



Control & Leadership

Researchers have found several critical factors for employee engagement center around [control and autonomy](#). When employees have support to make choices about how they work and prioritize their time, it's likely they are more productive and motivated than their disengaged coworkers. Similarly, [mastery](#), or the opportunity to develop and hone a specific set of skills that can be used autonomously and to the benefit of one's career or team, is also key to sustained employee satisfaction and connection to their work. We've known this; the research isn't new. Why, then, is it so common for leaders to struggle with control, a behavior that thwarts autonomy and mastery? Why, when something goes wrong, do we tend to increase our oversight and edge toward (or go all in on) micromanagement? Why do we see ourselves or others in management positions start to assert their authority and power in stressful or busy times? Researchers in psychology have found that a need to control our surroundings and even other people probably stems from experiences that happened well before we entered the workforce. It's likely a [stress-induced response](#). And, while wanting control is completely natural, it's worth understanding if we want to foster healthy teams.

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If you are interested in investigating and reducing your tendencies to assert control in the workplace, consider these evidence-based strategies.

Examine Your or Others' Stress Responses Knowing how you respond in stressful situations can help you recognize the times you attempt to control others. Do unexpected events or mishaps make you feel like you need to have power over something? Does criticism directed at you make you look for opportunities to more closely manage others? Once you identify your control triggers you can consider alternative responses. Instead of scheduling more check-ins with the coworker who missed a deadline for the 10th time this month, you may try to figure out what *you* need to feel better (a walk, a venting session with a close friend, a fun podcast), before you share feedback, offer support, or connect in a more productive way. Dare to Lead offers a [great checklist](#) for making sure you are ready to engage productively in these situations. It's important to note that understanding and changing our responses to stress may also go easier with the help of a therapist and/or professional.

Clarify Authority and Boundaries in Your Team In their article [How Leaders Can Let Go Without Losing Control](#), Mark Bonchek suggests that one reason teams struggle with control is lack of clear roles, boundaries, and authority for all team members. When team members know what is and is not their responsibility, which decisions they can make on their own and which require your input, what resources they can use or not use to accomplish their goals, and (to borrow from the Brené Brown phrase [painting done](#)) what 'done looks like,' they are more likely to have what they need to work autonomously and successfully. Clear boundaries can also be a helpful barometer for you when working with someone who takes a different approach or route than you would. As long as they are meeting the expectations set forth, you don't need to manage or get involved.

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Quash Micromanagement, Immediately [Gallup](#) defines micromanagement as a culture-killer that you can see when employees tailor their work style and behavior to a specific person. Micromanaging and directing are not the same thing. Directing yields clear guidelines and expectations; we direct when we help people understand a task, a process, deadlines, and ideal outcomes. Micromanaging yields [fear and resentment](#); we micromanage when we try to [control how, when, where, and with whom](#) someone accomplishes their work. [You can tell that you are micromanaging](#) if your actions or attempts to control are actually getting in the way of others' success or productivity. If you find yourself micromanaging, [call it out](#), acknowledge it to the person you were trying to exert control over, and change your approach. Temporary control over another person to get something done how you want it is not worth the long-term deterioration of trust and resentment that will build over time.

Focus on Building and Rebuilding Trust If control is something that you've struggled with throughout your career, it's likely that there have been some interactions between you and your coworkers that have diminished trust. [Gallup](#) has found that while building or rebuilding trust takes time, transparency, vulnerability, and authenticity are essential components of a leader's efforts. Find opportunities to be open and share information or connection with your coworkers. Is there more context that you can offer your team about a decision that came from the executive leaders of the organization? Can you share your development goals for the year with a few coworkers and ask their opinions about two things that you could start doing to meet that goal? If control depletes trust, building authentic connections is the antidote.

Recognize the Difference Between Control and Accountability Often, when leaders consider opportunities to let go of control, they worry that their team will lose all accountability to each other and their responsibilities. The hard truth is that our controlling behaviors are likely not what keeps tasks and people in line; and [when they do, it's only temporary](#). Accountability happens when people have the support, resources, information, time, motivation, and skills needed to meet or exceed their responsibilities. To build accountability, experts recommend that leaders [clearly establish expectations and roles](#), [shared agreements](#) or agreed-upon ways of working together, and a shared understanding of what happens when people do not uphold accountability. For instance, what happens when people miss deadlines? What about when it's a pattern? As a leader, focus on creating an environment where accountability is clearly defined and understood so that when something goes wrong, you have a clear, control-free path forward.