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The Tyranny of the Micromanager

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It is notoriously difficult to get rid of a micro-manager once he or she holds power.

As anyone who has had the misfortune to work for a micromanager knows, success only makes the manager worse. Nor is this observation limited to CEOs of Fortune 500 companies.

Frederick the Great of Prussia was a notorious micromanager of his generals. During the battle of Zorndorf in 1758, he shunted around his battalions like a boy playing with tin soldiers. Finally, goaded to the point of exasperation by the king's interference, his brilliant cavalry general Friedrich von Seydlitz had the following message relayed to headquarters: "After the battle the king can do what he likes with my head, but during the battle will he please allow me to use it?"

Frederick partially relented, once he made sure that their plans for battle were essentially the same, and Seydlitz went on to achieve a decisive victory against the Russians. But the following year at Kunersdorf, poor Seydlitz was not so lucky, and Frederick insisted on sending his beloved cavalry straight into the waiting guns of the Russian artillery.

It's notoriously difficult to get rid of a micromanager once he or she holds the reins of power. They rule without mercy, turning the minute and the mundane into weapons of war. The trick is to recognize the danger signs early on and take the appropriate preventive measures.

The history of the 20th century could have been quite different if Lenin's revolutionary comrades had spent five minutes reflecting on his behavior during the infamous "sealed train" journey from Switzerland to Russia in 1917.

The trouble began when Lenin was interrupted from his writing by a loud argument in the corridor. On opening his carriage door he discovered an enormous queue outside the train's only toilet. The returning exiles had obeyed Lenin's no-smoking-in-the-carriages directive by turning the loo into a secret cigar bar.

After expressing much irritation over his comrades' lack of self-control, Lenin decreed that the real culprit was the age-old problem of unregulated competition for scarce resources. Only this time, it would be solved in true Soviet style. First, the needs of the masses—in this case, the smokers and the flushers—would be assessed by a Party expert, namely Lenin. Next, the Party politburo, also Lenin, would allocate the goods and services of said loo according to revolutionary party principles.

Lenin's solution to the toilet crisis was to cut up his newspaper into strips. These were doled out as tickets: short for a flush, long for a smoke. Satisfied that order had been restored, Lenin resumed his studies in the quiet of his carriage.

History does not relate how the 26 revolutionaries traveling with him reacted to the sovietization of their toilet time. But it is not difficult to imagine what might have followed: A lively black-market develops behind Lenin's back, with tickets being exchanged for window seats, sausages and even swigs of vodka. Soon, though, there's dissatisfaction among the smokers and the flushers over the length of time allowed per visit. A deputation from the two sides goes to see Lenin, which leads to their banishment to the unheated luggage compartment. At this point, two smokers make a bid for freedom and disappear onto the roof, never to be seen again. By the time the train pulls into Petrograd's Finland Station, the need for tickets has become redundant, since a tobacco famine has devastated the smokers and no one is using the toilet because overuse has broken the seat.

In any case, Lenin was delighted by the success of his central planning—and proceeded to run all of Russia along the same lines.

—Dr. Foreman is the author, most recently, of "A World on Fire: Britain's Crucial Role in the American Civil War." This column will appear every other week.

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