

## Career Compass No. 21: My Micromanaging Boss Is Driving Me Crazy!

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In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest offers some approaches to coping with a supervisor who is always looking over your shoulder.

*I am a park and recreation program coordination with a micromanaging supervisor. I joined my city government because it has a good reputation and offered good opportunities; however, I'm about to look for a new job in another agency. My supervisor is driving me crazy. She is constantly checking on me and how I'm progressing with my project assignments. I am a good performer and have gotten good reviews but her micromanaging style has become debilitating and is sapping my energy and creativity. I have begun to avoid her in between our scheduled once-every-two-week meetings because I'm afraid she will once again inquire about my progress. I've become more negative, less engaged, and dissatisfied. Help!*



**"Just checking in! Did you remember to put a cover sheet on your latest TPS report?"**

As you point out, people join an organization because of its general reputation and positive opportunities to do good work, make a difference, and advance. People leave an organization because of a poor relationship with a supervisor. Since you are a good performer and are now thinking of leaving your agency, this is an important issue for you. For your own sake (and the sake of the agency), don't passively drift—take action!

Here are several approaches to improve your situation.

### **1. BLOW OFF STEAM**

It is alright to complain a bit over beers with your spouse or partner, family members, or some nongovernment friends. Blowing off some steam is good for the soul as long as you then decide to proactively confront the situation.

## **2. SEEK TO UNDERSTAND**

As Eric Fromm indicates, you first need to engage in “positive regard” and try to understand why your supervisor is a micromanager. Is it because she is receiving unrelenting pressure from her boss; or her previous bosses were all micromanagers and this is the only approach she knows; or perhaps she is insecure in her role despite your good performance. To the extent possible, you should try to minimize your supervisor’s anxiety and need for control. If you can discern what is behind the micromanaging behavior, you can then develop an appropriate set of strategies.

## **3. CRITIQUE YOURSELF**

In addition to understanding your supervisor, you also need to engage in self-reflection and critique your own behavior. What part do you play in this bad situation? Ask yourself:

- Have I lived up to all expectations?
- Have I missed any deadlines?
- Have I always kept my supervisor and others up-to-date on projects?

If you have not always lived up to all commitments, you must figure out how you can now demonstrate higher performance.

## **4. CREATE WORK PLANS FOR KEY PROJECTS**

Even if you have always met all expectations and timelines, it is a good idea to create a written work plan for each project assignment of interest to your boss with specific timelines and milestones.

## **5. SHARE WORK PLAN AND GAIN AGREEMENT**

At one of your biweekly meetings, you can share your project work plan or plans and ask for feedback on desired outcomes, milestones, and timelines along the way. Then you need to specifically ask for approval of the work plan, secure any support that you may need, and commit to review your progress at upcoming biweekly meetings. In the case that your supervisor is getting pressure from above, you should encourage her to share your work plan with her manager.

## **6. PROVIDE WRITTEN UPDATES TO WORK PLAN**

After every meeting with your boss, you can provide a quick-and-dirty email summary of your progress and any issues that you are dealing with. Again, if your supervisor is working for a micromanager, you may suggest that your boss forward the email summary to her manager.

## **7. HAVE A COURAGEOUS CONVERSATION AND MAKE A DEAL**

Once you have fully demonstrated that you are committed to results and excellence, you need to have a courageous conversation with your supervisor. Schedule the conversation at a different time and in a different environment than your biweekly meeting. For instance, you may invite your boss out for coffee to get feedback on how you are doing. In the conversation, you should focus on yourself—what you are willing to commit and what you need in order to perform. Do not focus on your boss’ behavior. During the conversation, suggest a deal. Given your high performance and your need to exercise some autonomy, you can directly propose an agreement to provide results as specified in your work plan without any of your supervisor’s informal check-ins. If something comes up between meetings and you must deviate from the work plan or milestones, commit to advise your supervisor without being asked.

## 8. GET COACHING

Confidentially approach someone you trust in the organization who knows your supervisor and ask for guidance on how to proceed. An outside coach can also serve as a sounding board and advisor. In these conversations with coaches, you can test out your game plan and get feedback.

## 9. RELY ON SUPPORTIVE COLLEAGUES

While your supervisor may be a pain, you should focus on other workplace relationships, especially your immediate team. Just about all important work requires the efforts of a team. If you contribute to a strong and high-performing work group, you will find meaning and support from like-minded peers. Members of a strong and supportive team or various teams in which you participate can demonstrate caring and compassion and minimize the negative impact of a micromanaging supervisor. You support them; they support you. As Rosabeth Moss Kanter says, "The best cure for horrible bosses is wonderful colleagues."

## 10. IF ALL ELSE FAILS. . .

So, there is a lot you can do. However, if nothing works, by all means seek another position inside or outside the organization. You have talent and deserve better.



*Career Compass* is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff, and appears in ICMA's [JOB newsletter](#) and online. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail [careers@icma.org](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com).