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Micromanagement gets most of the attention, but under-management may be just as big a problem.

This is the term I've given to a constellation of behaviors that I've seen occurring together often during my 24 years in management: weak performance management, a tendency to avoid conflicts

with employees, and generally lackluster accountability. As the name suggests, there's just not quite enough management being done—and results often suffer as a result. But under-management can often fly under the radar because the managers who have these tendencies aren't necessarily incompetent; on the contrary, they often know their business well, are good collaborators, and are [well-liked](#).

One HR executive I spoke with about the problem estimated that some 10% to 25% of her company's managers were under-managing. And I well remember one of my own company's Human Resource VP's exclaiming in frustration, "The trouble with our managers is that too often they just don't manage!"

Take Jamie, a product development manager (he's not a real person, but a composite of numerous people I've known). He knew the technical details of his team's products well and got along well with other department heads in his division. He was a good communicator—unlike several other product development managers in the division, who were stronger on the technical side than in dealing with human beings—and his team liked working for him. They reported above-average morale, unlike many teams in the company.

But his team struggled to deliver results. For example, on large projects they had persistent trouble meeting deadlines. When this came up with Jamie's boss and peers during management team meetings, he maintained his team couldn't be working any harder—though other managers didn't always agree. When Jamie's boss or other members of the management team pressed Jamie about members of his team who might possibly be weaker links, Jamie strongly defended them. *There are no weak links on my team*. In baseball parlance, Jamie was "a player's manager."

There are several intertwined causes behind this phenomenon. Too strong a desire to be liked can get in the way of fully productive management because it can make you reluctant to do the things you need to do. Conflict avoidance is a related element of the equation; conflict is inherently stressful and unpleasant, and it's easy to think that if one can get by with less of it, so much the better!

True, pushing your people and holding them accountable for strong performance won't win you any popularity contests, and it requires some level of comfort with conflict. But while maintaining positive relationships with your own employees is a good thing, over the long run your priority is to deliver results.

If you think you might be under-managing, here are three tangible steps to take. The good news is that it's possible to improve one's performance in these areas; though it takes practice these are primarily issues of *will*, rather than ability: you need to commit to them first.

Don't be a conflict-avoider. Let's start with the handling of conflict. Early in my management career I was fortunate to have a mentor who took me aside and told me straight-out that if I was going to succeed in management, I needed to become more effective in my handling of conflict. I still

remember his exact words. He praised my abilities (my knowledge of our business and my work ethic), but added, “Frankly, I don’t know if you *want* to handle conflict. I don’t know if you have the stomach for it.” I realized that if I was going to be successful in management, this was a problem area and I was going to have to work on it. So I did — diligently. I became highly conscious of conflict and not ducking it. Truth be told I still don’t like dealing with conflict (most people don’t), but I recognized it was a vital part of the management role and over time I became more comfortable with it and competent at it.

View goal-setting as mission-critical. If you’re not delivering the results you need to, which is the risk at the heart of under-management, first make sure the goals your employees need to achieve are well-conceived and clear. Most managers don’t spend nearly enough time on goal setting; too often we approach it as a nettlesome bureaucratic exercise (why is Human Resources torturing me this way, making me fill out these endless forms?). But thoughtful goals that are agreed to by employees can be a manager’s best friend because you can manage to them: they become a roadmap to guide your work with your team all year.

“Is this work the absolute best you can do?” This is a simple but powerful question I learned from a longtime colleague and friend who was a retired U.S. Army colonel, who had picked it up from one of his officers. Asking it when someone hands in an assignment will make them aware that they’re being held accountable. (It’s also a good question to ask yourself if you suspect you are under-managing as an exercise in self-accountability. *Is this work the absolute best you can do? Are you doing all you can to set appropriate goals, hold people accountable to them, and deliver the results you need to?*)

Ultimately, rising above under-management is the proverbial win-win situation: better for your organization—and for your career.

Victor Lipman is a management trainer; his book is [The Type B Manager](#) (Prentice Hall Press) and his online course on Udemy is [The Manager’s Mindset](#). He has more than two decades of Fortune 500 management experience. He contributes regularly to *Forbes* and *Psychology Today*, and his current focus is on new and developing managers.
