

# New Hope for the “Directive Manager”

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**D**irective managers mistake parental behavior for good leadership. They believe the best way to get things done is by directing people: telling them what to do, what not to do, or simply issuing commands. Whether they are new to management or believe in a strict, command and control style, they fail to realize the high cost—to themselves and to others—of their own behavior – namely that it shuts good people up, and shuts them down, making them ineffective.

Directive managers are much more common than any of us would care to admit. Now coaching can help directive managers who are open to learning and developing themselves professionally to change their beliefs and the resulting behaviors allowing them to catch and correct their own directive behavior.

Take the case of Todd, a regional leader in a large sales organization. With 20 years’ experience in his field, you would think he could delegate with a light touch. One of his direct reports told me, however, “Todd’s idea of delegating is to tell me what he wants done, how he wants it done, and what happens to me if it doesn’t get done just the way he tells me. It always bugs me, and it makes me think he sees me as incompetent or that I can’t think for myself.”

Of course, Todd was surprised to hear that effective delegation is about asking great questions, listening hard, learning from your people, guiding and inspiring them. “But aren’t there times when people just need to hear what to do?” he asked. Eventually he learned that, while sometimes it’s necessary to tell people what to do, that was his default behavior all the time, with everyone. Directive Managers like Todd are shocked to learn something good delegators know already: people are most effective when they feel respected by being asked to find their *own* answers.

Experience can teach directive managers how to avoid the pitfalls of their own directive behavior -- if they are open to learning.

What are the traits of Directive Managers? Here are six attributes that you can use to identify them, any or all of which may be true of a specific person. They tend to:

1. Think ‘delegating’ means telling someone what to do.
2. Issue commands, rather than make requests in a way that launches people into effective, independent action.
3. Focus mainly, if not solely, on immediate tasks and projects, rather than build the solid relationships that are needed to achieve changing objectives over time.
4. Foster dependence, putting themselves in the way or path of getting things done.
5. Confuse listening with “reloading” (waiting until it’s their turn to talk again.)
6. Micromanage, attempting to control their people’s priorities, behaviors, and methods, rather than foster autonomy. (High need for control.)

**Causes of directive management:** Directive behavior is driven by faulty beliefs in any or all of these three areas:

**Time:** The directive manager believes there is never enough time to delegate. As Jane, a client, told me, “I would love to coach my folks or give them the leeway to try their own approach, even if it doesn’t work. But who’s got time for that?”

If *you* were to believe there is never enough time, directive behavior would make sense to you, too. After all, when you are in crisis mode, it’s all about getting the immediate task done, no matter the cost. Yet, by holding onto the notion that there is not enough time, Jane was creating her own time problem. Her people came to expect her to tell them what to do next, waiting to hear from “the boss” before acting. Managing a group of people waiting for direction is – you guessed it – very time-consuming, not to mention exhausting!

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Reviewing, identifying, and changing one’s belief about time can be an enormous help to more effective delegation. Starting with a new belief that “there is plenty of time” helped Jane to give people the latitude necessary to learn and function effectively on their own, saving huge amounts of her own time in the long run. A fairly simple one-time coaching discussion with Jane led her to realize she had a time-urgent view of life. It was making her “parachute in and out, telling people what to do,” and it also made her feel rushed in her personal life.

She told me recently, “Although our work on this issue was short, I look at it and think about it almost every day to help me delegate better and to help me keep my time-urgent ‘gremlins’ in check.”

**Others:** Directive managers tend to view others as functioning pairs of hands. Such beliefs lead to statements like Todd, the VP, would make, “Do it this way and tell me when you are done” or “You did X, but I wanted you to do Y.” He misses great opportunities to ask questions that launch people into effective, independent action such as “What do you need to change to make this work?” and “How can you tackle it in a different, more creative, way?”

In most circumstances, people are capable of independent and valuable thought and action. Asking them to draw on their own skills taps their strengths and leads motivated people to act independently and effectively – and that’s great for their manager!

**Self:** Directive managers either don’t know how to manage any other way, or they think directing is an effective management style. When people in positions of authority lack leadership training and have not experienced being managed by someone with good leadership skills, they emulate the next best thing – their parents.

Those who believe being directive is a valid management approach attempt to control people because they tend to lack trust in others, or they distrust their own ability to make their requests clear.

In the short term, when they juggle, push, pull, and prod well enough to get the job done, they get rewarded. This confirms their belief about the effectiveness of their approach. But the cost is very high. Directive management is toxic for the self and for others – it’s exhausting and it’s draining. Over the long haul good people either become more dependent on the manager or leave because they feel suffocated.

Coaches who work with directive managers must first hold up mirrors to help the managers reflect on their beliefs, their feelings, their resulting behaviors, and the intended and unintended consequences. By helping illuminate a blind spot, it is possible to enable managers to change their beliefs, allowing them to catch and correct their own directive behavior automatically. Managers are relieved to learn that they can let go of the need for so much command and control. They are pleased to find that their own time and the organization’s resources are both used more wisely as a result

Beliefs and feelings lead to actions, and actions lead to results. The most effective change happens by starting with changing beliefs. That requires self-reflection, the help of those we trust to be a mirror to us, and most of all the readiness and courage to be a leader willing to learn without the annoying limitations of an overactive ego. That Todd, a real General, was able to cut way back on telling others what to do and how to do it, is an inspiration reminding us of the extraordinary progress we can make when we are willing to face our blind spots and learn from our experience.

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