

# How to Deal With a Micromanaging Board



“Help! My board won’t stop micromanaging me!”

It’s probably the biggest complaint I hear from nonprofit leaders. That, or the board is entirely missing in action. I’m not sure which is worse.

A recent example? I just got an email from a reader who has been on the job for a year. The first six months was all about a financial crisis, but since then, the organization has been stable. The E.D. is ready to take on programming and grow the organization.

The board won’t let him.

He writes, “The board is not listening to me and wants me to do what they say. They keep piling work on me and I am desperate for advice.”

I know the word “micromanage” is familiar to a lot of you.

So here’s my advice.

## WHAT DOES “MICROMANAGE” MEAN, REALLY?

First thing’s first. I’m not sure we’re all using the same definition of “micromanage.” Sometimes I get complaints and I think, “Well, actually, that’s what the board is *supposed* to do.”

So let’s start with what I think **micromanage** actually means – specifically when it isn’t pretty. Here are some of the telltale signs:

- Focuses on tactics rather than strategy. As in the situation above, the board piles on “tasks” rather than approving strategy and letting the ED determine the best tactics to address the strategy and approve the goals.
- Board members take meetings with program stakeholders without prior knowledge of ED (yes, it happens way too often).
- Has executive sessions without the ED and is reluctant to inform him/her of the outcome (**more on why this is a bad idea.**)
- Regularly deals with staff directly and provides real instructions without kicking it around with the E.D.
- A Finance Committee that just cuts budget items without input from staff leadership.
- A Board Chair that will not allow the new Development Director to reach out directly to the major donors. She has to contact them first.

So *that’s* what a board that micromanages actually looks like.

## HOW DO ORGANIZATIONS END UP WITH BOARDS THAT MICROMANAGE?

There are two main reasons boards get out of hand like this.

- **Lack of understanding of board roles and responsibilities.** This is a recruitment process issue. And often ED’s are not as involved in the recruitment process as they should be. Here’s an unpleasant example. Great new board member is recruited. The ED has high expectations that she will “tip” the board in the direction of strategy and fundraising. Then the ED finds out that the recruitment committee told her this would be a great board because, “It’s a really easy board to be on – you don’t have to do much. “Here’s a post I once wrote about **how to build the board you want**. If you’re having board issues, read it.
- **Weak board chairs.** Without the support of the board leader, board members are not held in check.

## CAN THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR BE PART OF THE PROBLEM?

I need to be a compassionate truth-teller here.

Short answer: Yes.

First, ED's forget that the relationship between the staff and board must be one of shared leadership. If a staff leader is insecure and the power dynamics are askew, EDs can get into the very bad habit of asking "how high" when the board says "jump!" This is a recipe for disaster. Even without the board's to-do list, the ED is typically overloaded.

Second, ED's can actually give "permission to micromanage" to the board. Recently an ED offered the board chair an informational interview with the person she intended to hire as a deputy. The candidate was a hit. Enter last minute candidate #2. ED is conflicted – both good but now leaning toward #2. Sends candidate #2 to board chair. Board chair emphatically says "don't hire #2; hire #1."

What will E.D. do? Not sure, but I know she is ruining the day she involved her board chair in a hiring decision before she was clear on *the* candidate. She inadvertently gave her board chair permission to micromanage.

## IS IT ALWAYS BAD TO MICROMANAGE?

Compassionate truth-teller back again. No it is not always bad. But this is where definitions come into play.

When an ED is insecure, he may read close board involvement as "micromanage." But it ain't necessarily so.

Here's an example. A direct service organization I worked with had no choice but to move its location outside the perimeter of the neighborhood in which many of its clients lived. Many were outraged, none more than the founder of the organization, who was very public and vocal. He even stoked the outrage! Very, very bad. A crisis.

In this situation, you stay very close to your board and you want them as hands on as possible. You want their advice, their strategic suggestions and buy-in. Fair or not, the ED is in the cross hairs, the situation can change rapidly, and decisions need to be made quickly and thoughtfully. This organization needed a fully engaged (perhaps read as "micromanaging") board.

Another example is when a board member has a unique expertise that leads him to a position as a de facto member of your team. That happened during my time at GLAAD.

A board member played an absolutely critical strategic and *tactical* role in a very successful campaign. I *invited* him to micromanage our efforts. He knew more than we did.

## THREE HELPFUL WAYS TO KEEP YOUR BOARD OUT OF THE WEEDS

So now we understand what micromanaging looks like and when it's appropriate. For the majority of the time when it's *not* OK, how do you fix it when it happens?

- **Go ahead and let a micromanager have one big weed.** I heard this one at a summit I facilitated last week and loved it. Tell your board they can focus on the centerpieces but not the seating chart. Give them one place to exercise their micromanaging muscle.
- **Get a few of them busy doing something else.** There is a line from *The Music Man* –“The idle brain is the devil’s playground!” How can you *re-direct* the board members to a place where their micromanaging can be shifted and put to good use? Ad hoc committees with real charges can be a good strategy here.
- **Just be honest and explain.** *“So Mary Board Member, I know it means the world to you if we open a new homeless shelter in X neighborhood. I even understand that this was a motivation for you to join the board. But you see, Mary, we owe vendors hundreds of thousands of dollars. We have trouble even making payroll. If you can be a part of raising money to stabilize the organization, we stand a chance of realizing your vision.”* Slightly different spin on a real story. Several years later, the organization was ready, the shelter was opened, it was badly needed, we secured funding, and it became a legacy for that board member.

## AND WHAT IF THEY WON'T STOP MICROMANAGING?

- **Pray for a changing of the “Board Chair guard.”** You need a partner to shift the board’s tendency to color outside the line.
- **Recruit new board members.** Do these board members have limited nonprofit experience? Perhaps they don’t actually know better. If so, time to recruit some seasoned nonprofit board members to engage in some peer education.
- **Ask for a performance review.** Could they be trying to tell you something? Is it possible that they have lost confidence in you? Stop guessing on this one and **ask for a performance review**. Did you set goals with the board last year? Have you revisited them? How are you doing with them? If you are making headway, market your successes so they see you in a different light.

So, what do YOU think a micromanaging board looks like? Let’s hear your examples in the comments below. I’ll critique each one. Or share any work you have done to regain control and shift the dynamics. This is such a big issue for my readers. Thanks in advance.



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