Leave Me Alone, and Let Me Work!
Exploring the Effect of Micromanagement on Employee Engagement During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The World Health Organization (WHO) formally declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020. Companies adopted new protocols in their activities, one of which is working from home (WFH). The WFH setup made it challenging for managers to supervise employees. They believed they needed to check more often on their remote workers. This paper argues that employees with intrinsic motivation are likely to be committed and productive. This study, inspired by the role theory, also looks into the effects of micromanagement practices on the employee engagement levels of workers in terms of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. The method used is quantitative. A survey was conducted among the 80 employees of a medical equipment company, which shifted to remote working in 2020. The results indicated no difference between the level of micromanagement before and during the pandemic. Micromanagement practices can be present in firms regardless of the setting. The study also found that micromanagement does not affect cognitive engagement. The participants demonstrated the same high-level degree of concentration and attentiveness while working from home. However, the participants indicated micromanagement affected their emotional engagement. Micromanagement practices paved the way for workers to feel less attached to the company and have a weak sense of belongingness. Micromanagement also affected behavioral engagement. The participants did not exert effort beyond work expectations since managers have the final say on their deliverables. The low level of autonomy resulted in apathetic attitudes toward work. Consequently, when all the dimensions of employee engagement were taken as a whole, micromanagement affected cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. The authors recommended that leaders include organizational practices that heighten and strengthen employee engagement.

Key Words: Leadership style; Management style; Micromanagement; Employee Engagement; Covid-19

1. INTRODUCTION

Transnational, multicultural, multigenerational. More than ever, leadership is considered critical to the success of any organization. Effective leadership enhances the performance and competitiveness of organizations (Mishra et al., 2019). At the same time, it impacts employees on many levels, including their performance (Mishra et al., 2019), work engagement (Decuypere & Schaufeli, 2020), and employee engagement (Popli & Rizvi, 2016), among others. Employee engagement, in turn, is crucial to any organization because of its advantages, some of which include increased employee loyalty and morale, improved performance and productivity, and, ultimately, improved organizational bottom lines (Rao, 2017).

One of the strategies implemented by leaders to achieve business performance and manage employees is leadership style. According to Veliu et al. (2017), members of management apply leadership styles to motivate followers (i.e., employees). Thus, leadership styles should be selected and adapted to fit organizations, situations, groups, and individuals. The implication is that leaders should have a thorough understanding of the different styles because such information increases their success in leading effectively. Some of the leadership styles used in the past include democratic, autocratic, dictatorial,

and laissez-faire leadership styles. Current leadership styles include transactional and transformational (Rees & French, 2016).

1.1 Micromanagement

While micromanagement is not a leadership style, it falls within the purview of autocratic leadership. Khajeh (2018) described this style as a method used by leaders who want subordinates to work according to *their* directions. It is closely monitoring the work of employees and, therefore, is considered a control mechanism (Lee, 2021). Micromanagers who exercise excessive and unnecessary control over their staff get involved in the details of their work (Shuford, 2019). They strongly believe in a top-down decision-making process and feel they know how to do the work of their direct reports better than the latter.

Despite its negative reputation, micromanagement has proven beneficial in some *short-term* circumstances. These benefits include handling employees who are new to the company or unequipped to carry out specific assignments (Iro-Odoro & Jimoh, 2021), enhancing the efficiency level of underperforming employees, and managing high-risk areas (Mishra et al., 2019). Over the *long term*, however, micromanagement has more damaging repercussions. It has a significant impact on costs. If left unchecked, micromanagement can result in high turnover, low employee morale, decreased productivity, and customer dissatisfaction (Mishra et al., 2019). Micromanagement disempowers, demotivates, and disengages staff (Shuford, 2019). Its pervasive use can create gaps between management and staff, resulting in the latter resisting any changes the administration wants to make. Subsequently, micromanagement and similar control mechanisms are not favorable among employees.

1.2 The Covid-19 Pandemic

Operations ground to a halt when the World Health Organization (WHO) formally declared on 11 March 2020 that there was a global pandemic. Two years in, companies had to adopt new protocols and standard operating procedures in their business activities. One such strategy is working from home (WFH).

In their new 'workspace,' previously on-site employees had to find ways to carry out job responsibilities. Before the teleworking era, employees' homes were places where they could relax and take respite from problems in the office. Nowadays, stress has trespassed into their homes.

On the other hand, the work-from-home setup made it more challenging for managers to supervise employees and prevent time theft, which could cause trust issues due to their inability to monitor work activities they could not see. Managing teleworkers involves unique obstacles. Studies reveal that managers unable to *physically* supervise their direct reports find it difficult to believe and trust that they are truly working (Namrata et al., 2019).

In this situation, those in charge believe they need to check more often on their remote workers and micromanage. This action sets the stage for unreasonable expectations that their direct reports should be available at all times, ultimately disrupting their work-home balance.

1.3 Employee Engagement

Customers are key players who contribute to overall business performance and revenue. Nonetheless, they are not the only ones that an enterprise should consider. Employees are also resources that an organization can maximize. Shuck et al. (2016) argue that attitude correlates to employees' performance. The quality of their work transforms to greater heights when they are engaged with the company. Similarly, their work output reflects their attitude when employees are disengaged. According to Smith (2020), employee engagement is a human resources (HR) concept describing the level of enthusiasm and dedication workers feel toward their job.

Employee engagement is a daily aspect of an organization that many business leaders look into in hopes of improving motivation, enthusiasm, and the overall direction of their company objectives and strategy. Some leaders think that healthy levels of employee engagement could be signified through profit, arguing that a company is earning because employees work hard and are engaged, but this is not always the case. Favorable financial standing and employee satisfaction do not equate with each other. There are many successful businesses but at the expense of discouraged employees and burnout.

True leaders must consider both the economic and social performance of their company, honoring the employees who contribute to the firm's success. To do this, leaders can look into the levels of employee engagement within their organization. Employees carry cognitive, emotional, and behavioral energies into their work roles. These may reflect their current psychological state and response toward their organization.

1.3.1 Cognitive Engagement

Cognitive engagement is the intensity of mental energy expressed toward positive organizational outcomes. Cognitively engaged employees are attentive and concentrated in their workplace, and they dispense mentally loaded energy toward work-related activities. This behavior involves an employee's expression of focus and attention and concentration on work-related tasks, experiences, and contexts.

Cognitively engaged employees would *positively answer* questions. These include "The work I do contributes to the organization," "I feel safe at work; no one will make fun of me here," and "I have the resources to do my job at the level expected of me."

1.3.2 Emotional Engagement

The emotional aspect covers how employees feel about the company, leaders, and colleagues. Emotional engagement is defined as an employee's intensity and willingness to invest emotionality toward positive organizational outcomes. Tangibly, emotional engagement is the offering of emotionally connected, personal resources, such as believing in, feeling a sense of personal meaning toward, and being emotionally connected to a person or context within the full experience of work.

During the emotional engagement process, the feelings and beliefs of an employee influence and direct outward energies toward tasks. Employees who are emotionally engaged in their work answer affirmatively to questions such as "I feel a strong sense of belonging and identify with my organization" and "I am proud to work here."

1.3.3 Behavioral Engagement

Behavioral engagement is defined as the psychological state of the intention to behave in a manner that positively affects organizational performance or outcomes or both. It talks about the value-added component reflected in the number of effort employees put into their work, such as brainpower, extra time, and energy. Behaviorally engaged employees are noticeably willing to put in extra effort, work harder for their team and organization, and do more than is expected. It is simply not enough to just work harder. Behaviorally engaged employees see themselves as psychologically willing to give more and often going above and beyond in a way that characterizes their forward movement.

1.4 Problem Statement and Objectives

The general objective of this paper is to shed light on debates regarding micromanagement. In particular, to determine if micromanagement practices affect employee engagement in terms of the three dimensions: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. This study also investigates whether the pressures brought by the COVID-19 pandemic have led managers to micromanage their employees more, especially during the transition to a work-from-home setup. Thus, the study will focus on the following research questions:

- RQ1: Is there a significant difference between the micromanagement practices of managers before and during the pandemic?
- RQ2: Do micromanagement practices have an effect on cognitive employee engagement?
- RQ3: Do micromanagement practices have an effect on behavioral employee engagement?
- RQ4: Do micromanagement practices have an effect on emotional employee engagement?
- RQ5: Do micromanagement practices have an effect on overall employee engagement (cognitive, behavioral, and emotional) ?

Some say that micromanagement can negatively affect employee engagement. However, others demonstrate that it is not all that bad and that micromanagement can actually produce more benefits than harm in terms of employees' level of enthusiasm and dedication to their jobs. This research allows previous studies to be tested in an all-new and challenging environment experienced worldwide.

The research will also be guided by the framework presented below:

Figure 1
Research Framework
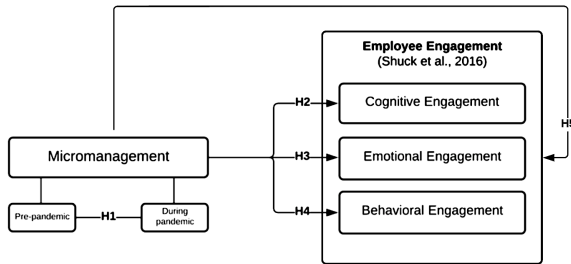
We begin with situating micromanagement as the leadership style (predictor variable) used in managing employees before the pandemic. Following arguments from previous studies, we would like to determine if managers indeed increased the level of control they practiced on their team during the transition to a work-from-home setup. The same variable is tested to determine if it affects employee engagement. In particular, micromanagement affects their cognitive engagement, their emotional engagement, and their behavioral engagement. From here, we present the following hypotheses:

HO1: There is no significant difference between the micromanagement practices of managers before and during the pandemic.
HA1: There is a significant difference between the micromanagement practices of managers before and during the pandemic.

HO2: Micromanagement practices of managers does not have a significant effect on the cognitive engagement of employees.
HA2: Micromanagement practices of managers have a significant effect on the cognitive engagement of employees.

HO3: Micromanagement practices of managers does not have a significant effect on the emotional engagement of employees.
HA3: Micromanagement practices of managers have a significant effect on the emotional engagement of employees.

HO4: Micromanagement practices of managers does not have a significant effect on the behavioral engagement of employees.
HA4: Micromanagement practices of managers have a significant effect on the behavioral engagement of employees.

HO5: Micromanagement practices of managers does not have a significant effect on the overall employee engagement (cognitive, behavioral, and emotional) of employees.
HA5: Micromanagement practices of managers have a significant effect on the overall employee engagement (cognitive, behavioral, and emotional) of employees.

2. METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study is case study and exploratory. The participants surveyed for this study were the 80 employees of a company in the medical equipment industry (census). In 2020, the company shifted its operations from on-site work to remote working. The survey used was adapted from Irani-Williams et al. (2021) for the questions on management practices before and during the pandemic and from Shuck et al. (2016) for the employee engagement scale using a 5-point Likert-type response, where 1 was "Strongly Disagree" and 5 was "Strongly Agree." Paired sample t-test and linear regression will be used for data analysis.

The role theory states that people are conditioned to play roles that help maintain social order. From a functionalist perspective, managers in the corporate world are expected to accept a specific set of rights and responsibilities when leading others. Generally, managers are not expected to micromanage but are expected to guide and lead. When managers overstep their roles, it may compromise social order within the firm. Such occurrences may be the reason for employees becoming disengaged from the organization. This paper argues that employees with intrinsic motivation to do their work are likely to be more engaged and productive because they enjoy it and can develop professional qualities in their roles.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1
Paired Sample T-Test

		Statis	df	p
Before	During	-1.98	79	0.051

HO1 is **accepted.** The paired sample t-test results show no significant difference between management practices and styles before and during the pandemic. In particular, micromanagement

practices are also applied in work-from-home setups even though managers are not physically present to supervise their employees. Some of these practices include keeping close tabs on employees and mandating them to be online and responsive almost all the time. It would even go as far as installing screen recording applications to keep watch on their activities. These are some of the many examples of new practices of micromanaging, but they all circle back to the same old foundational issues, such as lack of trust and the desire to control every decision made.

Table 2
Linear Regression

	R	R²	Adj R²	F	p
CE	0.125	0.0156	-0.0369	0.297	0.879
EE	0.501	0.251	0.211	6.27	< .001
BE	0.538	0.289	0.252	7.64	< .001
All	0.542	0.294	0.285	32.5	<.001

Table 3
Model Coefficient

	Est	SE	t	p
Intercept	2.257	0.2252	10.02	<.001
All	0.329	0.0578	5.70	<.001

HO2 is **accepted.** The linear regression results show micromanagement has no significant effect on the *cognitive engagement* of employees. Meaning employees remained focused and concentrated on their work. They demonstrated the same high level of enthusiasm as in the office. However, the participants indicated micromanagement affected their *emotional engagement*. Micromanagement paved the way for workers to feel less attached to the company, and have a weak sense of belongingness to the organization. Micromanagement also affected *behavioral engagement*. The participants found no reason to exert effort beyond work expectations since managers have the final say on their deliverables. The low level of autonomous culture resulted in apathetic attitudes toward work. Micromanagement also affected all

three dimensions of employee engagement. Thus, HO3, HO4, and HO5 are not accepted.

4. CONCLUSIONS

The pandemic, no doubt, brought with it many changes to the way people work. One of these is instituting a work-from-home (WFH) setup to ensure companies operate business-as-usual. In general, remote work proved advantageous: less commute, higher productivity, and increased personal time, among others. Managers, however, found it more challenging to monitor the output and performance of employees. Thus, micromanagement remained a strategy to manage WFH employees.

The results of this study, conducted among 80 employees from a medical equipment company, indicated no difference between the level of micromanagement before and during the pandemic. Specifically, managers applied it on-site and in the WFH setup. Similarly, even without close monitoring from their managers, the participants in this study demonstrated the same level of concentration, focus, and attentiveness to their work and responsibilities. Their *cognitive engagement* remained the same.

However, the participants indicated micromanagement affected their *emotional engagement*. Micromanagement paved the way for workers to feel less attached to the company and have a weak sense of belongingness. Micromanagement also affected *behavioral engagement*. The participants did not exert effort beyond work expectations since managers have the final say on their deliverables. The low level of autonomy resulted in apathetic attitudes toward work. In addition, when all three dimensions of employee engagement were considered as a whole, micromanagement already affected cognitive engagement together with emotional and behavioral engagement.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Employee engagement, whether implemented in the office or remote work setups, is critical to the success of an organization. Therefore, it is imperative for managers to strongly consider the leadership strategy they apply to their employee workforce. This research confirmed that micromanaging has more adverse than motivating effects on employees. Instead of closely monitoring their every action, whether within or out of the office,

we recommend allowing employees, especially the more experienced ones, to work on their own deliverables. Doing so enhances their job satisfaction, develops pride in their accomplishments, and deepens trust in their supervisor. Consequently, the *collective action* of engaged employees translates to high firm performance. In addition, we recommend that leaders include organizational practices that heighten and strengthen engagement. These may comprise wellbeing activities (*physical engagement*), workshops on values and strategies (*cognitive engagement*), and management programs using coaching and active listening (*emotional engagement*).

First, future researchers could apply a qualitative or mixed-method approach, either of which would enable participants to elucidate and provide specific comments on their unique WFH experiences. Second, there were only 80 participants in this study. Obtain a bigger sample size to determine if the results will be consistent. Alternatively, apply the same research topic to married or single employees. Marital status may influence the experience of WFH staff members. Lastly, we derived results from this study from a company in the medical industry. Thus, examine other companies and industries to determine if the results and implications will be the same.

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