



Redeeming Sisyphus
Get Out of Control! Get More Done!
I. Barry Goldberg

Walk into any company large or small and you will see employees who are suffering.

These talented people hired for their breadth, imagination and initiative are not producing to their full potential. When they leave (and they do leave), their exit interviews most often cite an over controlling boss as the main reason for their departure.ⁱ Task-oriented bosses under constant pressure to achieve increasing productivity goals rely too often on the “I think—You do” managerial style.

Most of us know leaders like this.

More of us than want to admit it (or even know it) ARE leaders like this.

It is easy to oversimplify the epidemic of bad bosses and point an accusing finger at the control freak manager. But we grow up in the world of business that teaches us to control our environment. We learn to execute tasks, and are often rewarded for near-term results with no regard for the wake of destruction we leave behind by pushing and prodding people to get their work done “yesterday.” When faced with the next insurmountable task, it is understandable that we return to the familiar (that set of tools that brought us success in the past) overseeing every detail to be dead certain that nothing under our watch can go wrong. It wouldn't dare.

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CREATING THE CORPORATE SISYPHUS

Our task-driven culture has created a generation of business leaders who treat their day-to-day work as if it were a marathon. But this marathon has no finish line. Research into energy management is very clear; we are better equipped to work and rest in cycles. And as for the task-driven Sisyphus, who is under constant strain, the words of Tony Schwartz and Jim Loehr from *The Power of Full Engagement* are particularly insightful:

“We can only push so hard and for so long without breaking down and burning out. Stress hormones that circulate chronically in our bodies may be temporarily energizing, but over time they prompt symptoms such as hyperactivity, aggressiveness, impatience, irritability, anger, self absorption and insensitivity to others.”ⁱⁱ

Like Sisyphus, forever pushing his rock up the hill, the command-and-control manager creates a circumstance in which rest, recovery, creativity and often learning are inexorably squeezed out in favor of control.

Let's be clear. The issue is not the size or scale of the project. It is the gating factor of the leader's personal need for control in oversight and governance. By definition, even a leader with Herculean control skills gives up scale in favor of control and thereby reinforces his place under the rock.

And what is the reward for successfully pushing a rock up this hill? In most companies, it is a bigger rock and a steeper hill! There are a few executives out there who are able to consistently move bigger and bigger rocks. If you are one of those few who push the business equivalent of Gibraltar up the economic equivalent of Everest, I have a question for you: Are you exhausted yet?

While society, the educational system, the organization or the job may have prepared you perfectly for the role and put you under the rock, there is no requirement to remain there. You stay under that rock because you like it. You like being in control even if you will not admit it (or do not even realize it).

Very few modern rock pushers will admit it, but it's true. They stay under the rock because they know no other way to manage. It is secure, and familiar. They like feeling validated by the constant need for their involvement and approval even if they complain about overwork and the pressures of the job. Command-and-control managers feel a sense of safety and security being on everyone's critical path, safe in their belief that they alone know better than their colleagues, direct reports and consultants what must be done.

And let's face it—while micromanagement is openly criticized by companies and culture, it is just as often reinforced by both companies and culture. The company gets great short-term results from a leader who volunteers to shove huge boulders (read: people) around. Some companies will purposefully encourage an “I think—You do” managerial style, knowing that they will get a faster turnaround or higher near term productivity. Many environments actively reward the macho image associated with 70-hour workweeks and skipped vacations. Some even know that they will pay a price down the road in the currency of disaffected managers, poor bench strength and succession plans vulnerable to turnover, but continue to take advantage of Sisyphus anyway.

Long after the tech-boom and dot-com lunacy, many of our financial markets actively extended this culture of pushing the rock by annihilating the market capitalization of any company that did not show double digit growth quarter-on-quarter. Today, it has become possible for even publicly traded CEOs to govern their companies with more than 90 days in mind. But, despite this change, we are still paying a hefty price for those years of ignoring the development of executives to leaders who can wield influence—All hail the rise of the micromanager.

With the more recent panic over meltdowns in financial markets, we can anticipate that the iron grip of the command-and-control manager will be again reinforced and validated. Companies, like people, respond to threat through fight, flight or freeze strategies. Under pressure and in a demanding environment, what seems the safest and most efficacious is to increase the amount of control in managerial processes. At a time when the most organizational leverage is needed, getting the most

out of every employee whose job is not cut, we are already seeing the resurgence of control based solutions from government and the corporate community.

I generally cringe when executives compare themselves to Sisyphus, even casually. Few understand that this myth has no resolution, nor are they savvy to what the rock symbolizes. Sisyphus is not a champion who survives his ordeal to return victorious and claim a rich reward. Neither is he the seeker who increases his value to his people and earns a seat at the table of elders. He does not get stronger. He does not redeem himself. He never gets a vacation. He gets slowly and inexorably used up without end. If he takes his hands off the rock, it will roll back down the hill and he begins again and again and again. This story never changes and never ends. The comparison to Sisyphus is painful because the myth is one of a very few that does not resolve. Sisyphus remains unredeemed to the end.

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To help the corporate Sisyphus extricate himself from beneath the rock, and yet keep it rolling up the hill, I offer a two-step plan: (1) the personal challenge—the creation and implementation of a new story about your role and the value of your leadership; and (2) the acquisition of an assortment of practical tools for delegating the workload efficiently.

Let's begin by taking a step out of control mode to create a new operating story.

REWRITE YOUR STORY

If you listen carefully to bosses with a reputation for control issues, the way they talk about their projects or direct reports provides a clue to the fundamental beliefs at the root of their control. Consider these observations from first meetings with senior executives and global project leaders.

“I am the only one who has the whole picture. If I do not stay on these people all the time, it will not get done right. And, at the end of the day, it is my ass on the line.”

“It is my job to know everything that goes on in my department.”

“It is not that I do not trust my people. I just have to know what is going on.”

“I know you want me to give up some control, but I sleep better at night knowing that I have my finger on the pulse of the organization.”

“I have good people on my team. They are very dedicated, but they do not step forward with ideas or suggestions, which means I have to do all the thinking. I do not have time for them to get over it and speak up.”

We can hear their story in their language: “I am...” “I have to know...” “I need...” Their command and control style is firmly rooted in their own belief that the only way to get work done and remain secure is to be on top of everything and everyone all the time. To be sure, there are situations where a take-charge and get-it-done style is warranted by the nature and urgency of the work. For instance, a war room established to bring a critical system back online after a disaster is not a committee activity. And if members of the team are not sufficiently trained or do not have the competency needed to complete the task, closer supervision is required. But the important observation here is that most micromanagers are micromanagers based on their own need to micromanage: not on any requirement of the work to be done or the people who do it for them.

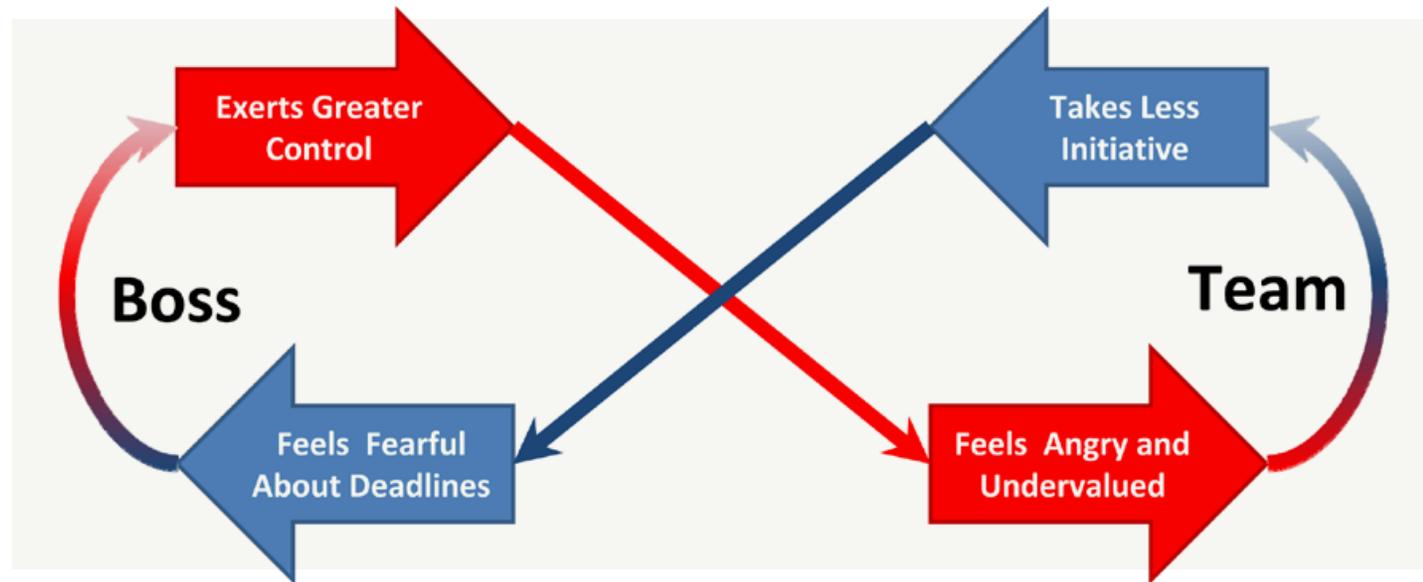
INFINITE LOOP TO NOWHERE

“Anyone can become angry. That is easy. But to be angry with the right person, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose and in the right way—this is not easy.”—ARISTOTLE ¹¹¹

Any pattern of behavior that repeats between people or groups can be traced to a self-reinforcing form of bonding pattern, or it would not repeat. These patterns can be very positive and profitable. But, in the case of a control-based leader, the bonding pattern costs businesses billions of dollars every year. This bonding pattern becomes ingrained, self-sustaining and even self-reinforcing and manifests like this:

1. The boss needs to know about everything and exerts control in order to feel (personally) secure.
2. To feed this need, he establishes too-tight controls, makes all decisions and sets regular meetings primarily for reporting.
3. Team members, desiring more autonomy, feel resentful and poorly used. They take minimal interest in the project outcome and work with ever diminishing initiative. Sometimes their retort to their own lack of interest is to actively sabotage the project or to abscond.
4. As the team members' initiative wanes, the boss becomes less and less confident that the work will get done in the absence of his direct control, so he increases the level of oversight.

Here is an illustration of this bonding pattern:



Note that the outer behaviors are a direct response to inner feelings, and that the process continually refuels itself, over time becoming ingrained as a pattern. It is no coincidence that the pattern forms an infinity sign. Sadly, this is an accurate depiction of the predicted outcome once this pattern is established. The pattern will only resolve if one side or the other responds differently from their normal M.O. An invitation to conversation on the part of the boss might not solve all of the team issues immediately, but avoiding the strong desire to exert more control will, at the least, not reinforce their dissatisfaction. Someone must be willing to choose a different response to his or her own discomfort to give the pattern an opportunity to change. And going first is usually the job of a leader. The best way to remain aware and to remember to choose a different response is to try on a new story.

What if...

...the boss believed the real definition of leadership was to ensure that the team was staffed with capable people who were willing to accept accountability for deliverables?

...ensuring that the team was passionate about the charter and aligned with the values of the organization took precedence over detailed direction?

...the manager's accountability was to ensure that the team had the tools and resources it considered necessary, rather than dictating terms and tasks?

...participation in the job or project was viewed as a development opportunity to be shepherded and nurtured by the boss?

...the manager's personal contribution was primarily a coaching function relying on his ability to deal with the larger ecosystem in which the team or project operates?

The moment a manager releases the drive for control motivated by his individual need to feel secure, the opportunity to obtain more quantity of and quality work from every person on the team emerges. It is the mark of an adult to be responsible for our emotional needs and make different behavioral choices; it is how we demonstrate our humanity. In his landmark book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman addressed the opportunity to decouple personal discomfort with a default behavior:

“Self awareness has a more powerful effect on strong aversive feelings: the realization ‘This is anger I am feeling’ offers a greater degree of freedom—not just the option not to act on it, but the added option to try to let go of it.”^{iv} As a “strong aversive feeling” we can safely substitute fear, worry or anxiety over performance for anger.

DON'T DO—DELEGATE

“Why is it that managers are typically running out of time while their subordinates are typically running out of work?” —WILLIAM ONCKEN, JR. AND DONALD L. WASS^v

In some of the most studied team successes, leaders concentrated on the external and supporting environment and, in some cases, steadfastly refused to parcel out work assignments or even take responsibility for articulating goals. One of the most illustrious of these was the Hewlett Packard DaVinci team where Julie Anderson and Mei-Lin Cheng took on a distribution challenge that previous teams (after failing) deemed unsolvable. Both women wanted to see this issue fixed; after all, billions of dollars and a lot of customer pain were on the table. They asked for a small amount of resources and assembled a team of people from all of the disciplines impacted—all of whom cared deeply about finding an answer. Then, instead of facilitating planning and delegating tasks, the leaders simply stood back and refused to assign roles or responsibilities. They orchestrated team events to be certain everyone was clear on the challenge, including field trips to follow customer orders voyaging through the HP system, continually reinforcing that the team would be accountable for the outcome. Their steadfast unwillingness to take charge made it clear to the team that the team members would have to self organize and get the job done.

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Was this a risky strategy? Yes, but these rare team leaders trusted the process and made the decision to step back from and remain out of the critical path spotlight.

The results stunned both the organization and the customers. The lightly managed team solved the distribution dilemma that the earlier teams (with much larger budgets) were unable to crack. Their success was memorialized as a cover story in *Fortune Magazine*.^{vi}

The biggest distinction between the management extremes of the HP-DaVinci team and “I think—You do” is the shift from assigning tasks to delegating accountability. Accordingly, in order to delegate accountability, it is necessary to understand how to measure it: a rigor different from tracking tasks.

VITAL SIGNS

When you go to the doctor, the nurse will first take your vital signs. Height, weight, blood pressure, temperature, heart rate and lung capacity inform them if your body is operating within normal tolerances. If more information is needed, you might have to give a blood or urine sample. All of these tests have a common trait. They produce a quantitative, easily reportable value that can be compared instantly with a range of normality. A temperature of 103 or a blood pressure of 95/65 may not tell them what is amiss, but it does direct them to look for more information.

The first step in delegating accountability is to understand the vital signs of your business. If you want reportable measures to advise you if your business is healthy or not, agree to take this simple challenge: go to a desert island.

The good news is that you are leaving for a 6-month stay in a tropical paradise and you will have plenty of food, water, reading material, music and company, but no internet access, telephone, fax or other means of communication. And, what (you may ask) is the bad news? You may be half a world away and completely out of touch, but you are still on the hook for the performance of your business, department or team.

In true entrepreneurial spirit, you have bribed the supply boat captain. Once each week you will sneak a 3-minute phone call with your admin or another support person. Your contact will expect your call and you will have just enough time for them to tell you the vital signs and for you to make a brief response or request of action. Before you leave on your extended hiatus, your task is to design the very vital signs which, when bundled together, will inform you of the relative health of the business.

Be rigorous and clear. Do not get tempted to ooze into soft measures. Not all of a business or project can be measured quantitatively; however, the discipline of defining the critical measures of your

business' health is worth the effort. Refine this down to a set of vital signs that are every bit as indicative of overall health as those your doctor takes at your annual physical.

Remember, a vital sign is a numeric value and your vital signs must take in the overall health of the whole body of the business. If the sales levels are positive but turnover in the sales organization is out of control, you will not know about the soon-to-emerge higher recruiting costs and risk. Turnover should be on your list of reportable vital signs.

Now, let's rehearse. Can these measures be reported over a phone (remember, no PowerPoint on the island) in a minute or less? Of course, it will take longer to gather and record the data and that is ok. The report format should allow anyone (perhaps someone who does not even know what these vital signs signify) to read them to you quickly and precisely.

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There are segments of a leader's job that normally cannot be delegated: future facing strategic issues, political maneuvering or governance communications, to name a few. However, your list of vitals represents measures of day-to-day operations. What would happen to your boulder if someone on your staff had full accountability for managing each of your vital signs? And if they truly understood that they were accountable and had authority to make decisions and act, how would your time allocation change?

More importantly, what would your new relationship with your staff look like? Luckily, you are not actually going to a desert island. But with those metrics delegated, your conversations and even your relationship with your direct reports would change instantly. Delegation does not mean that a leader is never involved or does not have a visible presence in the work. A leader who has delegated accountability can use experience and judgment to help subordinates understand implications of the choices they face; and yet, not take back responsibility for the decision. When the accountability is delegated, the conversation changes from the dictation of directions to the provision of wisdom.

A more active hand might help avoid a disaster that your deeper experience can see on the horizon. But ward yourself carefully: Are you making the decision because you feel uncomfortable, or as a learning experience in support of your employee? As Oncken and Wass said to their fictitious employee, “You may ask my help at any appointed time, and we will make a joint determination of what the next move will be and which of us will make it. In those rare instances where the next move turns out to be mine, you and I will determine it together. I will not make any move alone.”^{vii}

And in the case that a leader discovers that a team member does not have the chops for the work, it becomes the leader’s accountability to either support the employee to build the skills or ensure that the slot is filled with someone who is ready for the role. When a leader views every position on the team as a development opportunity, and insists that the team be accountable for business outcomes, the team members’ capability will be evident. But as long as the conviction that the only capable member of the team is the one the leader sees in the mirror persists, then productivity is limited to the scale and availability of the leader.

REPLACE INSTRUCTIONS WITH ENROLLMENT

“If you wish to build a ship, don’t drum up men to collect wood and start assigning them to tasks and work. Instead, teach them to long for the vast and endless sea.”

—ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPÉRY (1900-1944)

Lastly, we can obtain an additional tip as to how to get out from under the boulder from a different mythic character: Orpheus. Orpheus is not your usual sword wielding, shield-and-armor hero. And, although he is the son of Apollo, he has no god-like powers. Orpheus achieves results by influence—not by direct power. He is the master of the lyre and legend tells us that when he sang, rocks and rivers stopped to listen, wild beasts laid at his feet and all of nature hearkened to him. Do not jump to conclusions—Orpheus is no wimp. He journeyed with Jason and the Argonauts. In all of Greek mythology, he is the only one of three heroes who traveled to the underworld whose “influential” appeal actually allowed him to return to the world of the living. Where Heracles wrestled Cerberus, the three-headed dog, Orpheus convinced the hound of Hades to help him by enlisting him. And rather than being covered into compliance, Cerberus cantered at his feet and escorted him through the dead and damned to the throne of Hades and Persephone.

Most command and control managers find it easier to make the assignments and monitor progress than to enroll others in the outcome. Project team members who are passionate about the challenge and invested in the vision do more and more complete work on any initiative than those who do so under duress. Orpheus’ story is complex, but this much is true, he garnered all the help he needed to accomplish his goals because his talent was in convincing others to want to join him.

In the end, getting more done by getting out of control is not that hard.

Learn to recognize the difference between your need to control and the needs of the team or work process. Take accountability for your own need to control by delegating skillfully. Limit yourself to roles that absolutely require your experience and organizational influence. Make certain that those on your team understand the outcomes for which they are accountable. And, hold them accountable, just as you are. Look at your job as both meeting business goals and developing bench strength. Hone your skills at influence. Here is the big test. If your operational deliverables are fully delegated, you should be able to go to that desert island for a couple of weeks—no blackberry, no cell phone, no laptop. If the idea of being out of touch with your office for 2 weeks makes your palms sweaty, go to the top and read again. 📖

Orpheus achieves results by influence—
not by direct power.

End Notes / Sources

ⁱ Susan M. Heathfield. (March 21, 2006) Your guide for human resources: the poll of the week. Why do you stick with your employer? Retrieved from <http://humanresources.about.com/b/2006/03/21/poll-of-the-week-why-do-you-stick-with-your-employer.htm> (Three of the top four responses identify behaviors that negate micromanagement.)

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ⁱⁱⁱ Aristotle. *The Nicomachean Ethics*

^{iv} Daniel Goleman. *Emotional Intelligence*. Bantam Books, 1995, p.48.

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^{vii} William Oncken, Jr. and Donald L. Wass. Management Time; Who's Got the Monkey. *Harvard Business Review*, January 1990.

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