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MICROMANAGING VS. CREATING AUTONOMY

Welcome to *The Highly Valued Leader* podcast where I make it simple for leaders at all levels to amplify their value. My name is Mel Savage and I went from working in the mailroom at a small ad agency to making multiple six figures in senior management at McDonald's, to running my own multiple six-figure executive coaching business. I've had huge successes in my career and epic failures. All of it taught me the world-class leadership, mind and skill sets that I simplify for my clients and share with you on this podcast. I'll help you reset your leadership style, demystify the politics, and help you become the highly valued leader everyone wants on their team. Get ready for the most honest, direct and revolutionary leadership coaching you've ever heard. Let's simplify leadership together.

Hey there, leaders. Welcome back. Today, I want to talk to my micromanagers out there, the ones who are drowning in work, and the ones who need to know the details of everything and solve all the problems for all the people. I also like to give a lot of suggestions on how people should be doing their jobs or any such variation combination of that.

Today, we're going to be talking about how to create the balance between micromanaging your people and creating autonomy for your people. So even if you're not like a full-fledged micromanager, there's going to be some really great gems in here for you as well, because there's also a dark side to giving your people autonomy as well. Being too much of a micromanager and too hands-off could be a situation where you're not giving your people the support they need.

When you're too hands-off, you could be leaving your people alone, and they're not getting the growth that they could be getting with your support. So the goal for today's podcast is really to help you identify and create the balance between micromanaging and creating too much autonomy. That's what we're talking about today. We're going to talk about understanding the dark side of both; the dark side of micromanaging, the dark side of creating autonomy, and creating a mindset to help you find the balance.

I'm going to offer you three strategies to get you started transitioning from the reliable doer who knows how to do everything and wants control of everything, to a top-performing leader who really finds that balance between micromanaging and autonomy and grows the best people. So if you are a micromanager right now, part of the challenge is that you really gained recognition as being an unbelievably reliable and effective doer. You got so much value from people and people valued you so much for being that person because you're really great at what you do. And in fact, not a lot of people could do what you do as well as you do. That's why you got the leadership gig. And that's where your comfort level is.

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So now that you're in leadership, you really want to be good at this job but your comfort level is in doing things and getting things done. That's how you are sure that you're going to be creating value. And because you want to be good at your job, you end up being stuck, or sticking yourself into this doer gig and not moving out of that. You're afraid to move out of that because you're like, *'If I don't do this, how do I create value?'* You don't want to make a mistake in this new gig. You don't want to be seen as someone who didn't deserve this promotion, or that you're not up to it so you're afraid to make a mistake.

Not only do you not you don't want to make a mistake, but you also don't want your team to make a lot of mistakes, either, because you're worried that's going to reflect badly on you. So you just keep telling them what to do and exactly how to do it. Because you think that if they do it your way, no one's going to fail. And everything is going to be done right. And you're going to be seen as being capable of being a great leader. Things are going to get done in the best way possible because you know how to do that. You're the best executor of all time. And I get that that's what logically makes sense.

That's what I did in the beginning as well. So logically, it makes sense. But functionally, it's a disaster. Functionally, it's a frickin shit show if you keep doing that. Because while your way works for you, it doesn't work for everyone else. Imagine if your boss treated you that way and gave you zero room for your own creativity or pretended to give you some room for creativity, but then told you how to do it anyways. If you didn't actually come around to their way of what creativity looks like, how would you feel? Would you actually want to work with that person? I wouldn't.

Don't get me wrong, I was a micromanaging manager in the beginning, but I wouldn't want to work for me. Do you know why? Because it's really tough, like almost impossible, but really tough to grow under someone like that. You need to become a robot. You need to shut down your own creativity, which is not fun. Because if you're an independent thinker and you're someone who wants to grow, exercising your creative mind is what's important to you, because that's how you solve problems.

And if you're a leader of leaders, your job is actually to help people grow their creative thinking. So when you're a micromanager, you're actually limiting their ability to think creatively. So if you're working for someone who's on micromanager, you either need to just become a robot, or you have to work double hard to get your growth because you have to work around your boss somehow. And that's not fun. That's extra work for you. People don't want to stay in that situation very long.

Not only do really good people not want to work for you, but for the long haul, you become really exhausted because you're looking at everything. You're seeing everything. You're trying to solve every problem. You're trying to make sure everything's done the 'right' way and not just for your own stuff but for everyone else's projects, too. And you become this stopgap. The work slows down. The work by these demotivated people you create actually starts to slow down, and you're exhausted, which means you're not thinking at your best. You're not being able to make the best decisions.

This continuous, slow decline into burnout, right into failure, which is ironically, the thing you were trying to avoid in the first place by trying to control everything; what you're left with is burnout and a bunch of negative feedback from unhappy people who are working with you. It's not fun and it's not effective. It's not how you become a top performer. You're not going to get to where you want to go with that strategy. And I get the inclination. I really, really do. But I think the sooner that you realize it's not a great strategy for you, the sooner you're going to be able to exercise your creative mind to find a better strategy. Those are for the micromanagers.

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Now, there are those leaders that completely go the other way. They spend their time in meetings, they give people all the projects, and then they just disappear. They're not available to meet, give feedback, discuss challenges, clear the path for success, and be a sounding board because they're out there doing their own things and they just leave their people out there on their own to figure their own shit out. There is no net. There's no mentor. There's no leader.

I think this comes from a lot of different places. It could come from a good place, which is, *'Oh, this is what I think I'm supposed to be doing.'* So let's give people the benefit of the doubt if that's where you think you're supposed to be. That's kind of you've gone too far the other way. It can also come from a fear of making a mistake. It could come from the same place as micromanagers. Instead of being in this fight mode, when you're a micromanager, you go into this flight mode.

When you are creating too much autonomy for your people, where you're not sure what to do, you don't want to make a mistake, you have this fear of not knowing, so it's better to avoid the whole thing, and you just do your own thing, and that you let your people sink or swim for themselves so that you can feign ignorance like, *'I didn't know they were doing that… I wouldn't have suggested that… They didn't come to me…'* All that kind of stuff. But that also only lasts so long. You only get so many free passes with that strategy. Sooner or later, people are going to see that you're not accountable and you're not available to your people when you're just leaving them out there to sink or swim for themselves.

It reminds me of a story my mother used to tell me about when her father literally taught her to swim. It was back in the day when everything was black and white. This is back in her home country in Turkey. They went out into the sea on a boat and he literally just threw her overboard to see if she would sink or swim. You either figure out how to swim or you drown. Obviously, he wasn't going to let her drown, in this particular case. A lot of leaders will let you drown. Basically, it's a trauma. It was a trauma from my mother.

You might say, *'Well, she did figure out how to swim. It did work as a strategy.'* Yes, but it was totally traumatizing for her enough that she is still telling me this story 30, 40 50 years later. I've heard it my entire life. It traumatized her enough that she never took me for swimming lessons. She didn't actually want to teach me to swim. By the way, I still can't swim.

While my mother figured out how to swim in that situation and so will some of the people who were under this kind of absentee leader leadership style, it won't be because of the leader that they do this, it will be in spite of the leader or despite the leader. It'll be because these people are independent thinking enough that they found their own way. But it's still a long way. It's still a hard road for these people. It doesn't have to be like that. And a lot of really good people will fail.

A lot of good people who have a lot of value will fail under this kind of leader because they're not getting the support that they need. They might be great doers, they might be independent thinkers, but they may not necessarily have the strong emotional foundation that they need to be able to do this all on their own. That's what the support from the leader is for, to make you feel safe as you're going out there trying to figure shit out. And you know what else? Most people don't want to work for a leader like that, either.

If you're super ambitious, super savvy, and you're confident enough, this might be the best situation because you can go around your boss and go up a level and build your own profile quickly in an organization. So that kind of leader might suit you. But those kinds of people are few and far between. For the majority of the people who you

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lead, they are going to need your support. They are going to need you as a safety net, as a sounding board, as someone who is clearing the path for them.

I always say this and I'll probably say it in every single podcast, your job as a leader is to create the environment for results to happen. It used to be as a doer that you were the one creating the results. But now your job is to create the environment for results to happen. Sometimes that means being a sounding board, helping people think, creating safety, clearing the path, like using your relationships to clear a path for your people to be able to work, sometimes doors or hurdles are thrown up at them. Your job is to get rid of those hurdles and be there for them. If you're not there for them, the work is not going to get done as effectively and you're not going to be a growing leader.

The bottom line is you need to find the right balance between micromanaging and abandoning your team under the banner of letting them be autonomous. And when you find that balance between micromanaging and extreme autonomy, if you want to call it that, people are going to want to work for you because the people on your team are going to feel like they're growing. They're going to feel like they have that great balance of a safety net and a sounding board plus the ability to grow their creative thinking. They're going to be proud of what they achieved. They're going to be getting kudos from people. And that's going to feel awesome.

They're going to know that a big part of that is going to be because of you and your leadership style. And they're going to be loyal to you. They're going to be telling people how great it is to work with you. They're going to hear stories from their peers about how shitty their own bosses are. And they're going to feel sorry for them that they don't get to work for you. They're going to say, *'Well, my boss doesn't do that. I really have a great boss.'*

Your team, never mind them loving you and wanting to work with you, they're going to deliver better and better results, not just today. But the results are going to get better and better as time goes on because you're giving them a chance to learn and because you're activating their creative brain by challenging them to think differently, by asking them questions, and by being there to sound things out with them. And you're going to learn a new skill which isn't doing all the work, which is about teaching people to think and realizing that great effective ideas can come from anywhere and that your ideas aren't the best ideas for everyone, they're just the best ideas for you.

You're going to learn to trust yourself because you trust your people. And you're going to have more energy and more time because you're not sitting there trying to solve everyone's problems, which is a huge brain suck and totally exhausting. When you're not getting in the weeds on everyone's work, guess what, you're going to create space to actually step up and grow into the leader, do leader work, which is a whole other story. That's scary.

A lot of the time, people stay micromanaging because they think, *'Oh if I'm not doing this, I'm going to have to do that scarier work. And I don't know how to do that scarier work. So I'm just going to stay with what I know.'* But you know what? Create the space for the work that you don't know how to do while creating those big change initiatives like building relationships and creating a vision. All those things that you're not sure how to do, create the space for that. And then you'll learn how to do it. You'll just go, *'I got to do this. What's my first step?'*

I'm always here to help you. There are a lot of people who will help you if you just ask, but you have to be the one creating the space. I always say, that once you become a leader, you're no longer in the orchestra playing the instrument. You are leaving the orchestra, and you are now the conductor. You are now the one keeping the time. You are now the one keeping everyone in sync. That's your job.

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And even though you might say, *'I really love to play the violin. I'm so good at playing the violin. I know how to do that better than anybody,'* I would say to you if you really want to play the violin, go play the violin. Just go play it. Stay playing the violin. Become the best at playing the violin. Get the first seat in the orchestra. But you'll never be able to conduct the orchestra if you're so stuck on playing the violin so you have to choose. What do you want to do? You can't do both.

Whether you are a micromanager or an extreme autonomy creator in your team, a lot of this comes from a fear of needing to prove yourself. So when you micromanage, it's like, *'I'm going to prove myself through overworking.'* And when you create this sense of extreme autonomy in your team, it's because you're so afraid that you won't be able to prove yourself that you just avoid the whole situation.

When people in these situations come to work with me, the very first thing that we work on is letting go of the 'need to prove yourself.' Hey, we've already got the job. The job is different. Now, you just got to go in there and start working on doing this new job. You need to understand what it is. Get a scope of it and develop a strategy for what it looks like for you to be a fantastic people leader. And obviously, there's more to leadership than people leading.

And when I work with my clients, you want to actually build an overarching brand for your leadership style. But it needs to start with one thing. You can't build it all at once so just start with the people leadership. What does it look like for you to be a great people leader? When you know what it looks like, then you know where your gaps are. With my clients, we just start filling the gaps. We start practicing, understanding why those gaps exist, and then changing the thinking so that we can start to eradicate those gaps. We can make the gap smaller and smaller. That's it. It's just practice.

Over the course of weeks, we're talking weeks here in pretty short order; these doers, these micro-managers, these extreme economists, I'm making up new words as we go here; these people have fully transitioned into world-class people leaders, literally in the span of weeks. When they start to get into a groove, you'll see how easy it is. The thing that you need to embrace is that you're walking into a different job. You're walking into a different identity by taking a leadership role. You're no longer a master reliable doer. You're no longer the person playing the violin. That is over now. That was your past identity.

You're now transforming into a top-performing world-class leader, which means you don't get to do stuff anymore. You don't get to do the same stuff that you were doing before. Your job now is to help people do stuff. Your job is to create an environment where other people can do stuff. And if you're not willing to accept that identity, then you're not going to get far. That is the very first thing that you need to do is to understand that the job is changing. You might be like, *'Duh, I know.'* But it's amazing how many people know the job is different, but then subconsciously still fight it because they don't want to be doing a different job.

So step one, just accept that the job is different and understand that you could have a different identity now. And beyond that, I want to give you three other strategies to just get you started. These aren't all the strategies that you can use to transition from where you are now to where you want to be as a world-class people leader, but this will get you started. These are just some really tactical things that you can do.

Number one, just stop doing projects and stop solving problems. This is one of the ones I practice that I give to my clients all the time. This whole week, you're not allowed to solve one problem. You are not allowed to take on

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one project because you gained recognition as being a doer, and you're really great at it. But that's not your job anymore. Your job is no longer to execute, to have projects, or to solve problems.

So for a whole week, you're not allowed to do any of that. You have to get every project off your plate, except for the big ones, like the big initiatives that your boss is giving you to do. I'm talking about the leaders out there who are taking projects that should be given to their people because they're worried about their people not being able to have time to do it or they think other people can't do it. If this is too much to do both of these at once, just pick one. Stop solving problems for a week.

When you tell yourself, *I am not allowed to solve problems*, that forces you to find other ways to help your people. The number one thing I always tell people when I tell them to stop solving problems is you need to focus on the person and let the person focus on the problem. If you're focusing on the problem itself, and trying to solve it in your mind, you're not focused on the person in front of you. By focusing on the person in front of you, what I really mean by that is helping them ask themselves the questions that solve the problem.

The reason you're such a great doer is that you very quickly process the issue. Then ask yourself a bunch of questions in your brain and pop out a solution. What you need to do now is slow yourself down and slow your brain down enough to say, '*What questions would I ask myself in this situation?'* And instead of asking yourself those questions and coming to an answer, just start by asking those questions to your report.

What's the objective here? What are you trying to achieve? What's the problem with that right now? What's in the way? Why is it in the way? What would need to happen for it to get out of the way? How would other people feel about the solution I'm presenting here? Are there any issues that I'm not anticipating right now? Who's help join? These are all the questions you would ask yourself.

I'm just going off the top of my head when I think about solving problems. These are the kinds of questions I asked myself. I find it really interesting when my clients, my really seasoned, very senior clients, just like you are like, *what questions should I ask? What questions would you ask yourself in this situation?* That's all you need to do. You just need to slow your brain down enough to ask yourself questions, open-ended ones so that your person can answer and then sit back and be patient.

The patient part is the hardest because you just want to tell them what to do because you can do it in five seconds a quarter of the time, 10% of the time. But that's not your job. If you're solving the problem for them, you're not doing the job. Same with the projects. If you decide, *'Oh, I'm great at not solving problems, but the project thing is really hard.'* Then take on the project things. Stop doing things.

You might say, *'They don't know how to do this project. I'm really afraid if I give it to them, they're going to blow it… They've already got so much to do on their plate, I can't give them something else. I need to take this on… We're short-staffed, blah, blah, blah…'* Both of those problems have multiple kinds of solutions but you're gravitating to the solution that you're comfortable with, which is *'I'll just do it,'* versus *'Oh, how can I help my report think through the work on their plate and take this on and then reprioritize what's going on with their work? Or maybe they can delegate some of their work, or they can need to go back and negotiate timelines with people on their work, or maybe they're doing things that they don't need to do right now.'*

These are things that you can look at with your report because as you help them learn to prioritize their own workload, they become stronger critical thinkers. Let's say the person doesn't know how to do they've never done something like this before. Great. Delegate it to them and then be there for them to help them learn how to do it.

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That's how they grow. That's how they stretch. You've never done the things that your boss is asking you to do, which is why you're avoiding them, FYI, but you're going to be able to figure it out.

You, as a great leader, are going to be there for your report to help them figure it out. That's what delegation is. It's not just giving people projects. It's about giving people projects and then being there to help them learn how to do the project. That's how you create critical thinkers. Delegation doesn't save you time. Delegation is an alternative use of your time if you want to look at it that way. That's really the first practice, some of the very easy things that you can do if you're a micromanager. Practice that.

In order to do some of these things, the next thing I'm going to offer you to do is change your calendar. Right now, your calendar is chock-a-block with meetings and projects and stuff to do. My challenge to you is to create 50% of your time in your calendar dedicated to your people because your number one job is your people. It's creating an environment for results to happen.

Creating an environment for results to happen is not just for your people, obviously, there are relationships, there's division, there's change management, and there's a bunch of things that come along with that. But 50% of your time right now, as you're learning to step out of the micromanager role needs to be for your people. So you need to get rid of meetings that you don't need to be at. And that's going to be hard. But for every person I've ever worked with when I give them this challenge, 20% of the meetings can go right away. I know that's going to be true for you too.

You can delegate certain meetings to someone else to go to, or you can ask to be caught up, like get someone to, *'Hey, I can't be there. Can you just tell me what happens?'* That sort of thing, or read them notes after the meeting, whatever it is and you need to get projects off your plate that you don't need to be done right now. You need to be able to create the space to be with your team.

The key is to prioritize your team first, and then everything else gets prioritized around it. That way you can help them get the results that they need to get, be there for them, and help problem-solve with them. They're going to feel safe that you're available to them and you're going to feel safe that you're available to them because you're going to be able to help make sure that they're doing the work effectively. Not your way, but effectively. This might freak you out.

If you can start with 50% of your time, start with 20% of your time. And the next week, add 10%. And then the week after that, add 10%. Sometimes your calendar is blocked three or four weeks in advance, and you can't get out of some of the stuff you've committed to. So look out three or four weeks in your calendar, block the time off now, and then slowly start to cut things. Starting this week, next week, or the following week, every time something gets moved or gets cut, leave it for your team. Start working towards 50% of your time. That's going to allow you the space to delegate those projects, to be there for your team, to solve problems, and to have patience because you don't have to run to the next meeting. You're actually there focused on helping your team solve problems.

Another thing that you can practice, another offer I'm going to make to you if you've already got the first two things nailed, it's about meeting people where they are. A lot of times, new leaders particularly, will paint everyone with a broad brush. *This person is great, this person isn't… This person is already an independent thinker. They have certain skills. They don't need as much time for me, blah, blah, blah… They always show up with solutions. I want everyone to be like that. That makes them great… This person is a little bit more insecure, they need more help*

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from me. They are afraid to take action without my safety net and blah, blah, blah… They're weaker… We sort of label people like that.

What I want to offer you is that both of those people could be amazing employees. One's just going to take more effort from you. And I'm not saying you'll need to micromanage them, but they will need more management time from you. That doesn't make them not great. That just makes them in need of more development, which is your job. You need to meet them where they are and give them the support they need to become an independent critical thinker and now the one that requires less management from you because they're already operating at a certain level.

A lot of times, leaders will just be like, *'Oh, they don't need as much for me. I can take the time that I would normally give to them and give it to this other person who'd say no.'* In some cases, they just need a higher level of management from you. Just because they're creating amazing results in their current role doesn't mean they don't have the capacity for growth. It doesn't let you off the hook that they're already great at their job. That just means that the support that you give them needs to be at a much higher level of thinking, a higher level of anticipating problems, a higher level of authority and decision-making ability.

You're going to challenge them to do bigger things. Everybody needs to grow. In both cases, your job is to stretch your employees into growth, but the way you stretch them will be dependent on the employee. You need to have different strategies for different people. You also need to maintain the belief in both of those people. Because if the person right now who's maybe not as developed, let's say, if you think of them as weaker and less great at their job, they're going to feel that you need to believe in their ability to be great, wherever they are.

The more you treat them as you aspire for them to be, the more that they're going to push themselves. The more that you believe in them, the more they're going to believe in themselves. The more that you think that they're weaker and less good at their job, the more they're going to believe that too. When you come up with the strategy for each individual employee, I recommend that you don't do it on your own. Sit down with each individual and agree on what stretch looks like for them. What is their growth strategy? How do you want to work it together?

That's going to be great because they're going to see that you care about what they think. And it doesn't mean you only do those things. Maybe you have some secret stretch, like super stretch goals for them, or whatever. But they're involved. It's a two-way dialogue. They understand why you're doing what you're doing. So it's important to meet people where they are and treat them as high-potential employees, regardless of their starting place. And always be looking to stretch them beyond where they are right now.

Just as a summary of these three tactics that I've shared with you, Number one is just stop. Either stop doing things that they should be doing, like get those projects off your plate, or stop solving problems. Start with one of those, and just start practicing that like focusing on not going to solve any problems this week. *I'm not going to solve any problems this week.* Pick one of those to start with. Both of those are going to require you to change the way that you handle your calendar right now. So you're going to have to create more space in your calendar to be able to be available to your people and then for your people.

The other thing I want to offer that you practice is taking away the judgment of how they perform is an indicator of how good or bad they are in terms of their development. They might be a great performer or have great potential, but just not be as developed as some of your other people in the same position. The bottom line is to

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meet people where they are and allow them the time and support that they need that's customized to them to be able to grow them.

Whether they're a top performer now or a growing performer, they both need to be stretched by you. They both need attention from you and work with those people to develop a plan of what growth looks like for them. That's where the balance can start for you between micromanaging and being autonomous. Creating space, being there, and having a plan for your people.

The question I often get asked is *Does this mean I can never tell them what to do? Does this mean I can never give them advice?* Of course, you can give them answers. Of course, you can give them advice, especially if something is on fire and you don't have time to make it a teaching moment or growth. But if you're in a world where everything's on fire all the time, or that's the world that you create for yourself, then you still need to be in that space to decide what is truly on fire and what isn't.

Telling people what to do and giving them the answers should be considered the exception versus the rule. If the norm is everything's on fire in that normal world, still only 10-20% of the time, you should be giving them the answers. And even if you only get to a 50/50 place right now, where 50% of the time, you're not giving them the answers and 50% of the time, you are; that's fine. That's growth. Then just keep working your way up. Get to like *60% of the time, I'm not. 70% of the time, I'm not.* That's brilliant. That is growth. You need to start somewhere. You're not going to go from zero to perfection.

Even if 10% of the time right now you're not giving them the answers, that's great practice. Just keep pushing yourself for more and more and more. It's going to take time for you to grow into this version of yourself as well. So make sure that you're giving yourself the space to do that.

That's a wrap for this week, leaders. I'll talk to you next time. Bye for now.

Hey, if you want to simplify leadership while amplifying your value, then you need to get your hands on my free training. Head over to melsavage.com/simple for instant access to the training and get a taste of how I help my clients lead with ease and make more money in the process. I'll see you there.

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