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# Managing From the Sidelines

by Robert Evangelista

Ask any employee what his or her biggest complaint is about their boss and you're likely to hear a common response. Micro-management. While people may also refer to it as task interference, it is all the same in the minds of many employees. It is the boss getting too involved in the work of his or her employees.

During most of my years managing people, I really didn't comprehend how I was interfering with my subordinates. I never truly realized how I was negatively impacting them with my detailed instructions and regular involvement in "how" they did their job. In fact, the contrary was true in my mind: I thought I was helping them. The fact is, I really didn't understand the impact of micro-management, or how I was conceding to the habit. And then I coached a hockey team.

Anyone who wants to learn more about how to manage people should try to coach an organized sports team. While it was a three-year-long period of personal growth, it was also a professional development experience for me. In fact, I learned more about how to manage a group of employees from coaching than I ever learned from school or any mentor.

A coach is responsible for developing the team. Training them during practice. Teaching them to overcome their shortcomings. Leading them through adversity. The coach nurtures each player's individual role and develops different aspects of the player's game to help him or her become more potent. The coach teaches players how to win by delivering to them a game plan and preparing them to execute it. What the coach doesn't do is play the game.

At game time, the coach's role changes. Instead of being a teacher and mentor, the coach becomes an active observer. At game time, a coach stands back and hopes that the players execute the game plan that was created, discussed, and practiced. Oh sure, he or she can make adjustments to lines, change pitchers, or call different plays, but the coach is still a hostage to the players' ability to execute the game plan.

It is one of the first and most difficult lessons for an "ex-player turned coach" to learn: The coach does not play the game. And no matter how much a coach may want to, he can't play it. Realizing this fact can be difficult for many coaches to accept, but good coaches will understand the vital importance of

"The best executive is one who has sense enough to pick good people to do what he wants done, and self-restraint enough to keep from meddling with them while they do it."

Theodore Roosevelt

staying in their prescribed role.

## Game Time for Businesses

The work team is no different from the sports team. They plan and prepare for upcoming events. They develop skills and simulate initiatives prior to actually executing them. They use the results of their performance to reinforce behavior and target areas for improvement. And the fact is, we in business face opposition and competition every day. For us, "game time" is every day.

All of the team's preparation is practice for the moments when individual employees must perform their roles to execute the overall plan and help achieve the organization's goal. Game time can be any event, action or activity that:

- Can't or shouldn't be interrupted once it has began
- has been planned or prepared for
- is important to the overall achievement of the organization's goals

## Preparation Is Your Top Priority

During these situations, the quality of execution will almost always be directly proportionate to the quality of the preparation. Because of this, a manager should always be less concerned with the event itself and more focused on laying the groundwork and shaping the group to meet the challenges of the event.

Employees, while engaged in the performance of their roles, will and must be focused on their duties. They must be attuned to the immediate and dynamic challenges presented by their customers, their tasks, or their workforce. Intensity must be focused on the task. And chances are, it will be. If they have been prepared, they will carry out their actions like players who have practiced the same moves every day for weeks.

To embrace this belief that the development and preparation of employees is one of the manager's biggest challenges, you must also accept the notion that the period of preparation before execution is more crucial for managers than is the actual moment

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of execution. That is a tough thought to accept, especially if you're a manager who likes to get involved with the day-to-day activities of your work group. The fact is, a manager is much more useful to employees as a teacher, guide, and coach during preparation than as a "backseat driver" when employees are trying to get their work done.

Effective managers can't involve themselves in the same level of details as their employees. A manager who gets too involved in the details of an employee's performance during the moment of execution will become counterproductive. Unfortunately, it's difficult to learn to let go of the impulsive reactions that we have while watching mistakes being made. We want to correct them right then and there. We want to point it out to the employee immediately.

We know what the employee should have done. Sure, we're managers now, but most of us were doing their jobs once upon a time. We know what the right actions are. Unfortunately, to put it in sports-coaching vernacular, we're not the ones playing the game.

That can create a feeling of helplessness that will overcome any manager at some point while standing on the sidelines at work. You're watching employees fumble their assignments. You're watching them head down the wrong path. But much as you may want to, as a manager you can't interfere during "game time." Nor should you try to.

### **Don't Interfere During the Game**

To consider how best to handle employees while they're executing their tasks, let's first consider how NOT to handle them. Think again about the sports coach. A coach CAN'T interfere during the action of a game.

It's that simple. This notion is a little more palatable if you accept the fact that the ideal opportunity for teaching exists during practice and film reviews, not during the game. The fact is, it's hard enough to even get a player's attention during a game!

How can a coach expect players to react to game situations the exact same way the coach would've if he or she were playing the game? The answer is, coaches can't. Every one of us is different. We each have our own physical, mental, and emotional idiosyncrasies, and we may each react differently when presented with the same situation. Now, to each personality, add the speed of the game, factor in the surging adrenaline, and throw in a healthy dash of emotions, and you'll end up with wildly different reactions from everyone. That's why the coach has to accept that it's the players who must play the game.

Just as there are similarities between sports coach and business manager, there are similarities between sports players and our employees. They both prepare to execute repetitive tasks. They both develop skills that make their jobs easier. They both have roles to play in order to best contribute to the overall success of the organization. What that means is that our employees are doing, thinking and reacting in very similar manners as the sports players. So just as the sports player is distracted, if not oblivious to the coach's game-time tirades, the same can be said of our employees.

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## The Sideline Manager's Playbook

In order to minimize micro-management and task interference, managers can go a long way by adhering to a few simple rules for game-time situations. The following are simple rules for managers to follow during those periods when employees are actually executing their tasks:

**DON'T** attempt to teach while employees are trying to execute

**DO** plan the next learning opportunity and make notes for future lessons

**DON'T** try to correct mistakes, unless they are jeopardizing the execution of the organization's plan

**DO** make necessary adjustments and corrections to keep the team aligned with the plan

**DON'T** make correction based primarily on "How I would have done it"

**DO** be a source of guidance, motivation and advice

**DON'T** lose objectivity by getting emotionally involved in situations

**DO** step in when an employee has lost emotional control or is acting inappropriately

**DON'T** be an unnecessary distraction or interrupt the execution of the plan

**DO** assess the organization's support structure and look to eliminate obstacles for employees

If we treat our employees like a sports coach treats his or her players, then we will make changes to our style. We will spend time developing them BEFORE they have to perform. We'll make sure they have a solid plan that they can execute. And we will stand back on the sidelines and let them play.