How to Step Back and Still Keep Your Team Accountable

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In the natural world, massive flocks of starlings are called murmurations. They swarm through the sky in tight, ceaseless formation and can range from small groups to several hundred.

They also have a rare and noteworthy quality: their blend of speed and scale.

Even more impressive: They don’t rely on a leader. Instead, they are guided by three simple rules: Move to the center, follow your neighbor and don’t collide. This guidance allows each bird to act independently while maintaining group cohesion.

On the business side, there’s a tendency to believe that by loosening your grip, you’re leaving room for chaos to rein — especially in these unprecedented times of remote work, emails and video calls.

The current coronavirus pandemic makes everything feel erratic and uncertain. Sudden transition to virtual work at scale can feel daunting. Busy founders aren’t used to the idea of working remotely and can fall into the trap of distrusting their team’s ability to be productive unless they’re under constant supervision.

Yet leaders who are self-proclaimed “control freaks” and who double down on trying to micromanage everything lose out on opportunities to connect. Studies on mood contagion and

emotional intelligence show that employees look to their leaders for cues about how to react to unexpected changes or crisis situations, even when they aren't visible.

It's difficult to know what a healthy dose of managing should look like. Stress and fatigue can often cloud our better leadership judgment. But as co-author of *Own the Room*, Muriel Maignan Wilkins tells *Harvard Business Review:*

> *"Micromanaging dents your team's morale by establishing a tone of mistrust—and it limits your team's capacity to grow." Research has found that checking in on an employee every 5 minutes is counterproductive.*

Keep in mind, people are dealing with their own safety concerns as well as a myriad of distractions at home. It's crucial they feel supported in order to perform.

Changing your ways is challenging but pays off in the long run, says Jennifer Chatman, a professor at UC Berkeley's Haas School of Business. "There may be a few failures as your team learns to step up, but ultimately they will perform much, much better with greater accountability and less interference."

As CEO of my own company, JotForm, I try to avoid extremes and practice the "middle way," where I embrace employee autonomy (to a degree) and refrain from keeping tabs on their every task. Here are a few strategies I've learned along the way:

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1. Identify priorities and give room for flexibility.

Lack of face-to-face interaction can make CEOs worry their employees won't work as efficiently, but as *Harvard Business Review* contributor, Rebecca Knight, writes "The real work of

leaders is to think strategically, not to do their team's jobs for them."

I realize that trying to maintain control can feel comforting in these uncertain times, but constant hovering (i.e. Slacking over minor details or asking for impromptu meetings) will only achieve the opposite result of what you want.

I've written before about striking a balance between micromanaging and under-managing. Part of this involves identifying your most critical projects and giving your team precise objectives, ample resources, and a reasonable timeframe to complete them.

One way to do this is by allowing for more flexibility by eliminating hard deadlines for projects that aren't critical. And if you're especially anxious, try setting up a test run with a less urgent activity to fight off your micromanaging impulses, and see how well your team performs.

2. Create a work-from-home structure that works for your team.

At JotForm, we consistently reevaluate our processes and seek out ways to improve, and this is no different for our remote work. It goes without saying that any major change will have a transition period. People are adjusting to their new circumstances such as unexpected parenting responsibilities, or suboptimal workspaces. As leaders, it's our job to anticipate these hiccups. Since our company has grown to employ more than 140 people, I've become more strategic about how and when we communicate.

Every organization is different, but here's what works for us: Instead of our regular daily huddle, we've set up our morning meetings via video conferencing to check-in with each other, clarify the tasks of the day and give people the chance to

chime in with questions or announcements. I've found that starting off the day like this gives us all a chance to connect and keep each other accountable.

I also made it a point to set ground rules in letting my team know the best way and time to reach me. However, it's a two-way street in that I make sure to avoid checking in during defined hours unless it's urgent.

Setting up regular, predictable communication is the best antidote to micromanaging creep.

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3. The right kind of communication is key.

I'm a big proponent of offering ongoing feedback and taking one-on-one walks with different team members each week, and it's a practice I continue remotely by establishing individual weekly call-ins.

I ask them about any challenges they might have with the abrupt shift to work and how I can offer my support. It's a way to acknowledge any stress and anxiety they may be feeling in difficult circumstances and give them the opportunity to continue voicing their concerns one-on-one.

Effective leaders prioritize connection and guide employees to a solution rather than track their every step. The key in managing your team, writes Serenity Gibbons, comes down to these three things: "to communicate what you need, provide them with the support and resources to accomplish their tasks, and then trust them to carry out the task."

Leading ethically is an art and means getting comfortable with stepping back so your team has the space they need to succeed

and learn – and like a flock of starlings, work seamlessly toward the same objective.

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