

The Anxious Micromanager

Harvard Business Review | Julia DiGangi | From the Magazine (September–October 2023)



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Spotlight Series / Leading the Anxious Workforce

Why some leaders become too controlling and how they find the right balance

In my work with corporations, I commonly hear managers say they are stressed because they don't have enough "self-starters" on their team. But when I analyze their interactions, I find that the same people are often micromanaging their employees by, for example, asking too many questions, checking in too frequently, or giving too much advice. On multiple occasions, I've heard managers say to team members: "I want you to take total leadership on this project—just make sure you run everything by me first." Those messages send conflicting signals and cancel each other out. Confused employees wonder: "Wait, am I supposed to be self-starting or permission seeking?" Leaders are communicating "Start! No, wait—stop! No, start!" and then don't understand why the work never gains any momentum.

In theory, the command-and-control style has been on the decline for decades. Research and lived experience have shown that organizations perform better when leaders empower, encourage, and coach employees instead of delivering orders and meting out discipline. Nonetheless, that style—which I call "command energy"—remains prevalent, though perhaps less overt or aggressive. It's not so much that bosses are explicitly demanding, "Do this now!" Rather, they're communicating emotional energy that clearly signals I'm in charge, and you're

going to do it my way. (I also see this tendency in parenting and romantic relationships; there's often spillover between the styles people use at home and at work.) Command energy seems great in theory: If I can just get you to be different, then I can have what I want—how efficient!

The problem is that neurologically, such control cannot be sustained. The human brain is wired for independence. When management experts talk about things like employee choice, schedule flexibility, and bringing your authentic self to work, they are describing the brain's drive for autonomy. Regions in the brain, such as the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex and the insula, give rise to people's innate sense of self—the drive we all feel to have our own preferences, make our own choices, and express our own desires. Fighting human nature seems like a losing battle, so why do leaders continue to be so controlling? At root, the tendency to rely on command energy stems from a leader's own anxiety and lack of confidence. And as anyone who has worked for a micromanager can attest, this style of leadership tends to increase the anxiety of subordinates, too. That's especially troubling now, when rising percentages of the workforce say they already suffer from anxiety.

As a researcher and a clinician, I've studied the effects of chronic stress on the brain and on behavior and treated people for stress and trauma in business, community, and military contexts. Through that work, I created neuroenergetics, a model for understanding how the brain constructs our reality so that we can engineer our lives in more-satisfying ways. Neuroenergetics refers to brain energy—and as someone whose research involves putting people into MRI machines, I am not talking about brain energy metaphorically. We often imagine that the way we think and feel is some abstract, nonphysical thing. It's not. Your brain is, quite literally, the ultimate electrical machine, sending electrical impulses through your nerves at up to 260 mph and catalyzing more than 100,000 electrochemical reactions every second. The power of brain energy imbues our every word and action as leaders, and all too often, the result is command and control. In this article, I offer guidance for managers on harnessing that energy to lead in a much more effective and sustainable way.

Learning to Drop the Rope

Commanding other people to behave in a way that aligns with your interests while denying theirs cannot create strong teams, precisely because it goes against the way human brains work. While certain situations require command energy (military exercises; stopping your kid from running into a busy street), it rarely works in most realms of our lives. When parents don't create space for their child's emerging independence, it blocks the child from developing a healthy sense of autonomy and results in all-too-common parent-child conflict. In romantic relationships, command energy about seemingly minor things—how to do dishes or what show to watch on TV—can lead to deep disconnection. At work, command energy can be destructive in peer relationships and between supervisors and direct reports. People, naturally wired for autonomy, resent feeling "bossed around." I tell clients that command energy is like gravity—it's ubiquitous. Leaders hardly notice that they're using it, but it profoundly affects everything they do.

To identify instances in which you deploy command energy, look for what I call energetic tugs-of-war. Have you ever, in the face of someone's disagreement with you, repeatedly insisted that

you were right while they kept insisting you were wrong? Have you ever kept trying to prove them wrong? Or gotten into passive-aggressive standoffs with people, refusing to speak to them or answer their emails? In each of those situations, you're trying to pull the energy one way while the other person yanks it back the other way. At the core of energetic tugs-of-war is the (often unconscious) sense that "I don't feel confident believing what I believe, thinking what I think, or doing what I do until you get over here with me, on my side, exactly as I require." Unless you are talking about patently objective facts (what day of the week it is, what time the meeting is, and so on), there is no room for "being right" in constructive relationships. The tragedy of tugs-of-war is that both sides expend a ton of energy, but nobody goes anywhere. People get frustrated, and over time, the relationship decays.

The great news is you can end these cycles of relational pain quite quickly. What's the fastest way to end a tug-of-war? Drop the rope. Maybe you're starting to protest, "But why do I have to drop the rope? Why can't they drop the rope?" Dropping the rope may seem like dropping out of the fight. Giving up. Losing. It's not, though. Whoever voluntarily drops the rope is the leader.

To understand why, zoom out and look at tugs-of-war in the context of the leadership you want to create. Your role as a leader is to translate your vision into collective momentum—it's about moving people from where they are to where they have the potential to be. No one will follow you while they're busy fighting you. People get locked into exhausting tugs-of-war when they feel their independence is being disrespected—when their needs are ignored and their ideas devalued. Command energy is often the cause: Human beings can handle not getting their way; what they can't handle is feeling dominated.

As you begin to change your command energy, you'll see meaningful changes in the behaviors of those you lead.

Take Marc, a whip-smart, fast-talking tech-company executive with a personality like a trial lawyer's. (Marc is a real client of mine whose name I've changed to maintain confidentiality.) Marc's leadership strategy was to debate people until they agreed with him. Although this worked early in his career, he noted that in more-senior roles at some very successful start-ups, the "strength of people's wills and intelligence got sharper." Marc's old strategy of debating people until they capitulated no longer worked. "This made me think I needed to prove myself even more—so I tried even harder to tell people how to do things," he recalls. "I was determined to be the smartest guy in the room. Turns out, I was the clown."

After getting fired from three jobs in a row, Marc was devastated. Deep pain often provokes deep change, and with the help of coaching, he had two important realizations. First, he saw how much his sense of leadership depended on whether people agreed with him. He acknowledged that he felt "threatened" when others suggested even minor ideas that didn't perfectly mirror his own. Second, as long as he required this level of lockstep agreement, he could lead only a few people. It was feasible to get two or three people to perfectly agree with him—maybe five. But 15, 50, or 100? No way. Marc had big ambitions, and he realized that his command-and-control leadership style wasn't scalable in the smart, dynamic organizations he wanted to lead.

As Marc reflected on his leadership, he came to understand that he had been equating being right with being effective. Unconsciously, he had worried that if he didn't look smarter than everyone else, he would lose his influence. He told me, "Honestly, one of the most transformative things I've learned about leadership is the less I worry about controlling others, the more interested they are in following me." As he became increasingly focused on the substance of his work as opposed to agreement politics around it, he found that he could lead large groups of people quite effectively.

Marc ultimately landed at one of the largest tech companies in the world, where he oversees one of its largest divisions. It was his willingness to quit commanding—to drop the rope—that helped him become the powerful leader he aspired to be.

Address the Root Causes

To stop overrelying on a command-and-control style, leaders should look inward to understand what causes it. I have found that leaders are often surprised—and ultimately soothed—to learn that command energy typically comes from a lack of trust in themselves. We seek to control only what we do not trust. Do you try to command the sun to rise? No, because you trust it will. Do you ask to inspect a plane's engine before it takes off? No, because you trust that others have followed safety protocols. You might think you command other people because you don't trust them. In some cases, that will be true. But more often, the truth is that you don't trust yourself. You don't trust that your plans will be successful if people don't do things exactly your way, so you command through criticism. You don't trust that you've prepared your team sufficiently, so you command through micromanagement. You don't trust that your explanation was sufficient, so you command through overexplaining.

Leaders I've worked with are often relieved to learn they can stop paying so much attention to others and focus more on their own work. However, while many leaders are excited by what they could accomplish with less-controlled and more-empowered teams, they also naturally worry about what might happen if they start commanding less. One leader said to me recently that his team would become a "free-for-all." He was missing the central point: Releasing command energy does not mean creating a culture of irresponsibility. On the contrary, it means creating a powerful and inspiring culture of self-responsibility.

Once you start to understand how your own anxiety and insecurities fuel command energy, you can make big improvements in how you lead your team. However, cultivating a new leadership style requires a dramatic shift in thinking: Your job is not to control other people; it's to control yourself and trust that others will follow. Your job is not to be inspiring; it's to be inspired and trust that others will feel inspired too. When you embody the energy you want to see on your team, you become the energetic standard to which other people will calibrate. That's how emotions in relationships work. Neuroscience shows us that emotional energy is contagious—and you already know this is true. How often have you walked into a meeting in a good mood only to "catch" the bad energy of others in the room? Conversely, you may have been feeling down, walked into an upbeat room, and felt your energy rising.

This spotlight offers managers tools for helping employees—and themselves—address mental health challenges, improve their emotional well-being, and build a more supportive organization.

To strengthen your leadership, start paying closer attention to the state of your own emotional energy as the potential source of difficulty in relationships. Here are four steps to help you look inward.

Think of someone in whom you've invested a lot of time trying to command, convince, control, persuade, influence, or motivate. It might be an obstinate coworker who annoys you. Pick someone with whom it's important to have a positive relationship.

Identify two or three qualities about this person that deeply pain you. Let's say the individual is critical and judgmental.

Consider times when you've injected similar energies into your own relationships. In other words, where in your life are you being critical and judgmental? Notice if you have a defensive reaction to this step of the exercise, thinking, I'm not critical; they are! If you are pained by someone else's criticisms, chances are very good that you too exhibit critical energy yourself. Perhaps you know your own energy under a different name: demanding, precise, difficult to please, or exacting. Those labels may seem more palatable to you, but you're actually transmitting the same brand of energy that pains you to receive. It may not be easy to identify where and when you exhibit these traits: Blind spots and defensive mechanisms are real. If you struggle, ask people who are close to you where they see this energy emanating from you and weakening your relationships.

After you've determined where you're critical, monitor those settings and stop yourself if you lapse into the kind of energy you find painful to be on the receiving end of. Be aware that your command energy does not always show up in the same relationship where you've felt pain from it. For example, if your father has always been critical of you, you may not be critical of him—but you may criticize your employees. As you begin to change your command energy, you'll see meaningful changes in the behavior of those you lead.

To see these steps in action, consider the case of Marti, a successful executive and loving mother. (Like Marc, Marti is also a pseudonymous client of mine.) Despite her success, Marti frequently felt judged by her own mother. To combat the pain, Marti spent copious amounts of energy trying to convince her mother that she was successful enough, smart enough, and worthy enough. Marti began to realize that her own attempts to get her mother to hold a positive opinion of her were an insidious—and exhausting—form of command-and-control behavior.

As Marti and I worked together to deepen her emotional intelligence, I asked her what initially seemed like a strange question: Where was she too judgmental? At first, she was confused. It was her mother who was judgmental, she insisted, not her. But as we gently explored her life, Marti started to see plenty of places where she acted the same way her mother did. She recalled many conversations with her husband in which she complained about her colleagues' performance. She admitted that she micromanaged her team and worried that they couldn't be

trusted to do things to her standard. And she confessed to regularly judging other people's lives as she scrolled through social media.

Even though Marti's presenting complaint was about how her mother treated her, she agreed to focus on her own energy first—to think about the ways she was behaving contrary to her own values. As Marti became more emotionally aware, she stopped making judgments that violated her own values. As she made that shift, she became more accepting of not just her mother but also her colleagues, direct reports, and friends. By looking inward, Marti was able to lead more confidently and authentically.

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Many people compartmentalize their home lives and work lives, looking at them as separate spheres. As Marti discovered, they're not. To become a more effective leader, it's important to recognize that your leadership does not belong to any specific situation but, rather, is defined by the emotional energy you possess in times of stress. Becoming more centered, calm, and self-assured in one area of your life will often carry over to another. When you realize that your command-and-control leadership style stems from your own anxieties, you'll begin to pay closer attention to your own energy—and in doing so, you'll find the strength to drop the rope.

Editor's note: Julia DiGangi is the author of *Energy Rising: The Neuroscience of Leading with Emotional Power*, from which this article is adapted.