



How to Get Involved Without Micromanaging People

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One of the more vexing problems most managers face every day is how to get involved in the work of their people without doing the work themselves or micromanaging those doing it.

You can resolve this challenge with the same approach that we described in our previous blog (<http://blogs.hbr.org/hill-lineback/2011/03/better-time-management-is-not.html#>) — the technique we call Prep-Do-Review. In this simple but often forgotten action model, you think of every activity not as one step — doing — but three distinct steps: *prepare* to act, *act*, and then *reflect* on the outcome and what can be learned from it.

Last time, we focused on how you can convert everyday activities into tools for making managerial progress — moving toward goals, developing people, building a team, creating and sustaining a network, and all the other things managers are supposed to do but never seem to have the time to do (<http://blogs.hbr.org/bregman/2010/04/the-worth-your-time-test.html#>) .

Here we focus on using Prep-Do-Review with your people. Start by expecting your people to use Prep-Do-Review themselves in their work. Not only will it make them more effective, but it will provide a way for you to become involved in their work as appropriate for the person and the situation.

This is the way it works:

Prep: Start by previewing people's plans with them and suggesting changes, if necessary. You do this by asking crucial questions. What are you going to do? Why — for what purpose? How will you do it? How can you use this to make progress on our goals and plans? Who should be involved or kept informed? How can this be used to help you learn and get better? What if your assumptions are wrong or the unexpected happens? This is how you move your group's purpose, plans, and work forward, how you coach (http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2010/02/cultivate_your_coaching_networ.html#) and develop others, how you delegate more confidently, how you assure yourself that someone is well prepared and ready to act on her own.

Do: Based on what you learned in the Prep stage, you can decide whether and how to be involved in the doing of the activity. Working with a novice, you may want to perform the activity yourself while the person observes. Next, you may want to monitor periodically as the person does the activity and then give them feedback afterward. Thereafter, you probably don't need to be present at all — the Prep and Review stages are where you'll be involved.

Review: Great managers make post-action review a regular practice for themselves and their people. You can make it the focus of a one-on-one after an activity has been completed. Or it can be part of periodic meetings with each of your people or a standard procedure you go through in the updates your people provide at staff meetings. Be sure to model what you expect when you describe something you did — *Here's what we learned. Next time we'll do it this way.*

Remember to do a review regardless of the outcome of an action — failure or success. We are much more likely to reflect on our failures (<http://hbr.org/2011/04/why-leaders-dont-learn-from-success/ar/1>) . Too often, we don't take time to learn from our accomplishments and never really understand the keys to our success and what lessons we can take forward.

Most of your managerial interactions with people will occur in the Prep and Review stages. Only with someone inexperienced or in situations of high stakes and high risk will you, or should you, be involved in the actual performance of a task.

Used this way consistently and consciously, Prep-Do-Review becomes a powerful management tool that will improve how you manage your people. By giving you ways to be involved without directly intruding as your people do their work, it will make your interactions with them richer, improve outcomes, help people learn, and make you a better delegator (<http://hbr.org/product/delegating-work/an/13255-PDF-ENG?Ntt=delagating>) .

If you operate this way as a boss consistently, you'll find certain core management tasks become easier and more systematic. It will let you delegate more intelligently, based on both a person's skill and experience level and on the situation. It will help you coach people more effectively; indeed, it will help you turn many tasks into learning experiences. And it will let you use your time more effectively by helping you determine when you do and don't need to be involved.

With very experienced people, and especially with routine tasks, you needn't be involved in either Prep or Do, but as a boss you never completely let go of the Review stage. You may not review outcomes after every task, but ongoing performance review is something you'll never give up entirely.

If you think about it, Prep-Do-Review is the fundamental cycle of activities by which effective bosses manage — through a perpetual loop of prep-do-review-prep-do-review. By using it to become more mindful ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness_\(psychology\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mindfulness_(psychology))) and deliberate in all you do, it will help you convert mundane workaday activities into management activities. It will help you make progress through the daily work. And it's the way you guide your people, produce results, and help them learn without inserting yourself unnecessarily into what they do. It's not the solution to every management challenge, but it's a powerful approach and the closest thing to a management secret that we know.