

Micromanagement and its impact on millennial followership styles

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Received 14 July 2022
Revised 4 July 2023
Accepted 4 July 2023

Abstract

Purpose – It is predicted that micromanagement may become a growing workplace concern post-Covid-19, with managers grappling for control in the current hybrid/remote working environment. This will be happening at a time when millennials represent half of the working population. This study contributes to existing literature and provides an overall appreciation of the complexities of micromanagement and how it impacts millennials' followership styles.

Design/methodology/approach – A quantitative study was undertaken and a series of hypotheses were tested. The target sample for this research was the millennial cohort aged between 24 and 41. Data were analysed using SPSS.

Findings – This paper confirmed that “unfavourable followership styles” consisted of various negative followership reactions such as anxiety, demotivation, dissatisfaction, disengagement, reduction in support for managers, limited upward feedback, team conflict, reduced productivity and innovation due to fear of making mistakes ultimately facilitating a toxic workplace. Essentially, this research validated the notion that in order to create a sustainable organisation post-Covid-19, HR professionals must take proactive measures to mitigate this form of harmful leadership.

Research limitations/implications – Data weaknesses transpire where respondents have never interacted with a micromanager in reality. Therefore, perceived reactions to a hypothetical micromanager may differ from those respondents who were exposed to micromanagers.

Originality/value – A lack of research exists on the intersection of micromanagement and millennials' followership styles and as such this paper bridges that gap.

Keywords Micromanagement, Leadership, Followership styles, Millennials, Leadership styles

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Micromanagement is a leadership style that carries somewhat varying opinions among researchers. The general consensus defines micromanagement as leaders who control their employees in a manner viewed as domineering and extreme (Gardanova *et al.*, 2019; Wendler, 2013; White, 2010), and as such, it is a negative style (Cho *et al.*, 2017). Pastel (2008), however, views micromanagement as a form of centralised decision-making and an effective approach in mitigating risks, a viewpoint which Delgado *et al.* (2015) view as an illusion. Regardless of opinions on its effectiveness, as a leadership style, it is one that appears to be prominent in the workplace. Chambers (2009) revealed 79% of people experiencing micromanagement, with a further 85% admitting these destructive habits had negative impacts on employees. And yet micromanagers themselves do not seem to be aware of the negative impacts of this leadership style. A study by Chambers (2009) highlights that the significant majority (91%) of



micromanagers are oblivious to the fact that their employees have actually resigned as a result of their leadership style. A more recent survey has showed 39% of respondents agreeing that micromanagement was the worst quality in a boss (Comparably, 2018). These perspectives are likely to come into sharp focus as a result of the impact of Covid-19. The post-pandemic world has created a situation where managers may have a greater tendency to micromanage in order to counteract the lack of control in a remote/hybrid working environment. As a result, in post-Covid studies, the negative impact of this leadership style might actually be increased (O'Connell, 2020). This study was conducted in 2020, and as such, this study makes an important contribution to our understanding of the impact of this leadership style in the new age of working during and post-pandemic.

Additionally, while there exists a body of research on micromanagement, little attention has been paid to the impact of micromanagement on millennials. Millennials were born between the late 1970s to the early 1990s (Lyons and Kuron, 2014). Millennials are a well-researched cohort (Hughes, 2011; Purani *et al.*, 2019) and remain essential when examining workplace concerns as they currently represent half of the working population. Moreover, McGrath (2020) provides evidence that 75% of the global workforce will include millennials by 2025. Millennials along with generation Z are expected to fully satisfy the workplace by 2045 (Otieno and Nyambegeera, 2019). Therefore, while studying micromanagement, it is highly relevant to understand millennials' followership response to such a leadership style. A lack of research exists on the intersection of micromanagement and millennials' followership styles and as such this paper bridges that gap. In this context, the key research question which will guide this study is: *What is the impact of micromanagement on millennial followership styles?* We begin by describing the existing literature on micromanagement and identify three research hypotheses.

Micromanagement

Much of the empirical research focusses solely on positive leadership traits (Yasir and Mohamad, 2016; Hoch *et al.*, 2018); however, Kellerman (2004) contends that studying the positive traits of leadership in isolation is erroneous. Early 20th-century trends established associations with ineffective leadership as outlined by Tepper (2000) who explored "abusive" supervision; Kellerman (2004) formed "bad" leadership framework; and Lipman-Blumen (2005) established the toxic leadership scale (Schmidt, 2008). Additionally, Padilla *et al.* (2007) developed the reputable toxic triangle model. Einarsen *et al.* (2007) defined destructive leadership as a manager violating the interests of its company by disrupting organisational goals and subordinates job satisfaction. Micromanagement is classified by Erickson *et al.* (2015) as a form of destructive leadership whereby supervisors oversee their subordinates to such an extent that it becomes excessive, while White (2010) defines micromanagement as scrutinising behaviour on the smallest details and higher-level issues being neglected. Other qualities include overcriticising subordinates' judgements (Gardanova *et al.*, 2019). Austin and Larkey (1992) viewed micromanagement as the polar opposite to delegatory management where employee trust is paramount. There are two motivational aspects to micromanagement (Manzoni, 2011), the first relates to perfectionists who desire full control ensuring high standards are consistently achieved. The second is a more toxic motive and involves managers who display dominance in every situation to reinforce their ego and supremacy (Tavanti, 2011). Such managers do not delegate and want involvement in all project details (Manzoni, 2011). So what then of the followers?

Significance of followers

The ability of an ineffective leader to flourish lies with the ability of the follower to comply. An early definition defines followership as a process whereby subordinates are influenced by leaders to participate in meeting organisational goals (Wortman, 1981). Townsend and

Gebhart (1997) view followership as a process where subordinates recognise their duty to execute their leader's orders to an optimum standard. Hollander and Offermann (1990) were foremost scholars for recognising leadership as a relational process. Hollander's (1993) relational view critiqued leader-centric studies for failing to appreciate leadership as an influential relationship between people with mutual intentions. Additionally, Padilla *et al.* (2007) present conformers with a subtype bystander who are motivated by fear (Kellerman, 2004), as one approach in understanding the differences in follower compliance (Berkowitz, 1999). Chaleff (1997) contends effective followers are those who are brave enough to confront their leader with honest and critical feedback. For the purpose of this research, millennials followership styles will be the central focus. The term "followership" in this paper refers to millennials, as followers, and their basic reactions to micromanagers.

Kelley's (1992) followership theory is pivotal in highlighting the significance of followers, describing the process as a joint journey between the manager and the follower. Thomas (2014) maintains that leaders create an environment that forces their team to fall into one of Kelley's (1992) followership quadrants. For instance, micromanagers create alienated followers who Thomas (2014) articulate are those who have become disillusioned through excessive management control. They therefore reduce their participation, impacting employee performance and job satisfaction (Burns, 2017). White (2010) and Bedeian (2002) contend that although micromanagers may increase short-term productivity, in the long term, they inject anxiety into employees and fear of relentless disapproval evaporates any previous motivations to contribute to work tasks (Mathieu *et al.*, 2014).

Participative workplace

Millennials essentially aspire for a participative workplace and micromanagers are susceptible to creating out-group membership, preventing millennials to move into the subsequent stages of role making and role routinisation (Weijman and Meesters, 2020). Additionally, millennials generally exhibit exemplary followership and micromanagers' typical behaviours control their subordinates to such an extent that it creates alienated or "yes people" followers. This highlights a discrepancy between millennials' expectations and micromanagers' delivery on such expectations, resulting in probable high levels of tension. For instance, in situations where millennials attempt to participate in the decision-making through voicing their opinions and questioning their micromanagers choices (Gallo, 2011), conflicts will likely arise where millennials feel their micromanagers distrust their judgements (Kadhemand and Mohammed, 2020). This fosters job dissatisfaction impacting millennials followership styles (Burns, 2017). This leads to the first hypothesis:

- H1.* There is a negative correlation between micromanagers' suppression of participative workplace and millennials' desire to favourably follow the micromanager.

Autonomy

Fornaciari (2005) and Hill (2017) define autonomy as the extent to which jobs are designed, allowing employees discretion in the manner that tasks are completed, a significant driving force for millennials. Forastero *et al.* (2018) maintain that autonomy promotes responsibility, in turn satisfying a psychological state of meaningfulness. The significance of autonomy is highlighted in Deci *et al.*'s (1994) self-determination theory, whereby an employee works to their optimal level when needs of competence, relatedness and autonomy are fulfilled. Ultimately, where millennials are given job autonomy, they will perceive to be valued employees and will perform to the highest standard (Forastero *et al.*, 2018). Holt *et al.* (2012) hypothesise that a potential reason why millennials value autonomy is because it gives them more scope to exploit their characteristically creative abilities. Additionally,

PricewaterhouseCoopers (2011) outlines that millennials' technological abilities blur the lines on how they do their work, suggesting that traditional chain of commands are unfavourable for millennials.

Considering micromanagement as a direct contradiction to job autonomy, Martinen and Kostamo (2016) discuss managers' position in shrinking or expanding their follower's enthusiasm. One such finding outlined the importance of leaders designing work to encourage inspiration and experiential learning (Yost, 2013). On balance, the evidence implies millennials' expectations of job autonomy and micromanagers' hostility towards autonomy. Together, this demonstrates that millennials will react unfavourably in an environment of excessive control. Equally, micromanagers prevalent suppression of creativity and personal development opportunities gives rise to a cohort of dissatisfied and anxious millennials in such toxic work environments (Hadadian and Zarei, 2017; Fraher, 2014). Consistent with previous arguments, where millennials rail against micromanagers for a lack of job autonomy, the outcome could be counterproductive (Gallo, 2011). This leads to the second hypothesis:

- H2.* There is a negative correlation between micromanagers' dislike of autonomy and the likelihood of millennials following the micromanager.

Helicopter parenting

Exploring the root of millennials' behaviours as followers, it is acknowledged that parental advocacy shaped a large proportion of millennials' childhood such that their baby boomer parents constantly intervened in their lives by challenging their teachers because of their child's poor grades (Raines, 2002); and contacting hiring managers seeking job opportunities on behalf of their children (Gomes, 2019). Gardner (2007) reveals 32% of employers experienced parental involvement in recruitment processes. LeMoyné and Buchanan (2011) define helicopter parenting as parents who are involved in their child's life to such an extent, they preclude opportunities of independence. Implicit leadership theory (ILT) (Eden and Leviatan, 1975) proposes that followers have a predisposed belief of what constitutes favourable or unfavourable leaders. In understanding how likely a follower is to follow its leader, ILT is constructed through socialisation and previous experiences. It is thus activated in a "recognition-based" approach whereby followers link their managers' behaviour with what they store in memory (Uhl-Bien, 2014).

Thompson (2012) states that managers replace millennials' primary parental role once they enter the workforce. Where certain millennials have been raised in environments of frequent control and limited discretion, they would expect this same level of control from the substitute attachment figure in the work context. Certain millennials value centralised authority as they display their best performance when in the presence of rigorous guidance from dominant leadership (Gursoy *et al.*, 2008). Alsop (2008) expands this theory stating some millennials are optimally efficient under specific supervisory direction and in fact risk-taking fortes and decision-making skills become less attainable in ambiguous contexts. Partial explanation for this phenomenon can be linked to helicopter parents who recurrently intervened to solve any problems facing their child. This leads to the third hypothesis:

- H3.* There is a positive correlation between helicopter parenting and millennials' receptiveness to micromanaging behaviours.

Methods

Survey research was deemed the most reliable tool to quantify the attitudes of millennials towards micromanagers while testing the established hypotheses (Sukamolson, 2007). Questions were related specifically to the three hypotheses assuring research validity

(Hatcher and Colton, 2007). The target sample for this research included the millennial cohort aged between 24 and 41. A snowball sampling approach was utilised which entails respondents, with whom contact is corroborated directly by the researchers, exploit their individual networks to refer the questionnaire to connections who may also partake in completing the survey (Goodman, 2011). As a result of Covid-19, the research was conducted solely through virtual platforms and was conducted in 2020. Social media in conjunction with snowball sampling was identified to target millennials as research can be viewed as a “social conversation,” therefore exploiting the tools that millennials use daily to continue the conversations (Murphy *et al.*, 2012). Accordingly, LinkedIn, Instagram and WhatsApp were exhausted for the initial targeting of the population and an important step in snowball sampling (Goodman, 2011; Handcock and Gile, 2011).

The dataset was checked for missing data and outliers which were deemed as all respondents outside of the target sample. There were a total of 173 responses to which 152 completed the survey in its entirety. Twenty-one respondents were outliers due to being outside of the target sample, resulting in a useable sample of 117 responses; 32% of the respondents were male and 66% female, with 0.85% reporting as non-binary and 0.85% preferring not to say. In relation to age breakdown, 78% were between 24 and 27; 17% between 28 and 35 and 5% between 36 and 41. The data were analysed using the statistical software SPSS. Hypothesis testing including *t* tests and 95% confidence interval tests were performed.

Results

Millennial respondents were asked to rank in order of priority what they value most in the workplace and we deemed the top 3 ranked items highly valued. The majority of respondents (89%) described managers taking all responsibility as undesirable, with 73% valuing opportunities to make their own decisions and 73% also indicating they value manager trust. Of this 73%, 79% would request inclusion in decision-making processes if not initially granted and 59% would take no action and remain unhappy. Furthermore, millennials were questioned about their personal attitudes towards micromanaging behaviours; 90% indicated they would be displeased where excluded from decision-making processes with 68% of this sample requesting inclusion in decision-making processes and 19% taking no action; 74% of those who placed a high value on opportunities to make their own decisions would be disinclined to support their manager where decision-making opportunities were lacking. The majority (89%) of millennials exhibited unfavourable followership behaviours where they observed managers reacting with hostility when opinions were voiced. A modest 9% of millennials desired to be excluded from decision-making processes.

A *t*-test was conducted to compare the means of variable 1 (pro-micromanagement) and variable 2 (against-micromanagement). The mean value 3.61 denotes the average difference between the two variables. The variables are weakly and negatively correlated (−0.101), and there is a significant average difference between the variables (*t* = 15.2, *p* < 0.001). This indicates that millennials have an unfavourable attitude towards micromanagement in the context of a participative workplace, supporting H1 (see Figures 1).

Figure 1. Variable 1 incorporates millennials who favour micromanaging behaviours in the context of a participative workplace. Variable 2 incorporates millennials who found micromanaging behaviours unfavourable in the context of a participative workplace

Paired Sample Test								
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Variable 1 & Variable 2	3.61538	2.57255	0.23783	3.14433	4.08644	15.201	116	0.000
Paired Sample Correlations								
	<i>N</i>	Correlation	Sig.					
	117	−0.101	0.277					

Source(s): Authors work

Autonomy

The respondents were asked to rank from 1 to 8 in order of priority what they value in the workplace and the top 3 ranked items were deemed high priority; 97% felt that feeling valued with responsibility in the workplace was a priority; 58% expressed the importance of discretion in executing tasks. Only 4% wanted strong supervision and 15% indicated they wanted step by step guidance in how to complete tasks. Of the 97% sample placing high importance on feeling valued with responsibility, 96% would request autonomy where no autonomy was given demonstrating the importance of autonomy. Moreover, of the sample who valued task discretion, 60% would request for autonomy where it was lacking and a minor 3% would be happy with no autonomy; 89% would be dissatisfied with distrustful managers and of this group 72% reported having good manager relationships currently. The *t*-test analysis was conducted to compare the means of variable 1 (pro-micromanagement) and variable 2 (against-micromanagement). The *t*-test showed a mean value of 5.3 and the variables are weakly and negatively correlated (-0.90), and there is a significant average difference between the variables ($t = 33, p < 0.001$). This indicates that millennials, on average, have an unfavourable attitude towards micromanagement in the context of job autonomy, supporting H2 that there is a negative correlation between the two variables.

Helicopter parenting

The helicopter parented millennial sample comprises of those who directly admitted having helicopter parents, those who felt their parents were always “leaning over their shoulder” and those who felt “dependent on their parents to make decisions.” These respondents had a relatively positive perception of micromanagement with 59% believing micromanagement fosters a highly provide team and 59% believing micromanagers support their employees in always achieving high standards. Interestingly, however, the sample who felt dependant on their parents to make decisions for them found micromanagers as overly critical (75%) and that they lacked trust (60%). The *t*-test results showed a mean value of -0.58, which denotes the average difference between the two variables. The variables are strongly and negatively correlated (-0.495), and there is no significant average difference between the variables ($t = -1.346, p > 0.001$), indicating that on average, millennial upbringing has no bearing on creating a favourable attitude towards micromanagers, rejecting H3 (see Figures 2).

Discussion

The initial findings revealed millennials exhibiting strong desires for managerial attributes that are in direct contrast to micromanagers. In line with previous research findings (Morton, 2002; Kong *et al.*, 2016; Jha *et al.*, 2019; Hershatter, 2010; Gallo, 2020), it is clear that millennials yearn for open communication, allowing for their voice to be heard. Essentially, millennials want manager trust (73%) to allow independent decision-making (73%) and freely express their views (49%). Millennials do not want a dominant manager who takes full responsibility

Figure 2. Variable 1 incorporates helicopter parented millennials who favour micromanaging behaviours in managers. Variable 2 incorporates helicopter parented millennials who found micromanaging behaviours unfavourable

		Paired Sample Test							
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference					
Variable 1 & Variable 2	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
	-0.58824	2.54794	0.43697	-1.47725	0.30078	-1.346	33	0.187	
		Paired Sample Correlations							
		<i>N</i>	Correlation	Sig.					
		34	-0.495	0.003					

Source(s): Authors work

for the work being undertaken. As a moderate 19% would take no action when dealing with a micromanager, we can conclude that those opting to voice their opinions outweigh those taking no action. A possible reason for this may relate to the majority of respondents being aged between 24 and 27 (78%)—they are relatively new to the workforce and have not been exposed to excessive micromanagement nor the long-term mental effects which forces subordinates into becoming “yes people” (Bedeian, 2002). Notwithstanding this, the research illustrates that almost all respondents (90%) would be displeased with such a management style regardless of their reactive actions.

Despite this, many millennials would take no action and remain unhappy (59%) resonating with Kelley’s (1992) “yes people” and Kellerman’s (1992) conformer followers who forsake remedying unsatisfactory situations. This viewpoint also supports Thomas (2014) notion that micromanaging behaviours, such as exclusion from decision-making can force millennials to personify alienated or conformer employees, obeying due to fear of further criticism (Thomas, 2014; Mathieu *et al.*, 2014). Prominent cascading effects revealed from this research and supported by White (2010) and Burns (2017) include anxiety (51%) demotivation (43%) and dissatisfaction (89%), undoubtedly impacting organisational productivity as cautioned by Mathieu *et al.* (2014).

Our results also identified an array of unfavourable followership trends as a result of the aforementioned micromanaging behaviours, including a reluctance to support the micromanager (Gallo, 2011). This was predicted given millennials confidence in their abilities, as identified by George (2008) and Chou (2012). In Graen and Uhl-Bien’s (1995) LMX theory, they emphasise the positive correlation between high quality relationships and in-group membership with favourable followership styles, including upward feedback. Conversely, a negative correlation is evident in this study between out-group membership and favourable followership, due to incompatible expectations between micromanagers and their millennial subordinates (Gilbert *et al.*, 2012).

Additionally, adverse followership styles (89%) were exhibited where downward trust was non-existent. This is confirmed by Martinen and Kostamo (2016), Yost (2013) and White’s (2010) seminal discussions around the influence of micromanagers in creating favourable or unfavourable follower behaviours. This research revealed that micromanagers extraction of task discretion, prohibiting self-learning results in discouraged (51%), dissatisfied (89%) and unsupportive teams (82%), consistent with Burns (2017) and Boddy’s (2015) findings. This is also in line with Schmidt (2008) who maintains millennials eminent desire to advance their innovative abilities and in circumstances where such aspirations are unfulfilled, adverse followership transpires. In contrast, within the small sample who favour micromanaging behaviours such as strong supervision (4%) and an error free approach (9%), none of this sample admitted being “happy with no autonomy” indicating that, when encapsulated, millennials ultimately yearn for job autonomy.

In harmony with ILT (Uhl-Bien, 2014), it was assumed that millennials who experienced helicopter parenting were more likely to perceive an effective manager as one who is similar in nature to a micromanager; however, the findings here showed the reverse as true. Overall, the findings revealed a strong negative perception of micromanagement regardless of childhood rearing.

Limitations and future research directions

Limitations include the utilisation of snowball sampling which creates a dependence on personal contacts, and as the referral process intensifies, there are risks that the research may become misrepresented. For instance, this study is disproportionately female, with females forming 66% of responses. A potential reason for this is due to women being more obliging (Noy, 2008). A further limitation of this research stems from the perception of

micromanagement whereby some may depict it in its extremist detrimental form whilst others may perceive it as constructive and perhaps necessary. However, such limitation was forecasted, and survey questions were formed in such a way that they did not directly ask about micromanagement but rather about specific management behaviours circumventing any perception bias of micromanagement.

It would be important for future researchers to carry out a qualitative study to enhance this quantitative study by exploring a more holistic picture and uncovering individual experiences on this topic. Additionally, research would benefit from a more in-depth study on the psychological impact of helicopter parented millennials as data reliability was limited in this domain where only a small proportion confessed experiencing helicopter parents. Therefore, these findings were derived based on this minority population. Lastly, as this study focussed specifically on millennials and generalised them as one cohort with similar needs and desires, it is recommended to diversify from this sample by exploring other generations such as baby boomers or generation Z where collective beliefs differ. In addition, as this study did not delve into the intricacies that arise contingent on different job demands, this research should be expanded by exploring various sectors such as hospitality or healthcare where team dynamics vary possibly shedding light on trends and varied reactions depending on specific variables related to that cohort or role.

Practical implications

First, in circumventing micromanagers entering the workplace, the hiring process should include psychometric testing as a means of predicting counterproductive behaviours within the selection process. Such tests may include personality tests which can highlight any controlling or undesirable personality qualities (Remann and Nordin, 2021). Once micromanagers have been exposed by either self-identification or from colleagues, the counterproductive outcomes of this management style must be mitigated with hands-on coaching. Employees' perceptions of fairness vary depending on the interactions they have with their manager therefore, when training supervisors, a focus should be put on interpersonal relationship skills. This enables supervisors to understand the importance of fostering a perception of justice, focussing on ensuring interactional justice through respecting opinions and sharing information in the decision-making process (Burns, 2017).

Conclusion

This research lays the groundwork for the often neglected topic of micromanagement and its relational consequences for millennials. Micromanagement is a significant workplace concern and Covid-19 will likely amplify such concerns; meaning this research is both timely and necessary. Findings highlight that millennials as key stakeholders within any organisation are particularly resistant to this leadership style. This study has also outlined the damaging consequences of micromanagers preventing millennials from participating in decision-making processes. The fundamental conclusion derived from this study reveals that micromanaging behaviours result in unfavourable followership styles. Included under this umbrella term of "unfavourable followership" are employee stress and anxiety, dissatisfaction, demotivation and disengagement. Consequently, such issues create a toxic work environment with reduced support for managers, reduced productivity, limited upward feedback, conflict within the team dynamics and a lack of innovation. Moreover, endeavouring to provide an additional perspective this paper also examined the link between millennials with helicopter parents and their predispositions to micromanagers, thus concluding an equally unfavourable attitude towards micromanagers from all standpoints.

The core message underlying this research is that leaders have the power to transform an organisation whether positively or negatively. Therefore, when faced with a harmful

leader, it is critical that such destructive traits are firstly identified but also mitigated to protect the integrity of the business. Micromanagement is a small-scale harmful leadership style that lies within a trajectory of toxic leaders, yet nevertheless the consequences of this leadership style are overwhelming. This research confirms the necessity for companies to mitigate against harmful leadership traits such as micromanagement, through a systematic and strategic approach as outlined in the subsequent section.

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