

# BOARDS THAT MICROMANAGE

**Before joining** It is not always easy for a board to see the line between management and governance. Board members need to consider themselves overseers, not implementers. Monitoring activities in the organization can be facilitated by clear reporting guidelines and deliberate clarification of the role of the board and the staff. When boards overstep the line between governance and management they can easily become micromanagers.

## WHAT IS MICROMANAGEMENT?

Micromanagement usually refers to a manager who is paying too much attention to details and is not focusing on the big picture. A micromanager is not able to delegate but feels obliged to get involved in the actual implementation of the work. When a board micromanages it steps out of its governance role and gets caught in the actual operations of the organization. It forgets that the chief executive is responsible for daily management according to the guidelines set by the board. Boards that micromanage want to both set strategic direction and actively oversee the implementation of the details.

## WHY DO SOME BOARDS MICROMANAGE?

- Governing does not usually create immediate rewards. Strategic developments take time to show results. Operational tasks often produce faster tangible outcomes and personal satisfaction.
- Sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between governance and management. Particularly in organizations with small staff, board members can easily get drawn into the daily operations.
- Board members may not understand their roles correctly. They likely are involved in management issues in their regular jobs — and that is what they know best.
- The board is missing strong leadership helping it focus on strategic issues.
- A chief executive steers the board astray by bringing management issues to the board for approval.
- The chief executive does not provide the board with adequate information, forcing the board to demand additional detailed reports.
- The board is not confident in the chief executive's ability to manage the organization.

## WHEN IS THE BOARD MEDDLING IN MANAGEMENT ISSUES?

Here are examples when the board is getting too involved in management issues. It wants to:

- Approve the choice of vendors, office equipment, software, or office furniture
- Participate in staff hiring and defining job descriptions (besides the chief executive's)
- Approve individual staff salaries
- Verify receipts and invoices
- Contact staff members directly for information — without explicitly being invited by the chief executive
- Have a key to the office to be able to come and go at will (unless because of small staff board members are involved in helping out)
- Create committees that duplicate staff work
- Send a board representative to staff meetings
- Publicly second-guess the chief executive's decisions

## WHAT CAN THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE DO?

When the board oversteps its boundaries, the chief executive needs to discuss the issue with the chair and work out a solution. The chair must remind other board members of their roles and how to communicate with staff. If the chair is micromanaging, the chief executive still needs to address the problem directly and remind the chair of the different responsibilities they both have. The chief executive can prevent the most flagrant board interventions by being

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proactive and not bringing detailed administrative issues to the board's attention and by ensuring that the board receives regular and concise information.

## ALL-VOLUNTEER ORGANIZATIONS

All-volunteer organizations have a special challenge in defining the board's role and avoiding micromanagement. When there is no staff, the board has to divide its time between governance issues and carrying out programmatic and administrative duties. This works out best when there is a clear distinction between the functions of the full board and the individual board members. The full board acts as the strategist. The board delegates specific tasks to individual board members who follow the guidelines set by the board.

Micromanagement can be avoided when each board member is aware of which hat he or she is wearing at each moment. A board member must be able to differentiate between drafting guidelines as a group member and then allowing a colleague to finish a task independently as assigned by the group.

## WHAT IS NOT MICROMANAGEMENT?

When a board hires a competent chief executive, it already has adopted the basics of role differentiation between board and staff. Delegating management duties to the chief executive also assumes that the board clarifies job duties. Like any supervisor, the board is there to support the manager, set performance expectations, and challenge him or her to propel the organization forward. How the staff gets its work done is the responsibility of the chief executive and how the board manages its own tasks is the responsibility of the chair. In a productive partnership the chief executive uses the board as a sounding board. The two end up formulating strategic decisions together while leaving the details of implementation to appropriate individuals.

References: [Govern More, Manage Less](#)