

What if My First Chair is a Micromanager?

by Mike Bonem

I feel like he's always looking over my shoulder or second-guessing me.

Why can't I have more freedom to do my ministry? They hired me because of my expertise, but it feels like I'm more of a puppet on a string.

Many second chair leaders are frustrated because they perceive their first chairs to be “micromanagers.” Even though this term may not be in the dictionary, we all have a good idea of what it means. It's the senior pastor who is far more involved in the details of the ministry than what we consider to be necessary, who tends to be highly prescriptive rather than letting us develop our own solutions. And when we are in supervisory positions, it often means that they are reaching through us to give direction to our subordinates.

Working for a micromanager can be frustrating and demoralizing. It's not a behavior that is easily changed. So what should you do if your boss is a micromanager?

Know Your First Chair

Let's face it: Micromanager is a broad label that is easy to slap on a first chair in a variety of circumstances. So before you criticize your lead leader's over-involvement, consider the person. How well do you know your first chair? Do you know his or her story? Does this provide any insights into his or her behavior? For example, there may have been situations in the past when the failure of a subordinate caused problems. Or he or she may have been criticized for being too aloof and not paying attention to details. Or he or she may have previously led a small organization where a tight-reined management style was expected and effective.

In my business consulting career, my analytical abilities were a key factor in my success. As a result, I have a habit of diving into the details, even to the point where some perceive me as going too far. Anyone who wants to understand my leadership style will benefit from knowing this fact.

What have you observed about your first chair's default leadership style? Every leader has certain tendencies in how they lead when things are going well and when they are in difficult times. Does your first chair always manage too closely or does it just happen at certain times? Can you find the common denominator in those times when the micromanaging tendencies kick in? Perhaps it's around certain issues or when things are not going as planned or when he or she has a little extra time. The value in gaining this understanding is that you can stay one step ahead. You may be able to anticipate, or even avoid, those situations when you will tend to be over-managed.

Analyze Your Ministry Context

You need to know your first chair; you also need an accurate picture of the context in which you serve. How well do you understand the dynamics of your congregation or organization? Do you

have a good grasp of its history and culture? Can you accurately predict what will happen when you propose a major programming change, when receipts fall short of budget, or when a key constituent is unhappy? Is the senior pastor made to feel directly responsible for every error in the ministry, regardless of who actually made the mistake? Is the congregation filled with anxious lay leaders who are always turning to the first chair for reassurance? You see, your leader's management style is at least partly attributable to the larger environment.

My analytical skills were essential in my earlier career as a business strategy consultant. Clients paid our firm's hefty fees, and they expected accurate and insightful problem-solving in return. If someone on my team had accused me of micromanaging, I would have told them my job and environment required close inspection of the work of the entire team.

Your ministry context also affects how you are viewed by your first chair. If you are surrounded by competent people (staff and lay leaders) who do their jobs well and who are supportive of you, your first chair is much less likely to "interfere" in your work. But what if those who you direct consistently fall short, or worse, frequently voice concerns about you to your first chair or others in the congregation? Then you may feel your senior pastor breathing down your neck far more often than you would like. The context is not something that you can change overnight, but it may give you some important clues into why you are being micromanaged.

Assess Your Performance

At this point, we need to be clear about a reality that every first chair faces regardless of leadership style or ministry context. Your senior pastor is evaluated based on the overall "success" of the congregation. It is not enough to preach great sermons or to endear oneself to the people – if the church is not seen as being effective, then his or her performance is judged as lacking. If the primary reason for this gap is the poor performance of you or other second chair leaders, it invites micromanagement.

We talked above about the way that your performance is perceived by others, but it is also important to candidly assess your abilities and to understand your strengths and weaknesses. In what areas of ministry are you prone to falling short and letting your first chair down? Does your first chair tend to micromanage more in these areas? For example, your poor handling of an important meeting may have forced your senior pastor to clean-up the relational damage you created. You now notice him being much more prescriptive in how you should conduct yourself in future meetings. As a consulting manager, I paid much closer attention to the work of team members who had done incomplete analysis in the past. If you have an awareness of the areas in which you need to improve, do you also have an improvement plan? This is essential if you are going to make any changes in the way that your first chair manages you.

Confront the Issue

You may be thinking, enough of this examination and assessment, I want to make some progress in getting out from under the microscope. And you're right, at some point you need to confront the issue, but it is far better to do so after developing the insights described above.

If, after considering all the factors, you conclude that your senior pastor's management style, in most situations, is to micromanage, then you need to discuss this. That does not mean marching into his or her office and saying, "You're micromanagement is killing me!" (even if this is what you feel like doing). But you can and should schedule a time to talk about the ways that the two of you interact.

In that conversation, you might start by saying, "Here's something that I'm trying to understand" and then describe both the general behavior and a specific example or two. You may describe how this makes you feel. But equally important, ask your first chair to help you understand the reason for this behavior. This question is vital – be sure to ask it sincerely and to listen closely to the response. Then, if the time and tone seems right, be prepared to move constructively to possible solutions. In particular, look for ways that you might proactively address the issue. Are there ways that you can "get ahead of the curve"? That is to say, you might ask your first chair for more freedom in exchange for better advance communication of what you are doing.

Confronting the issue may also mean admitting and dealing with gaps in your own performance. If you conclude that you are at least partly to blame for your first chair's micromanaging tendencies, then you need to acknowledge your shortcomings. That is where your personal improvement plan becomes important. If you can explain the ways that you are working to strengthen your performance and the protections that you are putting in place to safeguard against future failures, your first chair may be willing to give you more autonomy.

Look for Small Wins

Now that you've confronted the issue and had a productive meeting with your first chair, you'll never need to worry about being micromanaged again, right? Not exactly! In all likelihood, your senior pastor's leadership style and management habits have been developing for a number of years. Even the working relationship between the two of you has some (maybe much) history behind it. So don't expect everything to change overnight. Instead, look for small wins and do your part to keep the changes moving in the right direction. Be aware of the times when your first chair stops in mid-sentence before giving you an order, or for a decrease in the frequency of interventions, or a decrease in their intensity. All of these are small wins, indicators that change is happening. It is also a small win every time that you prove that the additional trust and autonomy that has been extended to you has been well-placed, when you perform above expectations. In these instances, be sure to continue to talk with your first chair, explaining how you see improvement on the matters that you previously discussed.

One article is not going to solve all the problems between first and second chairs. There will always be plenty of bosses who tend to micromanage, either globally or conditionally. But perhaps you'll gain some new insights and in doing so, you'll find ways to lead with greater freedom and joy in your second chair role.

What are your experiences with a micromanaging first chair? Interested in interacting more on this topic? Join the discussion online at www.SecondChair.blogspot.com