require close and constant observation?** New hires, of course, must be watched closely enough to make sure they can do the job. But once an employee has proved his competence, it's time to loosen the reins. For some managers, this isn't easy. I once advised a real estate executive who insisted that all his employees - regardless of their status, ability or length of service - inform him when they left or returned to the office. It took a lot to convince him that the exceptionally high turnover among his workers could be reduced if he learned to trust them.
- **At what stage of an assigned project should the boss get involved?** Answer: Only when the project is off target. Thus a skillful executive should assume that an employee has everything in hand until the worker asks for help. But there must be no surprises at the end of the project, if a midcourse adjustment by the boss would have avoided the damage. That means the subordinate must be secure enough both to handle at least the routine aspects of the task, and to ask for help if he needs it.

A client at a major training company frequently complained to me about the inability of his professional staff to follow orders. He would give someone an assignment to be completed by a certain date and forget about it until the deadline. Then he would ask about the status of the project, only to find that for one reason or another, it hadn't been completed. I was eventually able to convince him that although he had full confidence in his executives, he couldn't give up monitoring their work. He could delegate responsibility, but he had to retain ultimate authority. As one executive put it, "In God we trust; everyone else we occasionally audit"

- **How much power is the boss emotionally prepared to delegate?** It serves no purpose to delegate control if you're such a perfectionist that you can't find it within yourself to trust your subordinates.

When I was asked to advise the manager of a national outplacement firm, I learned that he could not help himself from checking the results at every office each day. Since he was based in New York, he could not obtain the information from his Los Angeles office until 9 p.m. Eastern time, after which he could do little but go to bed and sleep fitfully. My advice was that if he wanted to sleep well and lead a happy life, he should

close his Los Angeles branch and concentrate on his East Coast offices. Even though his firm's revenues were likely to decline, the manager would be less anxious in the evenings and capable of using those hours more fruitfully, whether for work or play.

Effective managers exercise control, but ineffective ones often overdo it. A wise man knows his own limits, but an even wiser man knows the right span and depth of control.

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