



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H03JHA
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
MARCH 27, 2017

ARTICLE **MANAGING UP**

How to Tell Your Boss to Stop Doing Your Job

by Ron Carucci

MANAGING UP

How to Tell Your Boss to Stop Doing Your Job

by Ron Carucci
MARCH 27, 2017



CAT YU FOR HBR

Sixty percent of employees don't believe they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day at work, according to the 2017 State of the American Workplace [report](#). Sadly, one common explanation for this is that their boss is too busy doing it for them. In our ten-year longitudinal [study](#) on executive leadership, among 2,700 leaders, 67% struggled to let go of work from previous roles. As leaders rise in organizations, they have a strong tendency to take the work that made them feel successful along with them. The resulting organizational [compression](#) — the compacting effect of leaders playing too low — leaves direct reports constrained from having impact, feeling less satisfaction from their job, and then forced to work lower than their role, too.

If you are feeling like your boss is more involved in your job than you'd want, you obviously aren't alone. But the fact that it's common doesn't mean you have to accept it. Whether you report to the CEO or a first-level supervisor, it's in both of your best interests to thrive in your own jobs, not other people's. While the notion of confronting your boss may feel intimidating, the results can be more promising than you think. Because most leaders, especially those higher up in organizations, don't get great feedback from those they lead, it can be refreshing to have someone volunteer it. And though frustrating, there could be any number of explanations for your boss's behavior. Here are five things you can do to help guide your boss back to doing their own job, freeing you to do yours.

Test for awareness by clarifying expectations. You shouldn't assume your boss is even aware how involved they are in your job. Start by getting aligned on expectations. Ask your boss to share what contribution they expect from you and what they see the scope of your role to be. If their answer aligns with your views, you know they are unaware of their over-involvement. However, if their answer suggests a much narrower scope than you understood your role to entail, justifying their level of involvement, then the conversation you need to start with is about mismatched expectations about what your job actually is.

Aligned or not, the conversation opens the door for you to share your expectations, as well. Let them know how the degree of their involvement makes you feel. If you both agree on the scope of your role, discuss specific examples where they have been overly involved, and how you felt that work was yours to do. If you're not aligned on the scope of your role, then share why you feel their more narrowed definition doesn't allow you to grow and contribute to your full potential and satisfaction.

Ask if you're falling short. Your boss's excessive involvement in your job could be a form of veiled feedback, stifling though it might feel. Ask if there is something about the way you are performing the role that they find inadequate. If they jump into "reassuring" mode, telling you they think you're doing a great job, this opens the door for you to share an example of why you are asking. I recently encouraged the Chief Marketing Officer in one of my client organizations to take this approach with her boss, the CEO. He prided himself on being a former marketer, though it had been more than a decade since he'd done it. Whenever she presented new brand campaigns to him, he enthusiastically jumped in with "suggestions" that replaced her direction with his. He enjoyed the process so much he failed to see how demoralizing it was for her. When she expressed how his involvement made her feel devalued, embarrassed in front of the team, and unimportant, he felt horrible. Beginning the conversation about her rather than him allowed him to discover the disconnection, and led to a productive conversation about how to change his behavior.

On the other hand, if your boss does indicate he is disappointed in your performance, then address that. Let them know that you want to excel in the job, and are troubled they feel the only way to get the work done is for them to do it themselves. Ask your boss to consider offering you feedback and coaching when your work doesn't meet expectations, rather than jumping in and doing it for you. Whether they are disappointed or not, they may not realize how intrusive their "help" feels. Starting by asking for calibration allows them to invite reciprocation.

Point out the unintended consequences. Your boss’s unwanted involvement has further-reaching consequences than they likely realize. It makes you both look bad. As was the case with the CMO above, everyone on the team watched the CEO’s compressive behavior play out. In one of my diagnostic interviews, one person said, “Well, we all know who the *real* CMO around here is anyway.” She was able to bring that to his attention as part of their conversation. Regardless of the impetus behind it, your boss’s excessive involvement in your job isn’t a legitimate solution. It suggests they’d rather do your job than their own. It makes them appear as if they don’t trust you. The compression of their involvement in your job has a cascading effect, leading you to become overly involved in work below your level. Most consequently, if they are overly involved in your job, they’re likely doing it to other direct reports as well, **compromising** the performance of the entire team. While their intentions may be good — such as trying to be helpful, to demonstrate tangible value, or to “pitch in and help out” — the unintended consequences far outweigh any “help” they are offering.

Find alternative solutions together. Help your boss get clear on what their involvement is intended to achieve. It could be that they enjoy your job more than they enjoy their own, especially if they used to have it. It could be they think they’re better at it than you, and they may well be more experienced than you. As such, they may fear your work is making them look bad. It could be they want to feel needed as a boss, so they are jumping in as a way to feel useful to those they lead. Any one of these needs has a legitimate foundation. But meeting that need by overly involving themselves in your role isn’t a strategic way to meet any of these needs.

There is a legitimate level of **involvement** a boss should have in the work of those they lead. For example, they need to be kept informed. They can sometimes offer additional expertise to strengthen results. Whatever the reason, negotiate with your boss to find a mutually satisfying and reasonable level of involvement that meets both of your needs.

Don’t wait. Letting toxic resentment accumulate could be dangerous. The longer you wait, the more you are likely to start ascribing motives to your boss and concocting reasons to explain their behavior. In the case of my client above, the CMO had reached such a boiling point when she came to me, she was literally headed into the CEO’s office to rage, “Why the hell do you have me here? If you want to be the damned CMO, just take the job! But stop humiliating me with your passive-aggressive ‘suggestions’ everyone knows are really corrections.” Clearly, that would have been a disaster.

With the best of intentions, leaders often play beneath their level, overly involving themselves in the work of those they lead. Don’t assume your boss is aware they’re doing it, or why. Do yourself, and your boss, the favor of helping them get back into their own swim lane, and allowing you to thrive within yours.

Ron Carucci is co-founder and managing partner at [Navalent](#), working with CEOs and executives pursuing transformational change for their organizations, leaders, and industries. He is the best-selling author of eight books, including the recent Amazon #1 *Rising to Power*. Connect with him on Twitter at [@RonCarucci](#); download his free e-book on [Leading Transformation](#).
